

Sapphic Sleuth:
Investigating Craft, Causality, and Identity
in Lesbian Detective Fiction

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Abstract

‘Sapphic Sleuth’ consists of my novel, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, and a reflective thesis on the process of and rationale for writing it. The commentary explains the critical-into-creative methodology established to write a novel that leverages detective genre conventions and fluidity to inhabit, subvert, and expand on genre tropes, such as masquerade and the hardboiled wise-guy voice, to recast the lone-wolf sleuth as a queer nun who investigates her imbricated identities in concert with the central crimes. This thesis explores how the novel was informed by a creative reading and analysis of criticism and detective fiction, particularly hardboiled private-eye fiction, with the goal of contributing an original variation on the amateur sleuth narrative. Following examinations of genre and the complex relationship of social identities and cultural institutions in detective fiction, the thesis articulates how amateur sleuth fiction like *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery* exemplifies that relationship. These inquiries converge in the context of craft as I explicate the novel’s aesthetics and the system of poetics devised to queer the investigative sensibility and innovate within genre expectations to achieve thematic and stylistic synthesis. The critical commentary proposes that an application of queer analysis and the foregrounding of queer storylines in crime fiction, as illustrated in *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, can situate a sleuth outside of heteronormative constructs thereby affording her unusual detection abilities such as interpreting, code-switching, passing, and inference – skills particularly relevant to a person at the margins. Through this commentary I argue that a theoretically grounded queer crime fiction practice can create a discourse between new works and canonical texts, underscoring the fluid nature of genre and the vital ways crime fiction can contribute to an expansive Creative Writing practice and pedagogy.

Research Questions

1. To what extent, and in what ways, can an established genre such as detective fiction be made anew? Can the foregrounding of queerness assist in the creative practice of innovating within genre frameworks?
2. In what ways does a character's sexuality inform their technical procedures and/or praxis as a crime solver in a detective/sleuth narrative? How could queerness shape the overall investigative sensibility of a sleuth novel?
3. How fixed are the formulas and 'rules' with a genre project such as amateur sleuth fiction, and how much space is there for figurative language and prose styling within those rules? What craft techniques could help sustain tension and accelerate pace in a sleuth narrative without flattening characters or thinning atmosphere?
4. How are detective/sleuth fiction features, such as masquerade, deception, and revelation, reclaimed and reinterpreted in the lesbian sleuth novel?
5. Can a close engagement with landmark hardboiled crime-fiction texts inform the creative practice of writing gripping lesbian/queer sleuth fiction?
6. Can a sleuth's social identities (sexual, class, faith) be used to write social comment as well as compelling psychological narrative?

Introduction

The basic characteristics of any good investigator are a plodding nature and infinite patience. Society has inadvertently been grooming women to this end for years.
—PI Kinsey Millhone, *A is for Alibi* by Sue Grafton

A nun and a sleuth have more in common than you'd guess. We both wear black. We hide in plain sight. And, go ahead and try, but you cannot fatigue us. We're as patient and stubborn as a virus.
—Sister Holiday, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*

'If you do the crime, you do the time', the old adage warns. For me, watching crime dramas was the best part of the week. On Sunday nights during my youth, the PBS television channel aired the *Masterpiece Mystery* programme: detective shows like *Poirot*, *Miss Marple*, and *Prime Suspect*. I found myself deeply engaged by these mysteries and, in turn, by detective fiction; both are formats that dare the audience to lean in and match its wits with the amateur or professional detective. The process and promise of deduction enticed me. As a lesbian who came out on the eve of the new millennium, I was my own amateur sleuth, trying – unsuccessfully – to crack codes, decipher mixed cultural messages, and navigate shifting social norms. When I was closeted, I became skilled in the arts of masquerade and secret-keeping. I tried to be an interpreter of moments and people, reading scenes and reading between the lines. I therefore found succour in the misfits of crime storytelling: the hard-drinking private investigator (PI), the grey-haired spinster who was risible or invisible to the virile police chief, the eccentric gumshoe, and the punctilious inspector, derided for his 'queer' praxis, though his peculiarities enhanced his deduction skills. Popular sleuth characters like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Marple all possess uniquely magnetic energies within their story worlds – recognising almost

imperceptible patterns ignored by the ‘authorities’, making connections no one else noticed – and I was drawn into their investigative orbits. While markedly distinct, these detectives/sleuths share other common ground: they are all insiders yet outsiders, unmarried, childless, and too easily dismissed by culprits and coppers alike.

Stories by Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle and the subsequent screen adaptations of them ignited my curiosity about other modes of detective storytelling, and thus I read foundational American hardboiled PI stories such as Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953), and Mickey Spillane’s *The Snake* (1964). I admired the quirkiness and laser-beam precision of Agatha Christie’s Poirot, but I was jealous of the hardboiled hero’s brio. The gritty poetry animating the ‘wise-guy’ narration of Chandler’s PI Marlowe captivated me (‘To say goodbye is to die a little’).¹ Spillane’s breakneck narrative speed thrilled me. In my closeted years, a period in which I was terrified that my homophobic community might discover my truth, I read tales of slangy private eyes who said whatever they wanted to say and swaggered on the ‘mean streets’ with a boldness I wished I could access. Even if he was agitated (‘I drove home chewing my lip’²), pistol-whipped, or double-crossed, the hardboiled PI character still managed to knee a crook in the face and flip the proverbial finger, exuding a devil-may-care brazenness I desperately wanted to possess. Moreover, gay sex was criminalised in many American states, making me wonder about my own criminality, or, at the very least, if I seemed suspicious to others. The same week that I ‘came out of the closet’ – a phrase that enhanced the theatricality of my queerness – I was sent to a psychiatrist. In the vulnerability of that period, I found solace in the wisecracks, temerity, and cynical quips of the PI loner. These complex characters occupied

¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 365.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the body as well as the mind, ready to punch or insult an enemy. As Lee Horsley observes, ‘The hardboiled style is vitalised by his verbal combativeness’.³ PI Philip Marlowe, for example, arms himself with a gun and witty comebacks – both are important weapons.

The erosion of self-confidence resulting from my internalised homophobia also made me doubt my agency as a creative practitioner. Writing and reading were my passions; they helped to form my identity. But I questioned my core ability to deeply engage with texts beyond mere escape. Nonetheless, I kept at it, returning again and again to my creative practice, trying to scribble my way into the hardscrabble PI world. The hardboiled sleuth’s tireless nerve, even on a doomed quest, was an intellectual and personal refuge then and it continues to serve as the core influence in my narrative method.

The PI’s nuanced bravado is an essential convention in the hardboiled genre, the American response to British detective stories in which investigators usually solved mysteries from a distance. According to Horsley, the traditional British detective is a ‘detached figure, immune from danger; the hardboiled investigator, on the other hand, is a man who is very directly involved in this violent, dishonest, unfragrant world of urban corruption and criminality’.⁴ P. D. James offers similar thinking with her assertion that crime writers are heavily influenced by the time and place in which they write, and therefore, the American hardboiled PI had to be as ‘ruthless as the world in which he operates’.⁵ Since hardboiled authors were reflecting and commenting on the cities and scenarios which they occupied, the tumult of the 1920s/1930s, including corruption, the Great Depression, and violent gangs were woven into

³ Lee Horsley, ‘Hard-boiled/Noir Fiction in Twentieth Century Crime Fiction’, in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*, ed. by David Seed (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), pp. 135-146 (p. 136).

⁴ Lee Horsley, ‘Hard-boiled/Noir Fiction in Twentieth Century Crime Fiction’, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*, ed. by David Seed (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), pp. 135-146 (p. 136).

⁵ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 82.

American plots in the same way that class structures and issues related to British colonisation figured in the plots of Conan Doyle and Christie.

Aim of the project

Creatively reading and engaging with the culturally reflective and historical aspects of hardboiled fiction, as well as the avenging-angel trope of the wisecracking PI, set me on the course of scaffolding my own crime fiction novel with the intention of creating a fresh interpretation of the hardboiled voice and how to live a duty-bound life in a ‘nasty’ world.⁶ My aim was to inhabit and subvert the wise-guy code, importing the familiar convention into a feminist-queer character. I also wanted to expand on another key hardboiled trope, the tense interrelation of place and vocation, injected with the frictions and growing pains of 21st-century identity politics. Thus, in 2014, I conceived *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday*, a crime novel in which I recast the ‘lone wolf’ as a queer, iconoclastic nun named Sister Holiday whose search for redemption and spiritual meaning intertwines with her search for the arsonist/murderer who is targeting her religious community.

To establish the cultural/geographic tensions in the novel, the sleuth protagonist makes a move considered countercultural and regressive by her peers. An erstwhile ‘out’ lesbian when she lived in Brooklyn, Holiday chooses to become celibate Sister Holiday, adopting a new life in a New Orleans convent. I composed the first draft in this way to build a framework within the novel that allows one newly sanctioned and *expanding* North American cultural identity

⁶ ‘You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was a part of the nastiness now’. – Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 139.

(queerness) to overlap with a *constricting* cultural identity/institution (religion/Catholic nun), like two sine waves.⁷ Despite Sister Holiday's sincere efforts to take control of her destiny, and the immediate consequences of her abrupt decision to convert, the sleuth fears she may never understand who she is or who she is *meant* to be ('Look at me. Who am I?').⁸ These braided mysteries and anxieties fuel Sister Holiday's mission – at times myopic – to unmask the arsonist. Embarking on quixotic or inherently dangerous quests is another key feature of the traditional hardboiled tale.

For my critical research into how hardboiled stories operate, I examined the various choices made by Spillane and Hammett, with particular weight on Chandler, to reflect a sleuth's preoccupation with asserting individual agency in a broken, turbulent world. According to Paul Dawson, 'to read as a writer is to uncover the evidence of a writer's craft in the construction of a literary work, surmising about the practical choices made from a range of possible alternatives'.⁹ For my methodological inquiry, I paid close attention to voice and dialogue, looking for evidence of how and when characters speak, verbally spar versus fight physically, and communicate about their interior worlds. I examined the writerly choices made to illustrate the ways in which sleuths isolate themselves as well as distinguish what sleuths *say* versus how they *think*. The sleuth's words are frequently weaponised, deployed as offensive and defensive mechanisms. Ironic distance, via jokes and wisecracking retorts, and physical distance, such as a private eye living alone, are often complimentary character features in the hardboiled tale.

⁷ On page 123 in *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* (2019), Sister Helen Prejean writes, 'In 1965 in the United States we were 180,000 nuns strong. Today we number 60,000, with a median age of seventy-plus and only a tiny trickle of new members entering the community—all of them older now'.

⁸ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 305.

⁹ Paul Dawson, 'What is a Literary Intellectual?', *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol 9 (May 2003), pp. 161-179. (p. 178).

The select parallels between a fictional ‘loner’ sleuth and my experience as a formerly invisible (closeted) and now legally recognised affianced lesbian resonate with me, but the process of reading popular hardboiled stories required calibration. This calibration was necessary not because of the craft, which I have always found to be profluent, riveting, profoundly instructive, and devastatingly lyrical,¹⁰ but because of my interpretations of content which I perceived to be sexist, racist, and homophobic. As Philip Marlowe reports in *The Big Sleep*, ‘I slapped her face ... I slapped her again ... she didn’t mind the slaps’.¹¹ He repeats the word ‘slap’ four times within the span of two sentences, creating a strong rhythmic effect that communicates an ease with the violence. The cadence also intimates a pleasure in – or fixation with – the actual act of slapping a woman. In the theatre of the hardboiled tale, women were generally boxed into four categories: the victim, the gangster’s moll, the naïve secretary, or the femme fatale – a cunning woman.¹² As Sara Paretsky observes, Dashiell Hammett’s character of Brigid O’Shaughnessy is not only predatory, she is one-dimensional, existing ‘only in the body’.¹³ Even for Philip Marlowe, arguably the most self-aware and sentimental of the landmark hardboiled heroes, a female character is usually ‘a loose woman’¹⁴ or a shady temptress/siren who cannot be trusted. Hardboiled’s female characters, with their largely predictable storylines, exemplify the narrowness of repertoires of femininity. The push-pull tension in my creative practice is undeniable; I am attracted to hardboiled’s stylistic virtuosity and the sleuth’s brash charm, but I am repelled by overt expressions of misogyny, racism, and homophobia. We do not

¹⁰ ‘Dead. What a cold black noiseless word in any language.’ –Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 318.

¹¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 23.

¹² Priscilla L. Walton and Manina, Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-boiled Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 89.

¹³ Sara Paretsky, ‘The long shadow of the Falcon’, *The Guardian* (2000) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/may/06/crimebooks.books>> [accessed 25 November 2017] (para. 24 of 39)

¹⁴ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 215.

read texts in a vacuum. Even when reading solely for pleasure, we still bring the colours and contours of our life experiences to the process of reading(s). Therefore, a queer-feminist reader like myself may feel disconnected from some aspects of traditional hardboiled content.

Understanding cultural/historical contexts and authorial intentions is a crucially important element of actively engaging with *any* text, and this certainly applies to the ‘sexist thrust’ of a hardboiled novel.¹⁵ Indeed, even novels containing characters who pillory homosexuals and exalt violence against women are not so problematised that they cannot be utilised as highly productive tools within a Creative Writing practice.¹⁶ In fact, what I discovered through my immersion in the sexist- and homophobic-constructed worlds of the early hardboileds was a strong desire to engage with their historical and ideological contexts, attempt to transpose storylines into a contemporary setting, widen the conversation, broaden the scope, and diversify my reading list.¹⁷ Concepts and ideas codified by the hardboiled school, such as person versus persona, the rhetorical power of voice, masquerade, and revelation are fecund territories for the wider intellectual and literary discourse. I was therefore grateful to discover the neo-hardboiled feminist books by Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton that debuted in the 1980s. The plucky female protagonists of their novels – Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski and Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone – subverted sexist hardboiled tropes while appropriating the PI’s terse style, from deployment of wisecracks and invectives (‘I could outcuss him any day of the week’), to a spare narrative style free of extravagant flourish.¹⁸ Engaging with these novels prompted me to consider alterity as a

¹⁵ ‘Many women readers are well aware of the sexist thrust of [Chandler’s] books but still read with pleasure and against the grain his elegant, supple, multivocal style, or styles’. – Stephen Knight, in *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 120.

¹⁶ Raymond Chandler, ‘all this in the daytime had a stealthy nastiness, like a fag party’. *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 39.

¹⁷ Raymond Chandler, ‘[a] pansy has no iron in his bones’, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 61.

¹⁸ Sue Grafton, *D is for Deadbeat: A Kinsey Millhone Mystery* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 126.

potential asset rather than a detriment. Closely reading and expanding on the neo-hardboiled feminist novels gave me a platform to identify and consider the multitudinous benefits of femininity and female intuition as they related to PI work and sleuthing, such as the ‘plodding nature and infinite patience’ of Grafton’s PI Millhone.¹⁹ Similarly, my sleuth, Sister Holiday, is a stubborn shapeshifter who can ‘hide in plain sight’ and leverage deception and high-femme signatures to disguise herself and pass if/when she needs to.²⁰

Acknowledging the potential chameleon abilities depicted in the epigraphs to this Introduction was a paradigm shift for me, but although Paretsky’s and Grafton’s hardboiled counter-traditions and wise guy reversals were energising, their feminist PIs (chick dicks) were emphatically straight. I began to wonder: was there space in the crime fiction genre and sleuth subgenre for an out lesbian protagonist? Where were the queer sex scenes? Would the masculine tone and register so prevalent in private dick novels still exist without the expected physical dick?²¹ How would a queer femme fatale operate? Through the eyes of a marginal character, what constitutes a crime? What constitutes a heroic act?

With the discovery of Scottish lesbian author Val McDermid’s contemporary crime novels and lesbian detective fiction by North American authors such as Katherine V. Forrest, Barbara Wilson, and Laurie R. King, I had found the lesbian detective content I was craving. These works build on hardboiled conventions and invite readers into intertextual conversations,

¹⁹ Sue Grafton, *A is for Alibi: A Kinsey Millhone Mystery* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 27.

²⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 63.

²¹ ‘Private dick’— colloquial shorthand for ‘private detective’ and ‘private investigator’ (PI) – is used frequently in hardboiled texts themselves as well as the analysis of PI narratives. The feminist incarnation of the term is ‘chick dick’. ‘Dyke dick’ is the lesbian inheritor of the private dick moniker. Of course, all three – private dick, dyke dick, and chick dick – contain suggestive wordplay of their own, which is fertile territory for a self-aware genre author. Sleuth protagonists in novels by Sue Grafton and Katherine V. Forrest, for example, inhabit and often subvert the ‘dick-centric’ PI tropes.

making connections between novels.²² I explicate these innovations in Chapter One of this thesis. The influential derring-do of Forrest, Wilson, and King's queer sleuths and 'dyke dicks' of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s was followed by later LGBTQ incarnations, such as the *Bobbi Logan Mysteries* (debuting in 2012) by transgender author Renee James featuring a transwoman amateur sleuth; Stevie Mikayne's lesbian mysteries led by PI Jillienne Kidd (2014); Cheryl A. Head's *Bury Me When I'm Dead: A Charlie Mack Motown Mystery* (2016), a novel in which a black lesbian private eye battles against crime in Detroit as well as her own internalised homophobia; and my own character, Sister Holiday.²³ Chapter Two of this thesis historicises feminist and queer detection fiction in greater detail and situates my sleuth novel within the canonical lineage.

Through my close reading, critical and practical research, and multimodal engagement, I have established a critical-into-creative methodology for my crime fiction. An emphasis on an original 'voice-driven' crime fiction experience is the foundation of my narrative method. The narrative voice has been inspired and informed by a close engagement with hardboiled and neo-hardboiled texts, and I strive to innovate the genre with a queer-religious protagonist, a queer thematic centre, and an overall queer investigative sensibility. So much of a sleuth narrative's appeal is tied to the appeal of the sleuth herself, therefore, I have endeavoured to create a three-dimensional, flawed character in the hardboiled tradition, fuelled by a stubborn desire to solve a riddle and right the wrongs she perceives in the world. I aim to contribute well-drawn, layered queer portrayals in the detective genre that defy the gender binary and illustrate what law and order might look like from a queer perspective. My larger project is to introduce crime fiction

²² Graham Allen's *Intertextuality (The New Critical Idiom), Second Edition* (Routledge, 2011) was used as a general reference on the subject of intertextuality.

²³ Stevie Mikayne, *UnCatholic Conduct* (New York: Bold Strokes Books, 2014), p. 178.

characters who understand differently the contours of criminality because they were (or are) shadowed by their own alterity, marginalisation, or transgressions – breaking from a prescribed social order.

Another aim in this project was to render the sleuth character in such a way that she has the room to make bad judgements and then use those errors to generate tension and push the narrative forward. ‘Queering’ the narrative furnished many opportunities to blind, challenge, and sidetrack Sister Holiday. Unable to commit fully to an ascetic life, the sleuth is in a perennial state of agitation, and the purgatory is of her own design. Will she stay on the ‘righteous’ track or lose her way? Throughout the novel, I seek to reinvest this defining question in the reader’s mind to deepen reader investment and anxiety.

To plague my protagonist further, I placed her in the oven of New Orleans, a crucible of a city that can feel like a prison or a party, depending your perspective and level of agency. The infested ‘big sordid dirty city’ is another hardboiled trope I hope to reclaim.²⁴ The setting also gives me mouldable craft material to layer narrative pressures, exploit sensory perception, and sink Sister Holiday further into the flames – or threat of flames. Belied by the moniker The Big Easy, New Orleans has a reputation for institutional racism, musical heritage, quirky characters, oppressive heat, and punishing acts of God. Those aspects, including the force majeure of Hurricane Katrina, influence my characters and inform plot. Inextricably linked with New Orleans as a place and character are themes of masquerade and deception.

The themes of masquerade, carnival, and extravagance are essential to a rendering of New Orleans, and they are also woven into Sister Holiday’s identity politics, her sense of performativity, and her detection sensibility. Though her body is covered in tattoos, from her

²⁴ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 249.

jawline to her toes, she often remarks that as a nun she is invisible. Sister Holiday is required to wear gloves and a scarf to conceal her inked skin. Joining a Sisterhood and taking vows of modesty and poverty accelerate her erasure and camouflage on one level, but her spiritual practice brings her closer to herself. Throughout the book, I have placed mirrors in unusual places, for example seeing her distorted visage in the stained glass of the church, to reinforce the sense that the antihero has a complex relationship with her various selves. Try as she might, Sister Holiday cannot escape herself.

My crime fiction method balances genre conventions and inventions. Therefore, the novel should be read as a construction that is informed by detective fiction generally, and, more specifically, by select tropes from hardboiled and neo-hardboiled mysteries. The adaptations of those tropes and original synthesis are intended to innovate within the detective genre. The novel represents an application of pastiche and parody in that it exaggerates select genre hallmarks, such as Rosemary Flynn's casting as a queer femme fatale and Sister Honour's embodiment of moral authority and rectitude. While not a wholesale imitation, the novel utilises popular crime fiction/whodunit mechanics: the arson appears on the novel's first page and the rest of the novel is devoted to an investigation of who started that fire. The novel parodies and subverts hardboiled codes, such as the cynical first-person voice-over and the pacey style free of complex punctuation or grammatical intervention. In a work of 80,000 words, I do not use one semicolon. I strive to balance original lyricism and imaginative prose, explored in depth in Chapter Three, with humour, irony, and intertextuality. For instance, there is a cat named Miss Marple, Mike Hammer is referred to as a 'dick',²⁵ the characters read the Book of Judith, and the protagonist signals to the reader that she is aware of her own role within the sleuth tradition ('the same damn

²⁵ 'Every hardboiled PI, even Mike Hammer, that dick, has an office.' *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 49.

Chandler novels I read and re-read’).²⁶ The wisecracking wit expected in an iconic hardboiler is present throughout the novel.²⁷ The joking retorts and wisecracks serve multiple purposes. Talking back and cynical quips give Sister Holiday a form of power when she confronts authority figures like Sister Honour and Detective Grogran. Furthermore, Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones argue that, for the female PI, the wisecrack is a means of bucking conventional codes of feminine conduct: ‘Such deflection takes place when characters “crack wise” within such novels; it also occurs when authors use tough talk to respond to the hard-boiled tradition itself’.²⁸ This notion of authorial response is key to my larger project of contributing a fresh ‘voice’ to the evolving detective genre.

The ironic tone and dark humour (‘I’ll make you a saint if you drive fast’), including the group reading of the Book of Judith, which celebrates a man’s beheading, and sequences with the nuns dancing in the Evangeline Ballroom and singing on the school bus also introduce elements of Camp.²⁹ I embrace Camp as both a nod to queer culture and part of a stylistic sensibility that ‘seeks to challenge’. Susan Sontag’s analysis in *Notes on Camp* proved to be a useful reference during my craft process. Sontag contends that ‘Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon’.³⁰ Camp centres aesthetics – style and tone – to create an environment where the impossible can be experienced as possible. In art (literature, TV, and film), nuns have long been featured in Camp and campy portrayals; consider the pop-culture staples like *Sister Act*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Flying*

²⁶ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 198.

²⁷ “‘Might want to consider plumbing”, I said. “Good benefits and no danger of getting shot””. *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 55.

²⁸ Priscilla L. Walton, and Manina Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hardboiled Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). p. 131.

²⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 142.

³⁰ Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (1964) <<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>>

Nun, and the Sister's habit as a common Halloween costume.³¹ To make the impossible or unlikely appear possible, I have learnt that consistency and three-dimensionality are keys to creating a signature style in which readers can find purchase. The first-person perspective, variation of the prose line, the use of fragments and evocative figurative language, and the intermittent threading of prayer and invective contribute to the novel's line-by-line style which, in turn, contributes to the overall ethos.

The critical and practical research I have conducted varied in nature, ranging from creatively reading and analysing more than one hundred books through a feminist and queer deconstructionist lens, to shadowing musicians and high school teachers, to watching dozens of detective programmes, to riding along in a police car. The research was united by the goal of bringing plausibility, realistic dialogue, and authoritative commentary to the project. For example, in 2017, I participated in the 'Ride-Along' programme with Northampton Police Officers, accompanying a local sergeant on a six-hour shift, riding in his police cruiser, touring the police department, and interviewing the Police Chief.³² In 2019, I attended an investigative procedure workshop in Northampton, Massachusetts, with Detective Sergeant Vic Caputo of the Northampton Police Department. In 2018 and 2019, I collaborated with Attorney Gratiene Sienna Baskin, requesting her legal insight on the development of courtroom interactions and arrest scenes in my novel. I also interviewed the Easthampton, Massachusetts, Fire Captain Sandy Krauss, the first female to serve in the Captain's post. My written notes and photographs from the Ride-Along programme, and the interviews with Caputo, Krauss, and Baskin, provided

³¹ The intersection of Camp, queerness, and religious imagery can be observed in work by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an activist and performance troupe founded in San Francisco in 1979. According to the troupe's website, this Order uses drag, religious imagery, 'humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit'. <<https://www.thesisters.org>>

³² Northampton Police Department Ride-Along Program <<https://www.northamptonpd.com/community-services/ride-along-program.html>>

essential insight that helped me correct inaccuracies in the early-draft depictions of the police/fire department investigative procedure and legal system. Elements such as forensics, the handling of evidence, crime scene procedures, Miranda Warnings, interview practice, and court operations were reviewed, modified, and revised for veracity in the final draft. For example, two pages of dialogue mentioning fingerprinting students in Draft Twelve was deleted. I have also joined the Writers' Police Academy, an organization based in New Jersey that offers hands-on training events for writers, with a specific focus on the tools and procedures used for solving the crime of murder. Writers' Police Academy offers training on Sirchie, the crime-scene investigation technology.

To enhance the theme of musicality in the novel, I shadowed two guitar players, Adam Dunetz of Northampton, Massachusetts, and Ben Richter of Los Angeles, California, spending time with them backstage and in their music studios. As with the Police Ride-Along, the musical engagements provided opportunities to carve personal pathways into the world of the novel, which helped me gain more accurate and more intuitive understandings of the pertinent topics. My aim is to write with sensorial immersion and emotional depth and infuse a sense of immediacy into Sister Holiday's punk-rock past and her harmonious 'narrative present'. Jody Hobbs Hesler articulates how point-of-view can generate 'much of the narrative tension in the story, but, of course, it is not the only delivery system'.³³ In my narrative method, I have devised ways of illuminating Sister Holiday's secret longings – including her desire to reconnect with the physical intensity of playing the electric guitar, which was like 'riding a tsunami' – to make the subterranean pining evident to the reader.³⁴

³³ Jody Hobbs Hesler, 'Narrative Tension: The Promises Writers Make', *North American Review* (24 September 2019) <<https://northamericanreview.org/open-space/narrative-tension-promises-writers-make>>

³⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 102.

Multimodal engagements and interventions can provide further evidence that the detective genre is a vibrant and evolving genre. From *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a reference to Sherlock Holmes, to the television PI character Veronica Mars calling her father ‘Philip Marlowe’, sleuth storytelling has proven to be a remarkably fertile ground for intertextual and cross-platform conversations.³⁵ This suggests that, within familiar territory, readers and viewers *want* to be surprised by genre mutation, variation, recombination, and satisfying twists. My Creative Writing ambition is to innovate in such a manner, constructing a mystery fiction series that consists of more than two instalments and converses with germane hardboiled/mystery texts and tropes to widen the aperture for readers. Because the premise and the narrative predicaments at the core of my sleuth series would need to be compelling to keep readers wanting more, I believe that the evolving role of the Catholic church in the United States, of which I was an active member for twenty years, contribute to the non-static conditions needed for micro tensions and an ongoing macro story arc.

In addition to being a practicing Catholic for two decades, I also attended Catholic school for eight years, and the teachers who had the most enduring influence on me were nuns. I often meditated on the contradictory notion that nuns were the most fully realised examples of feminists I have ever encountered and yet they were, technically, servants to God and unequal with men. The nuns I knew in my youth were self-reliant and strong women, unencumbered by modern woes. They chose poverty, obedience, chastity, and the willing abnegation of conveniences in order to share their love with all of humanity, rather than one partner or spouse.

³⁵ The popular US television series *Veronica Mars* imports keystone hardboiled tropes into a teenage mystery series with micro/macro arcs and California noir/dark comedy. The series imitates and expands on hardboiled signatures, giving the characters their own private detective agency and utilizing a Philip Marlowe-esque voice-over. In Season One, Veronica Mars, played by the actress Kristen Bell, calls her father ‘Philip Marlowe’, even though she is more of Marlowe’s cynical and complex PI inheritor.

The Sisters-Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Order in my Pennsylvania hometown, Scranton, was instrumental in teaching literacy to the wives and daughters of anthracite coal miners in the 1900s.

Most religious women I now know are similarly service-oriented – energetically dedicated to social change. Many Sisters, like ‘The Nuns on the Bus’, are intimately engaged in purpose-driven lives, addressing racial injustice, tirelessly caring for the infirm, feeding the poor, advocating for healthcare policy changes, and working to improve shelter conditions for asylum seekers at the USA/Mexico border. Sister Helen Prejean, for instance, is an anti-death penalty advocate who is fiercely committed to restorative justice. She communicates openly about her spiritual practice, sexuality, and individuation within the context of Sisterhood. Sister Helen Prejean chronicles her spiritual journey with a distinctly passionate and luminous voice (‘The fire, the mystic union, is God’s pure gift’). She admits she is ‘haunted by God’.³⁶ For as solvent, creative, unique, and inspiring as nuns are in North America, they are still, as a group, not equal to men within the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nuns rank below priests and they cannot lead worship services. While the word ‘nuns’, in the strictest sense, refers to women who are cloistered and contemplative, ‘Sisters’ are active in the working world, engaged in the larger community, often on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised.³⁷ Nuns and Sisters have become so colloquially intertwined that these words are used as synonyms in and outside the church and they will be used synonymously in this critical commentary and the novel. With regard to political and cultural issues, Sisters do not have a homogenous voice, especially when it comes to LGBTQ rights, in relation to which a diversity of opinions is shared.³⁸ I plan to use rich

³⁶ Sister Helen Prejean, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* (New York: Random House, 2019), p. 284

³⁷ Jo Piazza, *If Nuns Ruled the World: Ten Sisters on a Mission* (New York: Open Road, 2014), p. 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

juxtapositions like these to shape my unconventional sleuth. Sister Holiday must come alive to readers as a credible character, not a circus sideshow. I attempt to strike this balance by incorporating sombre and sober scenes to humanise Sister Holiday and her world. I was conscious of how the sleuth acts, speaks, and thinks. I was equally aware of the need to instruct readers on the distance between what she says and what she thinks, how, like a traditional hardboiled PI, wisecracks and physical actions are often deployed as protective armour against emotional instability. For example, Sister Holiday responds to the brutal rape of her brother by stalking and attacking the perpetrators. She reacts to the violent death of Toni by moving from Brooklyn and joining the convent, trying to erase her ‘old self’. In response to her student, Prince Dempsey, who disrupts music class with a menacing question, ‘What’s the most painful way to die?’, Sister Holiday responds, ‘being your music teacher’.³⁹

To bring rigour and originality to the depictions of women religious and religious services, I returned to Catholic Mass in Scranton, Pennsylvania, paying attention to the subtleties and sensorial textures, such as the pungent sandalwood incense and unforgiving cold wood of the church pews. I read journalism about and memoirs by women religious, such as Sister Helen Prejean. As an erstwhile student of nuns, at Scranton’s Saint Claire’s School and Saint Paul’s School, I reflected on, reconstructed, and interpreted my own encounters with nuns – using memory as craft material.

My goal is to leverage the aforementioned critical and practical research, in combination with imaginative interpretations, to create an expansive, layered hardboiled-inspired sleuth text. In the thesis, I examine how queer mysteries, such as *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, are uniquely positioned to act as metaphors for the desire to understand our roles and to

³⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 50.

find (or make) meaning in the world as societal attitudes shift. I hope to do this by introducing complex characters who, as they search for the arsonist-murderer, are all presented with opportunities to interrogate themselves. Sister Holiday, as she looks from the outside in, offers commentary on the ever-changing customs of contemporary life and romance. In the system of poetics that I am devising, character development and cross-fertilised plot points will help exploit blind spots and discriminations, and amplify the tensions between one's past and present, between vocational identity and sexual identity, between storyteller and the story, and between healer and sinner.

Chapter One: Genre

The body of a swimming coach washes up on the shore of a sleepy Maine town. A ransom note, speckled with blood, rests on the blue sheet of an empty crib. A grand jewel is lifted from the old museum. While the aforementioned examples signal different crimes, they share common ground as the potential beginnings of detective fiction stories. Like many forms of literature, the detective fiction category is not monolithic; it can be as manifold as the authors contributing to the genre and the novels revolving around crime and characters (erudite detectives, mercenary PIs, spinster sleuths, even crime-solving cats) who try to piece together clues.⁴⁰ Cosy mysteries, forensic investigations, and locked-room puzzlers are a few forms of detective fiction readily available at libraries and bookshops. Many detective novels do not fit neatly into one restrictive box or another; they often assemble, reference, and include hallmarks of various categories. I argue that this fluidity and dynamism within the genre – the writ-large understanding that myriad styles can be found on one bookshelf marked ‘detective fiction’ – also presents craft-related challenges and opportunities for creative writers like myself.

In this chapter, I investigate genre with the goal of scrutinising the mechanics of and historical approaches to detective fiction. In the first section, I dissect genre with the following questions in mind: What is the DNA of the detective fiction genre? What are the rules of the genre and how closely must I follow those rules? How many rules can I break in a queer sleuth narrative? Within expected formulas, where are the opportunities to innovate and intervene? These inquiries fuel my research and creative craft, and thus I also utilise the first section of this chapter to establish an understanding of genre and how an engagement with genre is a vitally

⁴⁰ Rita Mae Brown introduced her sleuthing cat characters, Mrs. Murphy and Pewter, along with the dog Tee Tucker in the mystery *The Purrfect Murder*. The book, ‘co-authored’ by Brown and her cat, Sneakie Pie Brown, was published by Random House in 2009.

productive endeavour. In the second and third sections of this chapter, I research narrative devices commonly found within Golden Age (otherwise known as ‘classic’) and hardboiled detective fiction schools, respectively, exploring how an understanding of these devices adds rigour to my drafting and research processes and can illuminate strategies that can be used for queer sleuth storytelling.

The inherent variety within detective fiction calls for a thorough examination of genre and a subsequent explanation of how this analysis augments my creative method. Detective fiction is sometimes referred to as a ‘whodunit’, a narrative that conventionally anchors the genre in a question: *who* committed the crime?⁴¹ Tzvetan Todorov takes this notion further, suggesting that the whodunit consists of two stories: ‘the story of the crime and the story of the investigation’.⁴² In *Talking About Detective Fiction*, P. D. James distinguishes detective fiction from other types of literature containing a mysterious crime because the genre’s conventions, primarily the detective who ‘comes in like an avenging deity’ to solve the crime.⁴³ While these observations are largely true, there is room for vast interpretation within the genre, as evinced by the heterogeneity within the detective fiction landscape. In *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre*, Jackie Shead points to the ‘inverted’ detective story in which, unlike a whodunit, the criminal is *revealed early* in the novel and the story reads more like a willshecatchhim, a play on the whodunit contraction⁴⁴. Shead also addresses the ‘clue puzzle’, such as in Agatha Christie’s *A.B.C. Murders* (1936), in which an unlikely scenario with

⁴¹ ‘In 1930, Donald Gordon, a book reviewer for *News of Books*, needed to come up with something to say about a rather unremarkable mystery novel called *Half-Mast Murder*. “A satisfactory whodunit”, he wrote’.
<<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/whodunit>> [accessed 21 June 2018]

⁴² Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 42–52 (p. 44).

⁴³ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 9.

⁴⁴ Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 6.

rules is presented, as in a game or sport, hereby inviting the reader to compete with the sleuth and solve the mystery first.⁴⁵ The examples by James and Sheard point to the multifariousness of the genre and inspired me to take imaginative risks with the style and themes of my sleuth narrative.

In Harpham and Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, genre denotes 'types or classes' of literature. According to the authors, 'through the Renaissance and much of the eighteenth century, the recognised genres or poetic kinds as they were then called were widely thought to be fixed literary types, somewhat like species in the biological order of nature'.⁴⁶ With this concept of classification in mind, it is reasonable to consider genre a 'type' of literature that can be identified by prominent features, arguably in the way that specific markings on feathers might prove helpful during an *ornithologist's taxonomy*. The word 'order', however, which also figures in Harpham and Abrams's definition, illuminates P. D. James's scholarship on the subject of genre. James emphasises that what makes the detective fiction genre identifiable and different from other works of crime fiction are the detective novel's 'organised structure and recognisable conventions'.⁴⁷ In other words, following a familiar formula may assist in both the creation and the classification of a work as detective fiction.

There is often quite subtle gradation between detective novels such that the differentiation is not always clear. For example, a whodunit may also contain a nested willshecatchhim and elements of the clue puzzle structures that I illustrated earlier. Nonetheless, the detective genre's prescription includes an established set of ingredients. A detective story should include a central crime (a puzzle to be solved); a detective figure or a detection team; clues about the crime in

⁴⁵ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 9.

⁴⁶ M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th Edn (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), p. 108.

⁴⁷ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 9.

question; red herrings; and a narrative resolution of some kind. Therefore, a mystery, as it relates to detective fiction, means a riddle ‘to solve’ or ‘to be solved’ within the narrative framework of the book. I assert that the infinitive marker of the word ‘to’ is important as it solidifies the detective story’s deontic nature, meaning that a question is obliged to be answered. There is an expectation inherent in a detective fiction tale. The detective fiction genre’s premise is that the narrative is a problem-solving tool that animates the story’s action. Readers of the detective genre, in general, don’t want to be passive consumers; rather, genre enthusiasts expect to roll up their sleeves, synthesise, find the through line, and reject red herrings in concert with the sleuth.⁴⁸ And while a cosy literary puzzle about a sassy feline crimefighter could not be more different in tone to the brutality of torture in the Swedish Kurt Wallander novels, both are ultimately concerned with narrative resolutions that feel satisfactory according to the rules set forth by the respective authors of sleuth-oriented projects.⁴⁹

Accepting Harpham and Abrams’s premise that genre is a type of literature, and applying it to P. D. James’s assertion that a familiar formula helps to distinguish the detective fiction type from other crime fiction types, it is therefore interesting to explore Richard Dyer’s observation that genre is a type that also *describes* a type of art. In his book *Pastiche*, Dyer presents the idea that genre is both an object (a noun) and a modifier (an adjective, as in the phrase ‘genre fiction’). As it relates to my writing practice, Dyer’s application of genre as both a type and a description of type provided me with useful tools to analyse private eye novels such as Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and Sara Gran’s *Claire DeWitt and the City of the Dead* (2011),

⁴⁸ In Chapter Three of this thesis, I explore Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential concept of the ‘paranoid reader’ apropos of detective fiction as well as my writing practice. In my novel, I explore ways to keep the reader engaged and alert, searching for patterns that may prove to be useful clues (for example, Sister Augustine’s frequent prayer vigils at the shrine) versus patterns that are designed to mislead.

⁴⁹ Stijn Reijnders, ‘Watching the Detectives: Inside the Guilty Landscapes of Inspector Morse, Baantjer and Wallander’, *European Journal of Communication*, 24, Issue 2 (2009), pp. 165–181.

probing how these works both align with and/or stray from detective fiction's recognisable conventions. According to Neil McCaw, 'Reading is seen as a form of creative expression rather than a narrow prescription, a means of examining texts at a range of levels (intellectual/emotional/psychological/cultural etc.)'.⁵⁰ Creatively reading the aforementioned books – reading for comprehension, analysis, and interpretation – gave me a platform on which I could re-locate certain ideas in an attempt to create new paradigms. The insights gleaned from my creative reading were then used to negotiate voice, conflict, and the balance of action to first-person interiority in my novel. I invested in this aspect of the novel's construction in order to lead readers on a journey through the *inner* and *outer* worlds of the viewpoint character. The exterior and interior need to stay balanced to keep the narrative moving forward for the reader. Propulsion – movement toward the solution of the puzzle – is a general expectation in works of detective genre, especially when the story opens with danger or the threat of danger.

When analysing and engaging with influential genre texts, Richard Dyer also insists that familiarity is one aspect of how readers contextualise genre, but that likeness and familiarity are neither definitive nor instructive about art's purpose. Dyer raises the issue of 'purpose':

Genres are groupings of works recognised as being alike. A symphony or sonnet or Western is like other symphonies, sonnets or Westerns and so genre production is a species of evident imitation, of making and receiving something like something else because it is like something else. However, a straight genre work is not purposefully signalling the fact of imitation.⁵¹

My reading of Dyer's theory is that an artist can utilise the constructs and framework of genre not to copy or plagiarise outright, but rather to offer a new perspective, deliver a new twist, or tell a new story. Dyer further explains that a production of a genre work means a knowing

⁵⁰ Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts, A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills, Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 80.

⁵¹ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 35.

‘imitation’ of an art form for a strategic purpose. He also suggests that pastiche – artwork rooted in imitation – is a fruitful framework for analysing genre that contains an assemblage or ‘collage’. In this regard, the concept of pastiche in artmaking informs my creative process because my ambition is to learn from historical traditions, genre inhabitation, and textual subversion to examine both ‘how categories of text shift in an attempt to establish a framework within which all texts can be contained’, as Neil McCaw has observed, and also ‘the shifting nature of these genre categories’ in order to contribute fresh ideas to the literary discourse.⁵² I aimed to write a genre-recognisable sleuth narrative whilst also expanding the possibilities of the category. To that end, I rooted my story in a whodunit (who is the arsonist and murderer?), but I thickened the mystery with Sister Holiday’s characterisation and unlikely conversion story. The novel’s style is also a reference to hardboiled, with shotgun lyricism interspersed with prayer (‘Sirens wailed, and I felt the sound hard, like punches in the back of the heart. *Hail Mary, Mother Mary, full of grace. Hail Eve.*’).⁵³ My aim in the novel was to compose three subplots – Toni’s fiery death, a possible romance with Rosemary, the novice-into-permanent vow uncertainty – with tectonic movement so they interact with the central plot but also quiver with their own shadow inquiries: what is forgiveness, what is healing, who can be a hero, and – the book’s metanarrative – what happens when you lose control of the story you tell about yourself? Holiday was an out lesbian, and now she is a nun, Sister Holiday, so is she still the ‘same person’?

In my application, ‘identity’ is an aspect of personhood that is negotiated by the novel’s characters as they try to understand if an identity is a fixed boundary or if it is more like a nexus

⁵² Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts, A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills, Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 102.

⁵³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 81.

of distinguishing features and the interplay of those features. In the novel, identity is something that is perceived to be shaped, iterated, maintained, found, and or lost, as seen in the exchange in which Audrey doubts that Sister Holiday can still identify as a lesbian because she is celibate. Similarly, Detective Grogan identifies Sister Augustine as a rare figure in modern times – a ‘pro’ – because of the many decades she has served as Saint Sebastian’s principal. In these two examples, identity is a kind of invented or constructed performance. This dovetails with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that emphasises the ‘reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’.⁵⁴ Private-eye work and religious rituals are also contingent on speech and actions to codify or consecrate them, other types of performativity.

Beyond embracing the whodunit model, my novel is also a knowing assemblage of select archetypal hardboiled tropes, such as the cynical first-person point-of-view to mask inner fragility. But my goal was to add unexpected layers, such as the sleuth’s idiosyncratic lesbian identity, her contradictory tattoos which allow readers to try to ‘read’ and decode the character and her countercultural decision to become a Catholic Sister. Her tattoos are worn / displayed as visual cues (evidence) of her toughness and impetuosity as well as her faith. I have also included Golden Age detective elements in my narrative method, including an oddball pairing / foil, similar to that of Watson and Holmes. I dissect these signatures in greater detail in the second and third sections this chapter.

Additionally, the crime in my novel is serial arson and subsequent murders. And though my novel presents a mystery to be solved, thus necessitating propulsive action by the characters and reader, the spiritual nature of the protagonist, an unconventional nun, and the setting, a Catholic school, make it acceptable, even logical, for characters to disrupt time to reflect on the

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge. 1993), pp. xii.

past and meditate on grief, identity, and shifting social codes. For a character like Sister Holiday, spirituality and introspection are linked to her thought process which, in turn, influence her sleuthing. Readers see Sister Holiday alone in her bedroom and kneeling in the wooden pew of the church as she tries to focus on clues so she can ‘crack this case wide open’ and try to resolve the conflicts (her own and the arson/murder).⁵⁵ The scenes that occur in the convent kitchen, school, and church – narratively framed by Holiday’s inner monologue, constructed for the reader through reflections – foreground the complexities of duty and sisterhood. A hard-but-meditative character is another hardboiled conceit on which I attempt to build and extend. Grant Tracy points to the authorial treatment of interiority as a crucially important feature of reading Raymond Chandler’s work as a ‘landscape of insight’. Tracy writes, ‘There is a lot of gunplay, sudden violence in Chandler’s pulp stories, but in the six novels that follow Marlowe’s debut, he never kills anyone. Instead, action is downplayed in favor of attitude’. The idea proved to be a useful insight in my praxis as I attempted to create a thorny, hot tempered, and reactionary sleuth who was simultaneously contemplative and self-aware.

Another ambition for this Ph.D. was to blend stylistic experimentation within expectation, a mix evident in hardboiled-inspired texts, such as the oneiric sequences of Sara Gran’s pioneering New Orleans sleuth fiction.⁵⁶ In my novel, stylistic experimentation is exemplified in the word choice, context-sensitive syntax, repetition, and lyricism (‘The abdominal aorta pumps as the heart beats, like a secret heart. But every heart is a secret’).⁵⁷ A delicate balance must be achieved between expressive language, description, and action, and,

⁵⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 48.

⁵⁶ ‘That night I dreamed I was back in New Orleans. I hadn’t been there in ten years. But now, in my dream, it was during the flood’: Sara Gran, *Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 1. It is also interesting to note how this opening line by Gran echoes a classic, dream-related first line – ‘Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again’ – in *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. In both novels, dreams and illusions suggest the psychological complexities of the characters and influence narrative developments.

⁵⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 202.

ultimately, clues. Combined with the grinding work of rubber-meets-the-road sleuthing, the language styling must serve to push the sleuth story along. If poetic language is to work in the detective fiction genre, it has to be of service to the larger narrative project. In order that my poeticism ('Light pounded my eyelids ... Absolution. A portent of my future self') served voice-driven narrative and plot, I sought to make the syntax tensile and tight, and expressive in ways that reflect Sister Holiday's viewpoint.⁵⁸ The figurative language and symbolism evolve associatively as the story unfolds, often evoking heat, fire, sweat, agitation, and blood. Even my title, *The Scorched Cross*, is poetic in the sense that it points to the emotional heart and metanarrative of the novel – what happens when you get burned? what happens when you lose control of the story you tell yourself about your life? – rather than functioning as a simplistic label.⁵⁹ Chandler's hardboiled novels apply figurative language with similar means. In *The Long Goodbye*, after noticing a very attractive woman in a hotel bar, Philip Marlowe comments that the woman looks as 'remote and clear as mountain water'.⁶⁰ The variance between 'remote' and 'clear' supply important information about Marlowe's unique mindset.

In another familiar trope of detective fiction, the problem-solvers often have enemies of their own and problems of their own besides the central crime. In my book, Investigator Magnolia Riveaux and Sister Holiday are both depictions of an anti-hero, and they both wrestle with external and internal adversarial forces. They both have weaknesses similar to those of Sherlock Holmes (use of cocaine and opium) and Philip Marlowe (taste for booze as well as trouble). Riveaux is addicted to opioids and painkillers and wants, paradoxically, to be more

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

⁵⁹ Raymond Chandler's titles, such as *The Big Sleep* (1939), also operate on multiple levels. 'The big sleep' is a metaphor for death but readers can also infer that, even in a seedy crime-ridden city, the act of murder is indeed 'big'. As such, it is taken seriously by the protagonist.

⁶⁰ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 90.

present as well as to erase herself.⁶¹ Holiday has a hard time letting go of her own story and her identifications with her addictions. Without the disruptions of her old life and the perennial sense of mayhem that defined her, she asks herself and the reader, ‘Who am I?’⁶²

As I have attempted to illustrate, genre is fluid, alternating between commonly recognised conventions and variations (whether of form or of tone) in individual instances of the genre. This is not dissimilar to the diversity of approaches found within traditional poetic forms, namely villanelles and sonnets. Diction, syntax, rhythm, musicality, parallel construction, and other strategic decisions can help a writer to create uniquely engaging reader experiences despite fixed rules of the form. While literary critics like Edmund Wilson dismissed detective fiction rules as a ‘code’ and ‘custom which results in the concealment of the pointlessness of a good deal of this fiction’ – I argue that it is precisely the formulaic nature of the detective narrative that appeals to readers who are eager to experience the unknown within the known.⁶³ The creative practice implications are stimulating. In my poetry writing practice, I find utility in constraints.⁶⁴ It can be a generative writing exercise to construct a traditional sonnet about ‘love’ or ‘death’ that succeeds in furnishing a new viewpoint, and I believe that detective fiction, arguably an overexposed category, presents the same creative dare to the novelist.

T. S. Eliot was one of the ‘detective fiction genre’s most passionate and discerning readers’, according to Paul Grimstad. Grimstad explains Eliot’s position in his *New Yorker*

⁶¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 258.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁶³ Edmund Wilson, ‘Why Do People Read Detective Stories?’ *The New Yorker* (1944) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1944/10/14/why-do-people-read-detective-stories>> [accessed 2 April 2017] (para. 3 of 5)

⁶⁴ I am the author of two books of poetry, *Scranton Lace* (Clemson University Press, 2018) and *Girls Like You*, (Clemson University Press, 2015), and the pamphlet/chapbook, *I Would Ruby If I Could* (Factory Hollow Press, 2013). My fourth collection, *Bandit/Queen: The Runaway Story of Belle Starr*, is a true-crime poetry project inspired by the notorious Wild West outlaw Belle Starr. *Bandit/Queen* is under contract with Clemson University Press, scheduled for publication in 2021.

article ‘What Makes Great Detective Fiction, According to T. S. Eliot’: ‘Good detective fiction tempered the passion and pursuit of melodrama with the “beauty of a mathematical problem”’.⁶⁵ Like Eliot, I appreciate the formal constraints of the genre, viewing them as inspiring rather than limiting. A rule or formula puts pressure on the writer to deliver a surprise of some ilk. This is similar to the way in which a maths problem can possess ‘beauty’; the act of solving it or attempting to solve it is in itself a frisson. With restrictions in place, every calculation by the sleuth is observed and weighed. For instance, in my novel, convention meets variation in the presentation of my spinster sleuth character. In Agatha Christie’s *Marple* mysteries, elderly but savvy Miss Marple capitalises on the cultural associations of the spinster – meddling, socially invisible, and dismissed – and uses these to make her an effective sleuth as she eavesdrops and extracts critical information from witnesses. My lesbian character depends on and upends cultural associations in a similar way. As a nun and a teacher, students ‘looked right through her’, but she also exploits her otherness to give her a sleuthing edge.⁶⁶

The Great Detectives and The Golden Age

When I began drafting my novel, I knew that I wanted to write a mystery in which a crime occurs at the start of the book and readers – in concert with the sleuth – must follow the clues to deduce the identity of the perpetrator. I also knew that I wanted my sleuth to be unconventional in more ways than one: she is a sardonic, tattooed lesbian nun named Sister Holiday who cracks the case of a serial arsonist but fails to unlock the personal riddles that nag her. I wanted my nun-

⁶⁵ Paul Grimstad, ‘What Makes Great Detective Fiction, According to T. S. Eliot’, *The New Yorker* (2016) <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-makes-great-detective-fiction-according-to-t-s-eliot>> [accessed 2 April 2017] (para. 8 of 10)

⁶⁶ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 110.

sleuth to possess the street-smart pluck and beguiling cynicism of Philip Marlowe, the private eye ('eye' acting as the vocalisation of 'I' for 'investigator') who typified the hardboiled mystery subgenre popularised in the United States from approximately 1910 to 1950. I wanted the protagonist to be an amateur – a newbie in more ways than one – but I also introduce the device of a licensed PI, a common fixture in hardboiled stories, with the invitation by Maggie Riveaux to join her firm.⁶⁷ I also wanted to situate Sister Holiday in an odd-couple detection team with a foil who accentuates her complexities, the way Dr John Watson provides a rich contrast to Sherlock Holmes. This is a recipe often found in the earliest detective tales and their Golden Age successors (popular during the 'two decades between the First and Second World Wars').⁶⁸

Early period mysteries, Golden Age, and hardboiled-inspired subgenres offer creative writers useful case studies in conflict, suspense, and character development. The craft elements of Golden Age novels, sometimes referred to as armchair detective novels, that are useful for my practice are the notions of teamwork and the tenets of fair play (engineering a tale in such a way that a reader can solve a puzzle by examining clues using logical deduction). I will now explain my relationship to the early whodunits and Golden Age landmarks and how they informed my process, ultimately leading me to conceive a crime novel with a distinct first-person hardboiled narration style that is also influenced by traditional crime-fiction attributes.

The classic detective subgenre began with stories by Edgar Allan Poe (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1841), Charles Dickens (*Bleak House*, 1852), Émile Gaboriau (*L'Affaire Lerouge*, 1866), Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone*, 1868), and the subgenre was further

⁶⁷ Investigator Riveaux tells Sister Holiday that she has been fired from the fire department and has applied for her official private-eye license. Riveaux then says, "you can join my team. Magnolia Riveaux & Sister Holiday, Private Eyes'. Sister Holiday equivocates in response, offering an ambiguous quip. *The Scorched Cross: Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 314.

⁶⁸ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 50.

popularised by authors Arthur Conan Doyle (*A Study in Scarlet*, 1887), Agatha Christie (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, 1920), and Dorothy L. Sayers (*Gaudy Night*, 1936). The early whodunits feature crimes such as a theft, murder, or kidnapping, and a specific, known environment, such as a school, train, neighbourhood, or village. The investigative figure is usually brilliant and eccentric, as characterised in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Christie's Hercule Poirot. The suspects are often found within a finite group and occupy the same space, or at the very least are not strangers. Suspects are often introduced towards the beginning of the novel. In my book, the crime occurs on page one (the fire), and the setting is a high school with a correlating church, convent, and rectory. In addition to Fire Investigator Riveaux and the Homicide Squad (Sergeant Decker and Detective Grogan), most of the suspects are introduced early. In Chapter Three the reader meets Prince Dempsey, Sisters Augustine, Honour, and Theresa, Rosemary Flynn, Bernard Gregory, and John Vander Kitt. Each suspect has the opportunity and proximity to commit the crime.

In the classic detective mode, the protagonist can be an informal sleuth, professional detective, or private investigator who, by close observation of the evidence or by using a process of methodical establishment of facts, solves the mystery. Notable in this regard are the clever investigators created by John Dickson Carr, G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, P. D. James, and one of the forefathers of the genre, Edgar Allen Poe. In his story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, one of the earliest detective stories (published in 1841), the movements of quirky Paris native C. August Dupin are chronicled by his friend, an unnamed narrator of the story.⁶⁹ According to David Van Leer, Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* established many genre tropes that would become common

⁶⁹ David Van Leer, *Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales*, ed. by Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 65–91 (p. 65).

elements in mystery fiction: the eccentric and clever detective; the bumbling constabulary; and the first-person narration by a personal friend. The detective's peculiarities come into sharp focus in contrast to his foils, a 'sympathetic but naïve narrator' and an 'unsympathetic professional investigator'.⁷⁰ The countertype helps to cement character complexity and highlight the distinctive temperament of the protagonist, often unearthing sublimated ideas that the reader should learn.⁷¹ The friction of a foil in the form of Investigator Riveaux is an important element in my novel. After a car chase, Riveaux teases out a piece of revealing – and damning – information from Sister Holiday.

'I think you like this. The chase.'

'Naw. I want to help,' I lied. Of course I liked it. Not only the chase but the violence. Fire slithering back to life after you were sure it was extinguished. I liked digging in the trash.⁷²

In this scene, it is Riveaux's suggestion that forces Holiday to admit to herself – and to the reader – that she 'likes' violence and 'digging in the trash'. This contributes to narrative experience by showing the reader that temptation lives just under the surface. Even though Sister Holiday is now on 'the righteous path', deep down she is still, at least partially, a 'monster(s)'.⁷³ Writing dialogue that runs parallel to the fault lines of the foil can add character contour and offer the reader more purchase on a character's inner tumult.

A study of the great detectives and Golden Age texts also reveals that female authors have been making notable contributions since the genre's inception. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor (born in 1831) was a prolific 'dime novel' author who covered diverse subjects in her crime stories. Her book *The Dead Letter* was published in 1866 under the pseudonym Seeley Regester,

⁷⁰ David Van Leer, *Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales*, ed. by Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 65–91 (p. 65).

⁷¹ M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th Edn (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), p. 225.

⁷² *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 150.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

and it is commonly believed to be the first full-length American detective novel.⁷⁴ It is also the first female-authored detective novel. *The Dead Letter* introduces new kinds of problem-solving skills, such as reading people or reading ‘character’, and new narrative environments, such as the domestic, to the realm of detective work.

Another early female influencer in the detective fiction genre is Anna Katherine Greene (born in 1846), who wrote *The Levinworth Case*, the first American fiction series about a police detective. Her 1897 novel *That Affair Next Door* introduced the first American female detective in the genre, Amelia Butterworth.⁷⁵ Amelia is an amateur sleuth who is equal parts nosey, determined, opinionated, and impatient (‘I could not resist the temptation of leaving my bed and taking a peep’).⁷⁶ These nervy traits are handy for the sleuth, and these characteristics appear in later incarnations of the spinster sleuth and plucky lass characters popularised by Agatha Christie. In Christie’s *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), readers meet Anne Beddingfeld, a ‘bright sort of girl’, a young woman with an appetite for adventure.⁷⁷ After the death of her father, a famous archeologist, the newly orphaned Anne leaves the safe harbor of home and dives head first into a mystery she is determined to solve. While she does marry at the end of the novel, Beddingfeld was a baseline reference for crafting Sister Holiday insofar as her intrepid spirit colours her sleuthing methods (‘I searched diligently’) and her direct-address narration style (‘Everybody has been at me, right and left, to write this story’).⁷⁸

Another quality shared by amateur unmarried female sleuths such as Marple, Butterworth and Beddingfeld, is the utilisation of available resources such as common sense rather than

⁷⁴ Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, *The Dead Letter* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007)

⁷⁵ Lewis D. Moore, *Connecting Detectives: The Influence of 19th Century Sleuth Fiction on the Early Hard-boileds* (Chicago: McFarland & Company, 2014)

⁷⁶ Anna Katharine Green, *That Affair Next Door* (1897) (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 11.

⁷⁷ Agatha Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* (London: The Bodley Head, 1924), p. 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.

police acumen. Similarly, Sister Holiday pairs intuition – for better or for worse (‘Boys could never be trusted’) – with ratiocination.⁷⁹ In sum, gender is a vital narrative element in key examples of the classic detective genre as well as narratives inspired by early period and Golden Age texts. In my own novel, the subversion of gender expectations is encoded into the plot and character development. I analyse the relationship between gender and genre in depth in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Hardboiled Fiction

The American response to the Golden Age detective story is the hardboiled lone-wolf private eye. Because my novel is inspired by Golden Age and hardboiled PI aesthetics, with hardboiled serving as the more influential subgenre in my writing method, and as I have analysed select examples of the former genre, now I will investigate examples from the latter and locate them within my research and creative practice.

Dashiell Hammett’s fiction is often considered the originator of the American hardboiled subgenre. His PI character, Sam Spade, is the archetype of the cynical loner. However, it was Carroll John Daly’s short story *The False Burton Combs*, published in the magazine *Black Mask* in 1922, that is regarded as the first evidence of a private eye narrative in the hardboiled genre (‘I ain’t a crook ... I’m no knight errant either’).⁸⁰ Thus the archetype was born: ‘a man out for justice and/or revenge, pounding perpetually rainy streets in a dark, corrupt American city’.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 54.

⁸⁰ David Barnett, ‘Dames, detectives and dope: why we still love hardboiled crime’, *The Guardian* (23 March 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/23/detective-fiction-hardboiled>> [accessed 29 September 2018]

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Since the 1920s, the figure of the private eye has occupied the role of the wise guy, usually a male figure, a hard-drinking narrator who talks out loud (to the reader) and uses unorthodox methods to restore order in a broken society. Yet the hardboiled protagonist is an insider in relation to the problems to be solved – willing to drink Scotch and fraternise with shadowy characters, take a beating, spend a night in jail, or follow a dangerous lead into lawless territory.⁸² As Megan Abbott observes, the 19th-century pioneer narrative is touted as a notable inspiration for early hardboiled projects.

‘The common argument is that hardboiled novels are an extension of the wild west and pioneer narratives of the 19th century. The wilderness becomes the city, and the hero is usually a somewhat fallen character, a detective or a cop. At the end, everything is a mess, people have died, but the hero has done the right thing or close to it, and order has, to a certain extent, been restored.’⁸³

The reinstatement of order on the mean streets of the lawless city, if even for one brief moment, is a keystone of hardboiled sensibility. This reinstatement of order also necessitates an investigative method with teeth. How else will the sleuth find the murder, unmask the blackmailer, locate the missing person, or retrieve the stolen statue? To get the job done in a dangerous city or situation, Leonard Cassuto argues that the protagonist of the hardboiled tale often establishes ‘a code of behavior that substitutes for the corrupted morals of the society he occupies. The code emphasizes self-preservation and a nihilistic sense of duty.’⁸⁴ Sister Holiday also has her own strange code, represented by the gold tooth implanted by her back-alley dentist-friend KK after the scuffle at the Brooklyn bar. Holiday views her own violence as ‘almost holy’ when she shoves and hits Prince Dempsey and punches Audrey’s attacker, justifying her actions

⁸² In Raymond Chandler’s short story *Trouble is My Business*, Detective Lieutenant Finlayson tells PI Marlowe, ‘Guys like you get into a lot of trouble’, to which Marlowe responds, ‘Trouble is my business’ ... ‘how else would I make a nickel?’ *Trouble is My Business* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 57.

⁸³ Megan Abbott, ‘A Conversation With Megan Abbott’, *The Sewanee Review* (August 2018) <<https://thesewaneeereview.com/articles/a-conversation-with-megan-abbott>>

⁸⁴ Leonard Cassuto, *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 4.

as ways to ‘extinguish an endless brushfire of misogyny’.⁸⁵ Even Sister Holiday’s crucifix mirrors her sleuthing, or at least her attempt to be a proactive force for good; she views the horizontal line as a representation of doing, seeking, and moving, while the intersecting vertical line points up and down, representing contemplation with heaven, and perhaps hell, too.

Unlike the detectives in Golden Age fiction: the gumshoe usually suffers from injustice of one kind or another, and hence he intimately invests in justice on a personal level. In fact, the classic hardboiled protagonist’s imperfections, and in some cases deep wounds, shape his communication style. Lee Horsley underscores the idea that ‘slang, terse wit and sardonic wisecracks’ are trademark elements in the hardboiled protagonist’s protective armoury: ‘an assured voice that enables him to establish at least an illusion of control’.⁸⁶ This hardboiled portrayal of surface control undermined by addictions, as evidenced by smartass comebacks that disguise vulnerabilities, is integral to Sister Holiday’s malcontent character as well as to that of the recalcitrant Prince Dempsey. To import attributes of protective armour, coupled with spiritual curiosity vis-à-vis prayer and rhetorical questions, into the figure of a lesbian nun means this character may feel recognisable as typical hardboiled figure (a nuanced loner with a taste for whisky) and divergent (‘*Hail Mary*’).⁸⁷

Like most wise guys, Sister Holiday is determined not to be seen as ‘a candy-ass’.⁸⁸ Cynicisms and tough talk are not the exclusive domain of the hardboiled genre but they do help to define the tradition. Horsley contends that from Carroll John Daly’s character of Race Williams in the earliest *Black Mask* stories (1923–1934) through to late-twentieth-century

⁸⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 138.

⁸⁶ Lee Horsley, ‘Hard-Boiled and Noir in Twentieth-Century American Crime Fiction’, *Blackwell Companion to 20th Century United States Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 136.

⁸⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 64.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

cinema – weathered guys like Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry, ‘such figures can be found powering their way through quintessentially hardboiled narratives, routing villains, reaching the end bloody but still able to pull the trigger’.⁸⁹ On the mean streets of the filthy city, what will save you? Fancy words and good manners in the hardboiled world, or in my fictional New Orleans, are not as effective as physical action. Paradoxically, the need to be authentic, and a yearning to understand the world and be understood by it, permeate the hardboiled genre. This tension is present in Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled PI, Philip Marlowe: ‘I’m supposed to be tough but there was something about the guy that got me’.⁹⁰ Marlowe’s narratorial self-aggrandisement and self-effacement – the careful weaving of reflections – is also echoed in Sister Holiday’s narration. For example, Sister Holiday is hot-tempered and quick to fight, but she also confesses to the reader that she is afraid of frailty: ‘the twins scared me. They were too small’.⁹¹ There is awareness within the character and the reader that Sister Holiday considers herself to be both lost and found. She struggles to calibrate her multiple selves – hard versus soft, pre-conversion versus post-conversion, bitter versus hopeful.

The words used and omitted by hardboiled protagonists provide critical clues to their inner lives and world views, as exemplified by Marlowe’s aforementioned acknowledgement that he knows he is ‘supposed’ to be something that he is not. Scott Christianson, in his article ‘Talkin’ Trash and Kickin’ Butt: Sue Grafton’, applies a theory developed by Dennis Porter to the analysis of hardboiled language. Christianson cites Porter, who explains that the ‘language style of the hardboiled genre allows for a “perfect match between language and behaviour,

⁸⁹ Lee Horsley, ‘Hard-Boiled and noir in twentieth-century American crime fiction’, *Blackwell Companion to 20th Century United States Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 136.

⁹⁰ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 8.

⁹¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 69.

speech, and ethics”⁹² What I infer from Christianson’s application of Porter’s theory to Grafton’s language is that in the hardboiled genre, the wisecrack is itself a tool of defiance, self-actualisation, and rebellion. This theory is demonstrated by Sister Holiday as she expresses her rage towards the ‘devil’, Prince Dempsey (‘drag Prince back to hell’).⁹³ She forcefully hits him in the knees with a ruler then pushes him. Her words and actions frequently cast her more in the criminal role than the authority figure she has been trusted to be. In hardboiled style, Sister Holiday’s self-interest devolving into depravity (‘knowing I could break him – it was delicious’) relates to and shares the same frequency as the criminal’s immorality.⁹⁴ She understands and envies Prince. She’s been there, throwing punches, taking a lick, and knocking back tequila.

While inhabiting and parodying the tropes of hardboiled storytelling, I am also trying to challenge them. Sister Holiday is neither predatory nor helpless, traits that defined many female characters in notable American male-authored crime fiction from the 1920s and 1930s. There is a self-fashioning and transformative potential embedded in the concept of a woman who is simultaneously a sleuth, a nun, and a teacher. Each of those jobs, or life positions, is mindfully chosen.

Also notable in hardboiled texts is the justification for vigilante justice, or at the very least, a flawed sense of good and evil. In my novel, as in many hardboiled works, there is tension between the notion that one person can make a difference in a chaotic world and a romantic desire to believe that one person, through the solving of a crime, can restore order in a grand way, delivering Justice with a capital J. Sister Holiday embodies both classic and hardboiled precepts in this regard. She initially starts her sleuthing as young Holiday, pre-conversion, to

⁹² Scott Christianson, ‘Talkin’ Trash and Kickin’ Butt: Sue Grafton’, *Sisters in Crime* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 138.

⁹³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 51.

⁹⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 102.

avenge the violent rape of her brother by football players. It was the first time Holiday stepped into the post of moral arbiter, trying to follow clues and apprehend perpetrators, until her father told her to stop. She declares that she was prepared to seduce the attackers at a party in order to get them alone and make those ‘fuckers’ pay.⁹⁵ She eventually leaves one of the rapists ‘hog-tied with his belt and tie, laying face-down in his own vomit’.⁹⁶ In that aspect, Holiday embraces masquerade (a lesbian passing as a straight woman), making deception a part of her sleuthing method, as she graduates from stalking and revenge to detecting and justice. Holiday shows the reader that she is on the trail of the arsonist, but she also reveals that she is on a grander mission – to ‘nail’ Prince for ‘the greater good’.⁹⁷

The promise of queering Holiday and subsequently my sleuth tale offers another lens through which to explore crime and power, themes critically important to hardboiled works. Foundational issues like guilt, justice, and revenge look different through the eyes of a marginalised (queer feminist) protagonist from those of a white male. Holiday’s life experience – a closeted lesbian tearaway who abandoned her mother and herself during a crisis – has led her to see the world in a specific way. As a female amateur sleuth who is her own unconventional brand of spinster, Sister Holiday is an ‘other’. Her alterity and unique lens influence the reader’s lens in that she shows the reader what law and order might look like from the non-straight point of view of a character who has not felt systematically safe to exist outside male-dominated, heteronormative culture. While she knows she has the power to fight and save men (Jamie and Prince), she does not trust men or male power. Again, I would point to the scene when Holiday is intent on avenging the homophobic attack on her brother, pledging ‘to *never* take men’s insatiable appetite for control for granted

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

⁹⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 52.

again'.⁹⁸ Additionally, a lesbian character like Sister Holiday, for whom celibacy is a choice, invites the reader to confront a battery of questions, such as what does my community want versus what I want? Her vows contradict the deliberate work of the queer liberation movement. I give Sister Holiday space to meditate on the price she is willing to pay for order and how that tension destabilises her.

In hardboiled stories, protagonists express individualism that sometimes borders on isolationism. Private eyes are indeed private. I play with this trope by placing Sister Holiday in the convent where she lives alone but within a collective. In the convent, she wants to fit in, but she also seeks time by herself ('I needed to dine alone ... I could not bear talk of the fire with Sister Therese').⁹⁹ The reader also sees a willingness to admit vulnerability in her 'new life'. Sister Holiday is cynical and wisecracking, but she still wants to perform well. This is a character who struggles to stay on track, however. There is always something threatening or provoking her. In the final draft of the novel, I tried to elevate the sense of paranoia ('I also felt watched').¹⁰⁰ Also, Sister Holiday sees herself as a sleuth, but she is not very effective. She feels for clues in the garbage ('the more disgusting the better') but does not find anything.¹⁰¹ She uses her body in ways that are not sanctioned, such as reaching inside the pile of rancid trash, snooping through Prince's guitar case, studying images on Arjune's phone, ducking under the police tape of a crime scene, and attacking Prince after he refuses to share his knowledge of the fires. Using her physicality in transgressive ways, I would argue, colours Sister Holiday's sleuthing methods as queer acts. Her queerness lets her 'feel people out' without going too deep. She states that her gay superpowers 'open the door' for straight women to be more forthcoming

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁹⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 108.

because they do not view her as a threat.¹⁰² She exploits this interpersonal dynamic in the Prison Birth Centre when she questions Peggy about her criminal background and Peggy's boyfriend's experience with arson. This leads her to suspect that the culprit had carefully researched arson methods. She also looks for the subtext about the arsonist: 'Rather than go to an expert about the arson, why not go directly to the source, the arsonist'.¹⁰³ But Sister Holiday also lets her biases misdirect her attention as she remains oblivious to significant clues, giving Sister Augustine the space to set more fires and cause more harm. In the genre tradition, the DIY sleuth differs from the professional detective, utilising informal or proprietary methods and often embodying cynicism over optimism. While the PI certainly seeks justice, PI work inherently represents a radical acceptance that a tidy resolution is most likely not possible. To this end, Sister Holiday as narrator acknowledges the lack of closure, concluding her story with what she *does not know* ('I'm supposed to believe') rather than with what she *does* know, leaving room for faith to fill in some of the gaps.¹⁰⁴

My processes of methodological inquiry have led me to draw upon and reinterpret select elements of traditional hardboiled fiction and classic detective fiction. This creative strategy – the processes of reading, reimagining, relocating, remixing, and hybridising – is, I argue, a core element of the detective fiction genre as well as queer writing. Generation after generation, detective fiction proves to be both enduring and flexible. From a genre dominated by primarily heterosexual white male PIs, readers can now experience a range of ideological and sleuthing perspectives by feminists, LGBTQ individuals, and people with ethnic minority backgrounds. I look forward to the time when I might read a hardboiled-influenced narrative featuring a female

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁰³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 331.

Muslim sleuth. What would set her investigative sensibility apart? How might she draw on 'loner' conventions popularised by authors like Spillane or Chandler? Just as the dime novel bridges the content of classic detective novels of the 1800s and that of hardscrabble PI novels of the 1920s, the emergence of the feminist detective character prefigures the queer detective narratives of the 1980s and beyond. This evinces the detection fiction genre's responsiveness to attitudinal and societal changes as well as perennial reader interest in the genre. I would also argue that the growing demands for diverse perspectives and under-represented characters underscore the need for publishers to stay agile to meet market interests. My artistic aim is to formulate a narrative method that honours category expectations whilst also innovating and expanding the category.

Chapter Two: Social Identities and Cultural Institutions

Female characters in North American crime fiction began to evolve during the 1980s from the damaged dames, amoral femme fatales, and mutilated corpses popularised by hardboiled authors like by James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane to the types featured in, most notably, novels by Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, Laurie R. King, Barbara Wilson, and Katherine V. Forrest. These writers were working in the context of second-wave feminism and gay liberation, and the politics of these movements directly informed their narratives. Feminist neo-hardboiled authors such as Grafton and Paretsky, and feminist-queer authors such as Forrest, contributed self-aware, scrappy, and self-sufficient female detectives whose conscious identifications, for example naming oneself as a lesbian, fitted tightly within the plots.

Social identities in the feminist neo-hardboiled works intensify narrative suspense. Their thematic inclusion helped to redraw the genre's female characters, who had, up to that point, generally conformed to a narrow set of predictable types. Similar to the way in which the political tumult and ideologies of Chandler's place and time informed his plots, such as the Los Angeles mobsters in *The Long Goodbye*, feminist and queer crime fiction authors wove topical themes and identity politics into their projects. The social conditions, including sexism, homophobia, and violence faced regularly by lesbian characters such as San Francisco Police Department homicide detective Kate Martinelli in the 1990s-era Laurie R. King crime novels, and PI Jillienne Kidd in Stevie Mikayne's *UnCatholic Conduct* (2014) indicate the hostilities that queer women experience.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Stevie Mikayne, *UnCatholic Conduct* (Valley Falls, NY: Bold Strokes Books, 2014), p. 21.

In this chapter, I analyse the strategies used to create the social identities and cultural institutions at play in my crime fiction novel, explaining how I crafted them and how they relate to the initial research questions. I also historicise my approach to gender, sexuality, and spirituality and place my practice within a crime fiction lineage. I do this by analysing a selection of crime novels: Golden Age mysteries, classic hardboiled texts and their feminist and queer counter-traditions, and notable fiction featuring spiritual sleuths.

Gender

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.
–Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Gender has become – generally – more understood not as a fixed inborn feature of a person but as something that is an informative element of a person, an aspect that is individually expressed. This concept fuels Simone de Beauvoir’s argument from 1949 that ‘*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*’.¹⁰⁶ *What this assertion suggests is that gender is not sex, a biological category; rather, it is a cultural construct that is performed and observed in societal contexts.*¹⁰⁷ If *anatomy is not destiny*, you would not know this by reading Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled novels and short stories. Chandler’s narrator/protagonist, PI Philip Marlowe, performs male

¹⁰⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 283.

¹⁰⁷ My argument is that gender can be outwardly *performed* by an individual while it is also being observed in society and perhaps even informed by societal conditions and contexts. One example of this is an evolving awareness that gender identities exist beyond the binary of male and female genders. This evolution is reflected in various ways, including the growing trend of US-based colleges designating gender-inclusive bathrooms on campuses. ‘Schools and universities (including Johns Hopkins and Michigan State) ... are recasting the traditional men’s/women’s room, resulting in a dizzying range of (often creative) signage and vocabulary’. Source: Aimee Lee Ball, ‘In All-Gender Restrooms, the Signs Reflect the Times’, *New York Times* (5 November 2015) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/style/transgender-restroom-all-gender.html>> [accessed 5 July 2016] (para. 6 of 39)

gender as it may have been expected at the time: Marlowe is a gallant man. While a level of shabbiness is acceptable to Marlowe, he also leverages properly timed quips to belie inner tumult and vulnerability. While he admits that he ‘never got to like killing people’, he knows that a rough up is all part of the job (‘I was his raw meat’) and is never afraid to insult a woman, kick someone, or wrangle a weapon out of the hand of a foe.¹⁰⁸ He also has restraint, to a point.¹⁰⁹ He is contemplative and quick witted – a street-smart, cocksure, and virile man (‘It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window’), the cynical American male response to the eloquent, upper-class armchair detective character of the Golden Age.¹¹⁰ Where Sam Spade’s expressions of detachment increase the PI’s isolation, and Mike Hammer’s shoot-first bluster accelerates the thrill-ride of a Spillane novel, Philip Marlowe’s self-effacing quips add to his everyman appeal. These three characters are unique, but they all represent different iconic aspects of the ‘hardboiled man’ in the canon.

Chandler, writing after Hammett, is recognised as a seminal figure in the American hardboiled crime fiction popularised between the 1920s and the 1950s, and his fiction presents specific gender portrayals beyond Marlowe’s masculinity. Examples of these representations pepper ‘Trouble Is My Business’, Chandler’s short story in which female characters are minimised and disempowered when they are referred to as ‘dames’.¹¹¹ In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe, a private detective, declares that women give him a hangover, and he describes Carmen Sternwood as a ‘dope’, her teeth as ‘predatory’, and her naked body as ‘corrupt’.¹¹² These comparisons suggest that the narrator perceives women as objects and as less than human.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond Chandler, *Trouble is My Business* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 2002), p. 93.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹¹ There a certain wry irony in the usage of ‘dames’, ‘broads’, and ‘girls’ – and slang is an essential feature of hardboiled genre. A reader should be reminded of historical context, as well, vis-à-vis language and what it reveals about social strata. However, these words and their usage still read to me as reductionist.

¹¹² Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 174.

Like alcohol, women can be consumed, but too much will be poisonous. In ‘Trouble Is My Business’, the character of Harriet Huntress – a surname that serves to warn Marlowe and readers – is expected to ‘fall at some point’, implying that all women eventually falter, and she is ‘too tall to be cute’.¹¹³ In *The Long Goodbye*, violence shadows Marlowe’s appraisal of women in his taxonomy of the blonde (‘There are blondes and blondes’ ... ‘the small cute blonde’ ... ‘the big statuesque blonde’ ... ‘you would like to slug her’).¹¹⁴ Analysing the misogyny present in Chandler’s hardboiled fiction, Ta-Nehisi Coates observes that ‘Marlowe is forever slapping some woman, or seducing somebody’s wife within minutes of meeting her, or declaring his sexual invulnerability to still another woman, or berating some man for being gay – and thus being a woman’.¹¹⁵ Gender is an instructive narrative component in Chandler’s work as he encodes masculine and feminine expectations into his characters’ actions and the narrative causality, exemplified by Carmen Sternwood’s attempted seduction of Marlowe. This informs the narrative by establishing rules of engagement. With a few minor exceptions, female characters and male characters are *presumed* to act in certain ways that track with Chandler’s world order. This thematic centrality inevitably made female characters dangerous. According to Stephen Knight, ‘while the early stories of Hammett and Chandler do deal specifically with gangsters, and Hammett always retains some sense of social crime, in the private-eye novels the real crimes solved, the deepest threats faced by the private eyes, come from personal betrayals, mostly by women.’¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Raymond Chandler, *Trouble Is My Business* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1988), p. 15.

¹¹⁴ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* ((New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 89.

¹¹⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, ‘Raymond Chandler’s Private Dick’, *The Atlantic* (2012)

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/raymond-chandlers-private-dick/265589/>> [accessed 19 May 2015] (para. 9 of 13)

¹¹⁶ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity, 2nd Edition* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 111.

Chandler's self-mocking yet morally superior PI ('contempt for pettiness') has informed my development of Sister Holiday as I am interested in a figure who is similarly duty-bound, sardonic, and contemplative. For instance, Marlowe admits he is 'depressed', and his surname is recognised as 'sad and beautiful'.¹¹⁷ However, I want my protagonist to subvert the early hardboiled convention of limited and reductive gender roles. In *The Long Goodbye*, Philip Marlowe describes himself as 'a lone wolf, unmarried, getting middle-aged, and not rich ... I like liquor and women and chess and a few other things'.¹¹⁸ Sister Holiday is also a lone wolf, of a kind, as she is alone within the convent; she will not marry. Sister Holiday also has a penchant for liquor and women, and she participates in a figurative chess game with criminal elements. Whereas Marlowe defines his masculinity, in part, by his attitude to the opposite sex, Holiday does not. Marlowe and Holiday are both troublemaking agitators, simultaneously no-nonsense realists and cynics, and romantic at times. Unlike Chandler's narrator/protagonist, however, Sister Holiday acknowledges women's power and their powerlessness, particularly her own. This powerlessness results from a general societal imbalance as well as the character's self-invented demotion: as a Sister of the Sublime Blood she is unable to function at the highest level of church authority held by male priests. Sister Holiday is arrogant and tough; she pounds the glass in the jail lobby and she physically and verbally spars with Sister Honour, but she also admits her shortcomings.¹¹⁹ Readers learn about her myriad deficiencies as well as her talents. She is 'the first to admit' – to herself and to the reader – that she is 'shit at most things', a fact that makes her aptitude as a music teacher distinct.¹²⁰ Sister Holiday understands that she is flawed, but she does not feel useless. This is demonstrated by her reaction to the fire. With no hesitation, she

¹¹⁷ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p. 317.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹¹⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 157.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

dashes into the burning school and saves Jamie's life, carrying his bloody body out of the building. Throughout the story, she actively sleuths ('I slipped into the empty hallway with Arjune's phone').¹²¹ Action – even action with no result – has more currency for the sleuth than mere talk.

Philip Marlowe's chosen profession as a PI requires him to tangle with shadowy characters, and the work seems to suit him. Similarly, the more Sister Holiday tries to forsake sin and disorder, the more she is pulled towards it. Readers first meet her, in the narrative present, in a dark alley; alleys are common settings in the hardboiled world as they symbolise wrongdoing and back-door dealings. Just as Marlowe smells the gun of his drinking buddy Terry Lennox in *The Long Goodbye*, bringing the gun to his nostrils ('a Mauser 7.65, beauty. I sniffed it.'), in my novel, Sister Holiday, who, as a Sister of the Sublime Blood, pledges to repudiate vice, runs a stolen cigarette under her nose and sniffs it before lighting it.¹²² A gun is held and a cigarette is smoked, but inhaling contraband – a ceremonial rather than a necessary teleological action – brings vice into the characters' spirits as well as their corporeal bodies. These acts imply that for both characters there is a sensual interest in the sordid, and in Sister Holiday's case, a passion for sin ('fresh smokes, a handgun, and a brick of money were treats I could never have resisted') that she is in an adversarial relationship with as a Sister of the Sublime Blood.¹²³ Trouble is *both* of their businesses, and mischief is a sensorial engagement for these sleuths. Marlowe frequently details the temperature of coffee and the strength of a cocktail. Sister Holiday delights in the way the air changes when Prince Dempsey spits at her face after his arrest. She describes the feeling of hurting Prince as 'exquisite'.¹²⁴ One of my goals with this aspect of Sister Holiday's

¹²¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 63.

¹²² Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p. 28.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

characterisation is to illustrate that, while she heeds Sister Augustine's edict to conceal her tattoos using gloves and scarves, acting in suitable or socially sanctioned ways – honouring codified expectations of women and of nuns – is not a central concern for Sister Holiday. She wants to fit in while simultaneously standing out. She does not always comport with her Order's views. Even though Sister Augustine demands that Sister Holiday wear a black, Order-issued uniform every day ('You'll cover yourself, of course'), Holiday whines until her Principal allows her to dye her hair blonde.¹²⁵ She wants invisibility and visibility simultaneously.

Part of my rationale for having Sister Holiday concurrently reach for erasure and visibility, while expressing complex gender attributes, even within the constraints of the convent black wardrobe, is to disrupt readers' assumptions about the detective/sleuth praxis as it relates to gender expression.¹²⁶ Crime writer Kate Allen believes that internalised homophobia and sexism account for the preponderance of butch lesbian detectives in the 1980s novels, including her own characters: 'I think it is because butch is seen as strong and capable while femmes are always having to battle that "incapable" stereotype'.¹²⁷ Allen's acknowledgement suggests an unconscious characterisation within the gender binary that attached negative (incapable) value to a femme appearance. If a male-adjacent (butch) character is strong, then a female-identified (femme) character is weak. This is the thinking that drives many aspects of gender expression in classic hardboiled texts, especially by Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane ('She was all

¹²⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 62.

¹²⁶ While 'invisibility' and 'erasure' are not the same thing, I deploy the word 'erasure' here to refer to the deliberate and almost fetishised ceremony of Holiday's acts of concealment – covering her body in tattoo ink as well as covering those tattoos with gloves and scarves as a Sister of the Sublime Blood. While Katherine V. Forrest's dyke dick, Kate Delafield, stays closeted as a 'cover' so she can stay on the 'thin blue line' of the police force so she can continue detecting, Sister Holiday's layers of 'covering' both undermine and accelerate her goal of disappearing in order to fit in and, ultimately, continue sleuthing.

¹²⁷ Judith A. Markowitz, *Gay Detective Novel: Lesbian and Gay Main Characters & Themes in Mystery Fiction*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004), p. 9.

mine whenever I wanted her, a big, beautiful animal of a woman’).¹²⁸ Therefore, a believable protagonist detective in many – but not all – of the early lesbian detective novels correlates with those binary coordinates. An example of this is Katherine V. Forrest’s LAPD Detective Kate Delafield, one of the earliest and most well-known dyke dicks, who rationally observes the grit and beauty of Los Angeles – the lurid details and the serene – in equal measure. The adroit detective also runs the most thorough criminal investigation in the county (‘A Kate Delafield investigation was solid, meticulous, documented ... no sloppiness’).¹²⁹ Delafield, a Vietnam veteran, who, as a girl, was always stronger and ‘more aggressive than other girls’, also makes time to comment on female characters, a trait shared with traditional PI characters (‘Judy Markham sauntered from the lobby, hips swaying’).¹³⁰ Indeed, Detective Delafield ascribes to many elements of the hardboiled male trope, but, as I explore in Chapter Two of this thesis, she is also a three-dimensional character with nurturing and self-aware attributes.

Fashion choices and intentional physical gender manifestations, such as the cropped hair of Detective Kate Delafield, are still relevant today but no longer primary identity indicators or wholly representative cues of biologised body codes or gender expression. Playing with this notion, I wanted to write a lesbian sleuth character who could blend traditional binary gender expressions while complicating the notion of gender in a distinctive but cogent way. I created scenes and situations that showcase Sister Holiday assigning meaning to ‘traditional’ male signifiers (smoking, drinking, violence, womanising, cursing: ‘You curse more than I do’, Riveaux states) as well as traditional female gender signifiers (the desire to look good, envious of Audrey’s make-up, whining until Sister Augustine lets her dye her hair).¹³¹ These moments are

¹²⁸ Mickey Spillane, *The Snake: A Mike Hammer Mystery Thriller* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 8.

¹²⁹ Katherine V. Forrest, *Amateur City: A Kate Delafield Mystery* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1984), p. 9.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 140.

designed to help demonstrate how Sister Holiday constructs her femininity, sexuality, and religiosity outside and inside her New Orleans convent, which is ascetic relative to other orders. The conscious construction of self aligns with Sister Holiday's earnest and misguided attempts to reckon with her past, her interlocked identities, and her evolving place in the world. When Audrey says 'be yourself', Holiday responds 'I don't know what that is'.¹³² Nonetheless, Sister Holiday still has the confidence to open the novel with brute force. She kicks the doors open in her own brand of chivalry as she tries to save two teenage boys, Lamont and Jamie – and ultimately saves only Jamie – from fiery calamity. During her narration she admires herself ('She thinks I'm hot').¹³³ She also doubts herself, searching for mirrors wherever she can, since mirrors are in short supply in the convent ('Any chance I could get I stole a moment with a mirror').¹³⁴ Sister Holiday is a work in progress.

Indeed, the path that Sister Holiday has chosen – temporary vows leading to permanent vows, a theme I will explore in the next instalment of this fiction series – needs to be tested at various points to enhance the threat of her falling off the track. For this reason, I have introduced the narrative trope of the femme fatale, a fixture of hardboiled and noir fiction, a seductive woman 'noted for changeability and treachery' who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations.¹³⁵ I play with this genre expectation by writing the character of Rosemary Flynn as a queer omniseual siren who wears ruby-red lipstick and tries to lure Sister Holiday into the expected lair of the femme fatale bed, though in this novel the symbol is the parallel twin beds in a hotel room. With her air of mystery, signature red lipstick, and amorous offer of a tryst, Rosemary presents Sister Holiday with the temptation of breaking her temporary vow of

¹³² *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 238.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹³⁵ E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p. 31.

celibacy, an oath Sister Holiday pledged in an attempt to purify herself and search for balance, though it comes with severe self-denial bordering on the punitive. By retaining and repurposing the femme fatale trope in the queer character of Rosemary Flynn, I strive to honour the genre conceit of the sexy temptress while adding layers, politically and narratively, as Rosemary makes the object of her charms an unattainable, unavailable lesbian. Additionally, Rosemary Flynn is also an accomplished science instructor in her own right, an element of characterisation that aligns with feminist ideals. She has no ulterior motive to seduce Sister Holiday, unlike the unstable femme fatale Carmen Sternwood in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. Rosemary is attracted to Holiday; she wants a sexual connection, not a friendship, and therefore pursues her sexually and suggests a tryst. Sex is not a decoy for Rosemary but rather a goal, unlike for most other presentations of the femme fatale. The narrative predicament lies within the will-they/won't-they tension and in how Sister Holiday reacts to the sexual advances of a woman to whom – she admits to the reader – she is attracted. Rosemary is also in the frame as a suspect – ('Avoiding questions makes you seem guilty') – an added complication.¹³⁶

The notion that gender is now understood not as fixed and biological but as constituted socially, culturally, and psychically, and as fluid and shifting, helps to create narrative tension by giving readers more opportunities to be surprised by characters and correlating plot points. One example of this is Holiday's sleuthing praxis, which is informed by her interwoven gender, spiritual, and sexual identities. Sister Holiday, who has concealed her latticework of tattoos, accompanies Riveaux on a car chase to apprehend Prince Dempsey, and after the chase and Dempsey's arrest, she meets Riveaux's police officer colleagues. A policeman doesn't know how to decode her visual cues.

Officer Smith howled. 'Her? A nun? She looks like the gutter dyke I arrested in the Bywater a

¹³⁶ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 249.

couple hours ago. Bitch tried to cut me with a broken bottle.’
 ‘Maybe the Lord should cut you.’ I smiled at him.
 ‘You shouldn’t say that. You’re a goddam nun.’
 ‘Didn’t you just say I was a gutter dyke?’ I licked my lips, tasted the salty dust
 and gravel kicked up from the tires. I spit and it landed near Smith’s feet making him jump back.
 ‘Forget it.’ Officer Smith shook his head. ‘I don’t know what the hell you are, and I don’t want to
 know.’
 ‘Then get out of my fucking way.’
 He backed up, jerkily, tripping in the process, as if I were a rabid swamp rat launching at his
 ankle.¹³⁷

Is it Holiday’s short, poorly bleached hair that signals a ‘gutter dyke’ to the police officer? Is it the way she stands? What is clear from this passage is that Sister Holiday harnesses her inscrutability – a form of masquerade – to literally and symbolically move a male authority figure out of her way (‘He backed up’) so she can continue sleuthing. She also exploits the presuppositions of being a nun (‘They talked so freely in front of me, they must have thought I was praying. And I let them think that’) to elevate her sleuthing practice.¹³⁸ The primary goals with the scene that follows was to establish that Sister Holiday likes ‘the violence’, test the limits of lyricism within propulsive movement by grouping repeated words and phrases to establish prosody.

‘Want to know what I think?’
 ‘No.’
 ‘I think you like this. The chase.’
 ‘Naw. I want to help,’ I lied. Of course I liked it. Not only the chase but the violence. Fire slithering back to life after you were sure it was extinguished. I liked digging in the trash. The more disgusting the better. Feeling for clues in slime and filth. Yeah, I wore a scarf and gloves to conceal my tattoos. Sister Augustine made me. But I still put my hands where no hands should go. I liked speeding through red lights. Headfirst to the edge. Scraping enough skin to burn not bleed. It was Godly, really. The fire of vengeance. I liked the charge in the air when Prince Dempsey spat in my face, cursing blue blazes. Sleuthing was as impossible as it was consequential. Like kissing a married woman. Like a plague of locusts.¹³⁹

I also crafted this narrative passage with fragmentation (‘Headfirst to the edge’), seeking to generate a nervy energy so it would feel streamlined, with sound-patterning and echoes of Chandler’s ‘I like’, but with enough room to hold restless, idiosyncratic swerves. Comparing

¹³⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 149.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

‘kissing a married woman’ and ‘plague of locusts’ points back to the queer-religious thematic centre.

Holiday’s odd but conscious decision-making, which resulted in her becoming Sister Holiday and subsequently an amateur sleuth, fits within the feminist tradition of intentionally shaping your own role in life, even if those decisions, such as an out lesbian selecting celibacy, might feel counter-intuitive to some. Similarly, an essential question within the feminist dialogue is asked when readers encounter women who break the rules, whatever the rules are. Sister Holiday decided to become a Sister and a sleuth not because of a dire financial need but as a way to right wrongs. She likes sleuthing. Plus, she thinks fighting crime is a ‘gift’ she can ‘offer to God’.¹⁴⁰ She also knows that the world is dysfunctional and that extra help is needed, especially for marginalised people. She feels that she is capable – or at least she wants to be capable – of offering that help. That’s one of the reasons why the private-eye character exists, to fill in the gaps between established systems. The PI steps in where the law fails, and the law often fails women and queer people, as Sister Holiday learns after her brother’s assault. Tension seeks release, and as a narrative technique, the apparent incompatibilities – Sister Holiday’s queerness and her holy orders, her allegiance to the Catholic patriarchy despite her feminism, and her vigilante proclivities – raise the urgency for the protagonist. These inconsistencies introduce more narrative pain points and trap doors, increase the internal and external threats to Sister Holiday, and elevate the stakes for readers.

¹⁴⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 60.

Sexuality

The 1980s-era mystery novels at the heart of Maureen T. Reddy's argument in the article 'Lesbian Detectives' contain complex coming-out processes which inform story arcs and characterisation.¹⁴¹ Reddy contends that the process of accepting a lesbian identity echoes other narratives of awakening and revelations: 'Several of these novels follow strikingly similar patterns, paralleling the hero's investigation of a crime or mystery with her investigation of her own psyche'.¹⁴² Reddy's examination contributes to my analysis of my own authorial motivations and ambitions, but in my book the coming-out process is inverted. In the context of evolving social mores regarding sexuality, the complicated process of coming out – someone understanding their truth then bringing that truth to the outside world – is informative but it is not integral to the narrative of *The Scorched Cross*. Holiday is already out. In many ways, conflicts arise because of her decision not to come out but to go back in. Taking vows presents new challenges and opportunities. Although this character can still identify as a lesbian, celibacy is a tool for self-growth; her Order brings order and 'strips away the bullshit'.¹⁴³

Indeed, being pious and celibate is a way in which Sister Holiday attempts to simplify her life and seek penance, and her need to atone partly motivates her decision to join the convent. The need to impose order also parallels the hardboiled restoration-of-order paradigm that often drives sleuthing. It begins with the acknowledgement that the world is 'mean' and out of

¹⁴¹ Her objects of study include Valerie Miner's *Murder in the English Department* (1982); Sarah Dreher's *Stoner McTavish* (1988); Lauren Wright Douglas's *The Always Anonymous Beast* (1987); Katherine V. Forrest's *Amateur City* (1984) and *Murder in the Nightwood Bar* (1987); and Marion Foster's *The Monarchs are Flying* (1987).

¹⁴² Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1988), p. 126.

¹⁴³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 99.

order.¹⁴⁴ Sister Holiday is desperate for a way ‘to make all the contradictions of my life fit’¹⁴⁵ – and to sort through the confusion and friction of her competing and overlapping identities – lesbian, feminist, and religious. As the reader discovers in the narrative past, in the Brooklyn scenes involving pre-conversion Holiday, the characters of Frank and Toni Walsh were displeased when their children both came out as gay. In my narrative environment, to be gay does present obstacles but it is not a taboo. The character of NOPD Sergeant Ruby Decker is legally married to another woman, though ‘good ol’ boy’ Detective Grogan is flummoxed by the ‘new normal’.¹⁴⁶ Holiday struggles with her lust for women in the narrative past (Audrey and Nina) and the narrative present (Rosemary Flynn and Audrey).

The presence of queer characters, queer struggles, and queer storylines in detective fiction is not new. The genre has proven to be adaptable, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. While some of the gay/lesbian mysteries of the 1980s that echoed binary gender expectations, like stone butch/high femme, were found only on gay/lesbian fiction shelves and in paper catalogues – a necessity for discreet buyers before online book sales were possible – they still offered a refreshing diversity of images and representations of gay culture that were more inclusive than those found in mainstream crime novels. As discussed in Chapter One, Detective Kate Delafield is a dyke dick who inhabits the role of the archetypal stone-butche and is simultaneously contemplative, flawed, and three-dimensional. In *Murder in the Nightwood Bar*, an intertextual reference to Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, Detective Delafield breaks the nose of a man who has taunted her and called her a dyke, but she is also a tender and nurturing presence

¹⁴⁴ The streets are mean in Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled world. “Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man.” This quote is from Chandler’s essay, ‘The Simple Art Of Murder’, an essay that first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1944. However, British writer Arthur Miller used the term mean streets in his book *Tales of Mean Streets* (1884), though ‘mean’ may have had a different meaning.

¹⁴⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 207.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

for her community. Characters like Delafield were an exciting development within the genre. Rather than dour, humourless lesbians and fey gay male stereotypes cast by largely heterosexual authors for popular media consumption or dime store pulp, representations of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian characters in crime fiction felt new. They were ‘intelligent, ethical, and self-confident’.¹⁴⁷ A contemporary and intersectional inheritor of the lesbian sleuth tradition is Cheryl A. Head, who, in *Bury Me When I’m Dead* (2016), advances the queer detective trope with the character of Charlene “Charlie” Mack. PI Mack is a black lesbian who must negotiate layers of oppression. PI Mack is admired by her Detroit community, and perceived to be relentlessly tough, but her ‘internalized homophobia’ dismantles her. In a voicemail left for her love interest, Mack admits, ‘I’m not as brave as you’.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, I want to give Sister Holiday edginess and human contours; she wears the scars (tattoos) of her gold-toothed, scrappy, and wayward past, but she is not a total pessimist. Sister Holiday is cynical but not on auto-pilot; she is curious, alive, and alert. She grieves for a dead cat but hits her student, Prince, with a ruler. She admires and is tortured by women’s complex realities. She is observant, pre- and post-conversion, and though she expresses her faith in unpredictable and eccentric ways, Holiday loves God and feels connected to divine mysteries on various levels.¹⁴⁹ She strives to be strong, but, with damaged women, Sister Holiday lets herself be vulnerable. Indeed, as she returns to the Prison Birth Centre to counsel new mothers in prison, she summons her courage and finds a poignant, intimate connection even though she has committed to living alone (uncoupled) in a group (the convent) and on the margins of society.

¹⁴⁷ Judith A. Markowitz, *Gay Detective Novel: Lesbian and Gay Main Characters & Themes in Mystery Fiction*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004), p. 10.

¹⁴⁸ Cheryl A. Head, *Bury Me When I’m Dead* (Ann Arbor: Bywater Books, 2016), p. 247.

¹⁴⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 202: In the middle of a sex scene, Holiday asks Nina, ‘Wanna pray’? And she means it. She also talks about the importance of the physical body and physical pleasure: ‘Jesus came to us in the form of a body.’ Her recollection stirs feelings within her that contrast with her vow of celibacy.

There is a tradition of the sleuth – male and female – working and living on the margins of society in detective fiction. Sister Holiday’s celibacy and asceticism resonate with and allude to the diverse loner traditions found in hardboiled and broader detective fiction narratives, evinced in portrayals of the busybody spinster (Miss Marple) and OCD armchair eccentrics (Poirot and Holmes). Detective novels, including those inspired by feminist neo-hardboiled works, such as Sara Gran’s *Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead*, represent the trope that the PI, male or female, is a loner of some sort. Gran demonstrates this in a flashback when the PI is being mentored: ‘The first thing you need to know about being a detective’ is that ‘no one will ever like you again.’ The narrator replies, ‘That’s okay ... No one likes me anyway’.¹⁵⁰ Many canonical male PIs, like Marlowe, were, arguably, men at the margins of their narrative environments. Marlowe is lucky with the ladies (Candy breathily demands, ‘Put me on the bed’), but he rejects marriage offers.¹⁵¹ Though they performed male gender roles as the roles may have been expected at the time, hardboiled wise guys did not settle into typical domesticity or prioritise traditional family values.

Similarly, I wanted to create a female detective figure who capitalises on her inside/outsider status and her queerness to advance her sleuthing (‘Growing up as a closeted lesbian with a former nun mother teaches you everything you need to know about secret-keeping and people-reading.’¹⁵²). First, I needed to codify Sister Holiday’s queerness in the context of her religiosity. As I began composing my novel, I inquired: would self-selected celibacy and abstinence delegitimise Holiday as a queer character? According to Faye Steward, the answer is no. Steward suggests that queer mysteries bring a ‘socially critical perspective together with

¹⁵⁰ Sara Gran, *Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 105.

¹⁵¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p. 213.

¹⁵² *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 162.

boundary-crossing genders and sexualities, inviting readers to interpret queer figures and themes as literary incursions into cultural traditions and political discourses'.¹⁵³ The queer sleuth can bring a unique perspective to detection ('My queer paranoia').¹⁵⁴ The queer sleuth is not inherently better or worse than a trained investigator, just notably different, and this divergence affords exciting narrative possibilities within the genre. A lesbian sleuth – and a nun – live and work outside the expectations of patriarchy and heteronormativity and those of dominant cultural constructions. That fact, compounded by primary social filters, can allow her to see differently. Within my crime fiction framework, the lesbian sleuth uses the otherness of her experience and viewpoint to make surprising syntheses, look in unexpected places ('look for the secret code'), connect disparate clues, and take unconventional approaches.¹⁵⁵ This adds another layer on Martin Priestman's observation that the private eye has a 'solitary, unofficial' status, and can involve 'bending or breaking the law'.¹⁵⁶

I contend that the lesbian sleuth, and indeed the queer sleuth, is in a unique position to defy genre assumptions and in turn to free herself from associated narrative predeterminations and therefore give the whodunit reveal more weight. For instance, Sister Holiday's need for community blinded her to Sister Augustine's criminal machinations. Additionally, a queer sleuth may understand criminality on an intrinsic level, because gay sex had been criminalised until relatively recently, and is still, in many places, considered different, abnormal, deviant, or illegal.¹⁵⁷ Dovetailing with Maureen T. Reddy's argument that the hero's investigation of a crime

¹⁵³ Faye Stewart, *German Feminist Queer Crime Fiction: Politics, Justice and Desire* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015), p. 11.

¹⁵⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁵⁶ Martin Priestman, 'Private Eyes: The Detective Thriller,' in *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 52–64.

¹⁵⁷ In 2013, Montana removed 'sexual contact or sexual intercourse between two persons of the same sex' from its definition of deviate sexual conduct. *Source: Tim Murphy, 'The Unconstitutional Anti-Gay Law That Just Won't*

or puzzle parallels her investigation of her own psyche, a lesbian who makes the conscious decision to become a nun has been on a journey of personal inquiry. I would argue that experiencing rigorous reflection would make a lesbian sleuth a formidable investigator of her world. I chose to complicate this sleuthing prowess by obstructing Sister Holiday's view, in some ways, with her noteworthy occlusions, including her bias against and obsession with Prince Dempsey. The stresses of her narrative predicament(s) and her ability to make decisions, including hasty, ill-informed decisions, is intended to intensify the reader's investment in her journey and the narrative outcomes because a rigid agenda is not set; readers should be uncertain about what will happen next. 'Queering' the environment is a recognition that identities are not fixed, but rather, fluid and changing.¹⁵⁸ This provides more pain points for characters as they fumble and feel their way through a changing world. This undercurrent of flux also can help to keep readers guessing.

Furthermore, in *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose argues that 'while there is no critical consensus on the definitional limits of 'queer', the word locates and exploits the incoherencies in those terms which stabilise heterosexuality'.¹⁵⁹ In detective fiction, a *queer* approach can be used to widen narrative possibilities and leverage the concept of inconsistency as a generative tool. Bearing that in mind, the shift from the binary lesbian/gay (1980s) to queer (1990s and beyond) has different implications. What is distinct and different about queer detective fiction now versus the earlier iterations I have analysed is the inclusivity: non-binary

Die, *Mother Jones* (2011) <<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/lawrence-texas-homosexual-conduct-statute/>> [accessed 27 February 2018] (para. 2 of 14)

¹⁵⁸ In *A Dictionary of Media and Communication, First Edition*, Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday write, 'A critical discourse developed in the 1990s in order to deconstruct (or "to queer") sexuality and gender in the wake of gay identity politics, which had tended to rely on strategic essentialism. Opposed to gender essentialism, queer theorists see sexuality as a discursive social construction, fluid, plural, and continually negotiated rather than a natural, fixed, core identity. [Judith] Butler, seeking to destabilize binary oppositions such as gay/straight, introduced the key concept of performativity'. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Online Version 2016)

¹⁵⁹ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 3.

and gender-free queer characters appear more frequently now. The expansiveness of non-straight character identities can affect narrative development. One example of this is the word ‘transsexual’. In *Gaudí Afternoon* (1990), a character questions whether or not Frankie, the femme fatale, is transsexual, and this idea shocks other characters, even the out-lesbian protagonist, Cassandra Reilly. Conversely, the book *Transition to Murder* (begun in 2012 and reissued by Magnus Books in 2014), by transgender crime author Renee James, follows the quest of Bobbi Logan – a hairstylist, transwoman, and sleuth – and won a Chicago Writers Association Indie Book of the Year award.¹⁶⁰ The Lambda Literary Foundation honours innovative achievements in transgender literature within its annual Lambda Literary Awards. Conversations around LGBTQ topics continue to grow. Language is a fluid system that is informed by cultural and social factors. Therefore, LGBTQ conversations have evolved, and art that reflects queer life has also evolved.

While LGBTQ people and topics are more visible in the western culture than anytime hitherto, heteronormativity is nevertheless still dominant, and by acknowledging the limits and influences of heteronormative culture and how they might play out in the world of a novel, my aim was to queer detective fiction in order to create space for exploration and to amplify narrative tension. Take, for example, this exchange between Audrey, a former lover, and Sister Holiday, as they get tangled in their own misconceptions about what ‘gay’ even means: ““Can you still be gay?” [she asked.] ‘I shrugged.’ “Of course I’m still gay”.’¹⁶¹ The juxtaposition of Sister Holiday’s shrug and her confident verbal retort draws the reader’s attention to the protagonist’s incertitude. And yet, celibacy is not incompatible with gayness in Holiday’s

¹⁶⁰ Renee James won the 2012 Chicago Writers Association Book Award for Indie Non-Traditional Fiction for her transgender murder-mystery when it was submitted under a different title, *Coming Out Can Be Murder*. <https://www.chicagowrites.org/book_of_the_year> [accessed 9 January 2019] (para. 9 of 10)

¹⁶¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 288.

worldview. She is still attracted to women and therefore she is still gay. Holiday's curious world view should signal to the reader that the protagonist will be unorthodox in other ways too, including in her work as an amateur sleuth, which will shape narrative development. Indeed, Sister Augustine weaponises Sister Holiday's queerness by making her and Rosemary share a room at the Convention, as a forced distraction, as well as abusing Sister Holiday's need for community and structure ('Growing up queer –"tolerated" by my parents, forever worried about riling them up, getting tossed out of the apartment – made me crave a family of my own').¹⁶² Sister Augustine knows Sister Holiday would not be accepted by any other Order, and she therefore exploits queer marginalisation.

While the United States has generally made notable strides towards equality, queer people are still marginalised and disenfranchised.¹⁶³ In 2017, by Presidential Executive Order, Donald Trump banned transgender individuals from serving in the United States armed forces.¹⁶⁴ LGBTQ individuals still face discrimination and scorn.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the queer-identified community grows more heterogeneous year by year. That crime fiction can incorporate the dynamism of social change into the narrative environment is part of what I feel makes it an agile art form. In 'Amelia Butterworth: The Spinster Detective', Joan Warthling Roberts argues that '[w]e have come to appreciate the mystery story as a microcosm of the culture and mores of the times it portrays: it changes as they change'.¹⁶⁶ In the past decade, a growing number of self-

¹⁶² *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 48.

¹⁶³ A noticeable fissure still exists between religious communities and LGBTQ communities. The unlikely election of controversial businessman Donald Trump as United States President in 2016 suggested the depth of influence of evangelical, far-right political figures – traditional opponents to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights.

¹⁶⁴ 'Trump signs new transgender military ban', BBC (2018) <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43525549>> [accessed 12 March 2018] (para. 2 of 23)

¹⁶⁵ Statistics from a 2018 Human Rights Campaign survey reveal that 73 per cent of LGBTQ youth have received verbal threats based on their actual or perceived identity. <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/2018-lgbtq-youth-report>> [accessed 24 April 2018]

¹⁶⁶ Joan Warthling Roberts, 'Amelia Butterworth: The Spinster Detective', in *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, ed. by Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 3–11. (p. 3).

identified lesbian mystery authors, such as Val McDermid, Katherine V. Forrest, and Stevie Mikayne, have referenced the contemporary cultural landscape that I occupy, the world of legal lesbian marriage, lesbian divorce, lesbian families, trans and non-binary visibility. Additionally, since the metanarrative of the book is concerned with what happens when you lose control of the story you tell yourself about yourself, Sister Holiday and the majority of the characters confront the untidiness of reinvention. Societal change – in the form of dwindling Catholic congregations – is viewed as disastrous by Sister Augustine, a high-ranking nun with more than forty years of service. This ‘new’ reality and her response to it provoke her arson.¹⁶⁷ As homosexuality moves from being classified as illicit to a more visible, commonplace feature of Western society, characters like Detective Grogan, a traditional Louisiana native, push back or are confounded by the new realities. The characters stumble as they try to find their footing on unstable cultural ground.¹⁶⁸ Ultimately, I argue that in a queer detective fiction story, every character has an opportunity to be their own sleuth, pulling apart language, testing the limits and habits of perception, and interrogating expectations to get closer to the truth, or at least a truth.

¹⁶⁷ In *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, Sister Augustine’s strategy is to create traumas (arson, murder, panic) to demonstrate that only the church can providing healing after a trauma. Her crimes take root in psychopathy and obsession, but the metanarrative of this novel, symbolised by Sister Augustine’s turn to crime and Sister Holiday’s conversion, is how one responds to the loss of control of their story, including the threat of losing their identity. The empty church pews due to shrinking congregations, the plummeting enrolment at the Catholic school, the fear that God is no longer seen as relevant in a distracted world all lead Sister Augustine down a precarious path. This plot intertwines with Sister Holiday’s arc as the sleuth also responds to an existential crisis with an extreme action. Holiday overcorrects her own truculent behaviour, in part, by becoming Sister Holiday.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Appearing, succeeding and becoming remarkably varied within 20 years, lesbian feminist detection has been one of the most striking signs that crime fiction is still capable of representing, in its apparently unending diversity, issues of real and new importance to its authors and readers.’ –Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 179.

Spirituality

There are two notable examples of religious sleuths in fiction that I have analysed and interpreted in concert with the creation of my nun-sleuth novel: G. K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* and James Runcie's Reverend Sidney Chambers from *The Grantchester Mysteries*.

Both of these examples come from collections of short stories that root crime-solving in religious settings. G. K. Chesterton employs a first-person point of view to demonstrate how Father Brown solves mysteries. Father Brown is not the storyteller – a distinct narrator is – but we learn about Father Brown through his deductions, his lexicon, the reflections he shares with his congregation, and how he interacts with other characters. Just as readers see Holmes through the camera-eye narration of Watson, Father Brown's thoughts, via dialogue or action, are made clear.

Chesterton's sleuth stories also use the first-person plural – 'we' – as if the reader were part of the book's congregation and therefore a part of the deductive process.¹⁶⁹ "What we all dread most," said the priest in a low voice, "is a maze with no centre. That is why atheism is only a nightmare".¹⁷⁰ Through that sentiment, the storyteller helps us understand how Father Brown thinks: he equates a Godless life with a meaningless nightmare. This provides clues to his investigative sensibility as well. Father Brown looks for patterns and areas of certainty. He feels confident in his assessments and he does not underestimate the depths of human longing, loss, and fear. While anchored in whodunits, the *Father Brown* short stories allow spiritual mysteries – questions of fulfilment and life's meaning – to run along parallel tracks with the crimes in question. The frequent deployment of the pronoun 'we' accentuates the experience of

¹⁶⁹ G.K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton, *The Wisdom of Father Brown: The Head of Caesar* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 150.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

collectively solving a riddle. Indeed, while his language is often lyrical, technicalities matter; clues reside within the lived experience – in the quotidian – and the astute reader needs to pay close attention. In his 1930 tutorial ‘The Ideal Detective Story’, Chesterton writes that ‘the detective story differs from every other story in this: that the reader is only happy if he feels a fool’.¹⁷¹ At its core, a detective story must be solidly constructed – a balance of red herring, detail, and appropriate clues – so that the reveal feels both surprising and earned. It cannot cheat. Chesterton emphasises the importance and the reward of technical construction as a form of sleight-of-hand concealment. This proved useful when crafting the subtle clues of Sister Augustine’s long-game orchestration of exploiting Sister Holiday as well as Sister Augustine’s psychopathy (‘What’s it like to spend sixty years without having sex? Did it make you crazy?’).¹⁷²

Another religious character who leverages his moral convictions to help solve mysteries, even when those beliefs are not quite firm, is Vicar Sidney Chambers, Honorary Canon of Ely Cathedral. Unlike Holiday, the clergy-sleuth Chambers, created by James Runcie, is married and has a young daughter. Both Chambers and Sister Holiday are musically inclined, though, with Chambers loving the improvisatory qualities of jazz and Holiday appreciating the fact that music is a ‘living thing’ – a mystical and Godly gift.¹⁷³ Vicar Chambers also provided a useful reference for my religious sleuth because of the flexibility of his faith. Both sleuths have chosen to devote their lives and careers to God, but they remain open to learning. Holiday’s spiritual curiosities, like those of Chambers, are, to some degree, malleable, and this informs her views on crime. For example, she craves Sister Augustine’s mentorship (‘I didn’t want her to let me

¹⁷¹ G.K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton, ‘The Ideal Detective Story’, *Illustrated London News*, 25 October 1930.

¹⁷² *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 165.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

go').¹⁷⁴ She also needs to 'nail' Prince, even though Prince is innocent, while she lets the guilty Sister Augustine go free.¹⁷⁵ Sister Holiday's imperfect religious character and lack of ethical rectitude are crucial, both for her characterisation and for the development of the narrative. Sister Holiday dedicates her sleuthing to God, but she does not believe that morality is circumscribed, nor does she believe in moral absolutes. She justifies Sister Augustine's crimes and her own transgressions. Indeed, the sleuth's temerity is another popular trope of detective fiction. This determination, bordering on myopia, keeps the detective working the case, pounding the pavement, despite the odds. Sarah Williams contends that, in the creative practice of crafting hardboiled fiction, morality is a 'crucial' element. For a protagonist who is a 'loner,' Williams writes, 'dispensing their own style of justice, [...] we, as readers, need to be able to give our agreement and assent. More than any other figure, the hardboiled detective is on a quest to right wrongs and to rescue the downtrodden'.¹⁷⁶ Though Sister Holiday's moral compass is not set in stone, her sense of nuanced morality entertains discussions about concepts of a 'calling' and 'being called' to a vocation (the Sisterhood, PI work, teaching) in the modern age.

Analysing the character of Vicar Chambers was generative for my writing practice because of the gradations of his spiritual vacillation. For example, in *Sidney Chambers and the Forgiveness of Sins*, Sidney preaches a sermon on the nature of penitence. Told in close third-person point of view, readers see – and hear – the Reverend's musings. During the sermon, he asks his parishioners 'What is true contrition?' – or is he asking himself?¹⁷⁷ Sister Holiday also

¹⁷⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 206.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁷⁶ Sarah Williams, *How to Write Crime Fiction* (London, UK: Robinson, Little Brown Book Group, 2015), p. 43.

¹⁷⁷ James Runcie, *Sidney Chambers and the Forgiveness of Sins: The Grantchester Mysteries* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2015), p. 35.

questions herself and her world ('Was everyone harbouring a secret? Did everyone need a way to escape daily torments?').¹⁷⁸

Like Reverend Chambers, Sister Holiday is a character with room for spiritual doubt as well as growth. I have progressed with my drafts, providing opportunities to render a brand of spirituality that is as quirky as the character herself. She is an ascetic Sister, but she has not jettisoned her desire for sex, guns, smokes, and whisky. Sister Holiday and Prince Dempsey, the suspected offender, have both succumbed to darker yearnings, making them morally equivalent. But it is the character of Sister Holiday who chooses a new life, a life of order within an Order (the Sisters of the Sublime Blood). And while she believes in doctrinal redemption, she does not see Prince Dempsey as a candidate worthy of redemption. Similarly, Sister Augustine, the principal and head Sister, warps religious zeal to justify her own criminality. The solipsistic ethical codes of Sister Holiday (sleuth) and Sister Augustine (criminal) motivate the primary tensions in the novel. Holiday Walsh wants to be – and becomes – Sister Holiday because she craves order and meaning, which would be a framework for her own strange faith, but this also means that she will be, technically, controlled by the patriarchy as a Catholic Sister.¹⁷⁹ She does not yet know what she wants or needs, and she takes readers on the quest with her. When Holiday realises she does not possess the language or temperament to connect authentically with her fragile mother, she admits that her identity was 'defined by selfishness', and she wonders who she would be without her protective armour of dissidence ('Who was I to begin with?').¹⁸⁰ Thus, she willingly commits herself to the Sisters of the Sublime Blood.

¹⁷⁸ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 223.

¹⁷⁹ When questioned by Rosemary Flynn about the contradiction of being a feminist who serves under the patriarchal authority, Sister Holiday replies with a typically flippant retort: 'They hardly even talk to us, but Father Reese is fine. It's better that he's a flatliner. We have our own projects and worship. We stay out of each other's way. Besides, Sister Augustine has our backs'. *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 253.

¹⁸⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 238.

The simultaneity of her multiple identities – lesbian, feminist, servant of the Lord, someone who needs order (via the Order), and someone who longs to transgress – causes friction. Even if she wanted to, it would be hard for Holiday to stay in one lane or another, as her identities often intersect. As a hardboiled-inspired protagonist, she is the interpreter of her world and the world of the novel. Sister Holiday is both object and subject because we see her as a character in her world, but we also see the world how and when she chooses to show it to us. We are frequently reminded of her religious and moral contradictions (‘I should have left it alone’).¹⁸¹

Holiday’s active detection is also connected to the arc of her religious awakening. The physical conundrums (whodunit?) mirror the metaphysical (what is death? who am I?) and both puzzles invite the engagement of all the senses. The emphasis in the novel is often on Holiday *by* Holiday – how her world smells, sounds, feels, and tastes. She also knows that God is watching her. She’s on a spiritual path to enlightenment and reparation, though it is not a smooth, straight, or level road. To that end, her occlusions and what she observes about Prince originally makes her *feel* that he must be guilty. But as the book develops and her religiosity deepens, Holiday’s sleuthing skills also develop. She attempts to become more reasonable, admitting that her emotions have indeed misguided her. However, when her earlier logic proves to be faulty, for example when she discovers it is not Prince but rather Sister Augustine who is guilty, Sister Holiday reverts to her selfish behaviours (‘I already killed one mother. I wasn’t going to lose another one’).¹⁸²

To add a further dimension to the role of identities and cultural institutions, I seek to thicken characterisation with religious disaffiliation. Though she is devout, Holiday’s mother,

¹⁸¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 256.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 319.

Toni, had disaffiliated from her own Order so she could marry Frank and have children. In many ways, this disaffiliation amplifies the tension when Gabriel and Holiday both come out as gay ('I left the Order for this?').¹⁸³ Raising a family trumped Toni's religious vocation. Years later, in a reversal that she hoped would make her mother proud, even though Toni did not live long enough to see, Holiday disaffiliated from gay culture to join a convent. These disruptions serve to tie the fates of Holiday and her mother together in surprising ways. Holiday is determined to succeed as a nun even though her mother chose to leave the Sister's way of life. Will history repeat itself, and will Holiday leave the convent, or will she stay on course? I rendered the disaffiliation storylines to amplify tension between Sister Holiday's competing and overlapping identities – her queerness and her religious commitment. The reader can concurrently invest in both narrative outcomes – leaving or staying.

Beyond disaffiliation, I was interested in developing a character denuded of modern luxuries. Sister Holiday does not own or use a computer or mobile phone. What she has gained in spiritual wealth she has lost in terms of material wealth ('nuns had no money nor use for excesses').¹⁸⁴ She has been stripped of digital devices in an increasingly digital world, and this functions to isolate Sister Holiday from her peers and her teenage students. Her modest means also inspire her to see more and notice more. At least she thinks so. She learns she must rely on herself and her faith. As she and Jamie exit the fast-burning east wing in Chapter Two, she prays for courage. Prayer is always there when Holiday needs it and she makes it her own, hybridising recognised prayer with her own prayer, creating a remix ('*Hail Mary, Mother of God. Sister Holiday, Grow up. This is what you wanted*').¹⁸⁵ However, her faith also confuses and limits her,

¹⁸³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 171.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

evinced by her inability to pursue her romantic attractions to Rosemary Flynn or Audrey, or to find the intimacy she craves ('I wanted to bring my mouth to hers and smear her brick-red lipstick').¹⁸⁶ A blindspot in Sister Holiday's vision gives Sister Augustine space to continue setting the fires, and in this way, the arson tests Sister Holiday's spiritual threshold. She commits to finding the perpetrator, but she fixates on Prince Dempsey's guilt, refusing to offer him the very redemption she has sought by building a new life. Redemption is a value that drives the Sisters of the Sublime Blood, and her inability to be objective with Prince contributes to Sister Holiday's enduring bifurcation. The reader is left to wonder if the emphasis on looking for clues is an over-correction of the internal mysteries that nag this anti-heroine. Since this is the first book in a series – the Sister Holiday Mysteries – it is useful to remind readers that the sleuth's mutually complicating identities create an ongoing problem that is nowhere near resolved in the first book. As these intersecting complicating social and spiritual identities work with and against each other, they form another narrative motor that helps drive the story forward. They layer additional queries on top of the whodunit by continually introducing brand new questions and keeping readers guessing, wondering what will happen next. Will a sense of dislocation follow her everywhere?

The tension produced by the cross-hatching of identities also moulds Sister Holiday's narrative journey into a zigzag rather than an arc, represented by her decision to let the arsonist go free rather than laying claim to a traditional form of justice. While no moral code is restored at the end of the book, Holiday revises her world view slightly and tries to accept, if not make peace with, events she cannot change. This is a significant moment for Holiday. Though it causes her physical pain, she resists her desire to kiss Rosemary. She does not heal herself or answer her

¹⁸⁶ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 267.

pressing questions, and she remains self-centred, but at the end of the novel, she sees the broken world in a new way ('If endings are just a series of unexpected beginnings, I'm okay with that.').¹⁸⁷ The word 'okay' invites various interpretations, but in the context of the scene and the anti-hero's narrative journey, the equanimity of 'okay', even if it is temporary, is evidence that this spiritually nuanced character has grown somewhat. The result for the reader, after adequately investing in the character, should be a sense of confidence in this scrappy, flawed sleuth and in her ability to crack a case, albeit in a sloppy, sideways manner. The character for whom you have been worried, the character for whom you have been rooting, has exercised self-control and a modicum of self-care. She possesses unique tools, and she is moderately aware of those tools and how to use them. This hopefully lets the reader buy into the premise that this character has the constitution and grit to tackle another mystery.

Another emblematic feature of a crime fiction series versus a single book is room for continuance or sustained mysteries. The located timeliness and contemporary characterisation of this novel is inherently risky, and part of my creative strategy is to aim to narrativise elements of the current zeitgeist in a way that would still feel compelling to readers ten or one hundred years from now. Over-emphasizing today's trending concepts would tie the novel too closely to specific temporality and compromise its enduring relevance, similar to the way *Gaudí Afternoon* by Barbara Wilson, a pioneer in the queer crime fiction genre, was cutting-edge when it was published in 1990, but now reads as somewhat dated due to the characters' shock and anxiety over transsexuality, as explored earlier in this chapter. Too little topicality, however, would deracinate the text from its indirect requirement to engage with and critique the social landscape. Indeed, what drives me as writer of detective fiction is to utilise the lens of the queer sleuth as I

¹⁸⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 331.

have come to define it: a sleuth who is able to deploy her alterity as part of her identity as well a tool to advance her sleuthing practice. From her experience outside of mainstream conventions, she has the ability to see what the mainstream cannot see and feel what the mainstream cannot feel, and she can use these relatively heightened or unique viewpoints to advance her sleuthing during a time of notable change ('Gay marriage is legal now').¹⁸⁸ Sister Holiday is destabilised by the shaky ground under her feet, but she is also accustomed to falling, lifting herself up, and forging her own path ('no sex ed class I took discussed lesbian sex').¹⁸⁹ In *The Scorched Cross*, I want zeitgeist to play a greater role than setting and act as an informative element of characterisation for Sister Holiday – her friction and idiosyncratic convictions. Plot is also advanced by topical concerns, such as the fact that, in North America, Catholic church congregations are shrinking; this development is so severe that Sister Augustine tries to reverse it by setting fires and creating havoc and chaos to remind the flock that they are only safe with the Lord. My goal is to deploy located timeliness in a way that serves my goal of contributing a fresh variation on the amateur sleuth tale.

¹⁸⁸ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 283.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Chapter Three: Craft

Earlier in this thesis I delved into hallmark features and conceits of sleuth and detection fiction as well as the influence of social and cultural institutions on my creative practice. Now I will critically reflect on my aesthetic and ethos to examine the principles underlying the creation of my crime novel. I will analyse the narrative strategy that braids three distinct storylines. I will also explain how I utilised craft techniques – such as the use of figurative language, an idiosyncratic prose style, and the first-person narrative mode – to support my ambition of meeting the genre expectations of a whodunit puzzle while seeking to make an original contribution to the sleuth fiction category. Reader feedback on Draft Twelve was transformative, revealing a picaresque journey for Sister Holiday rather than a novel that was structurally investigative. Therefore, I will explain my strategies for revision that correlated to such new realisations.

Narrative Structure & Flashbacks

In a whodunit, the temporal architecture must be tightly controlled. Time, like other craft materials, is a storytelling tool, and my treatment of temporality, however conventional or experimental, should be in the service of the plot and the crime fiction promise of answering a question. A narrative sense of time, via a timeline, can establish the chronology of events, and it can hold elevated importance in the detective fiction tale where the concept of ‘next’ – needing to know what will happen next – undergirds the story. The writer’s treatment of time should keep

this in consideration. In the diegetic mode of my novel, Sister Holiday is the narrator.¹⁹⁰ Her voice is the primary voice through which readers receive investigative details as well as atmospheric clues. Similarly, the reader's sense of temporality is filtered through Sister Holiday's relationship with time ('The next thing I knew it was past midnight').¹⁹¹ How and when clues and tensions are introduced or not introduced, and moments when the narrative present and narrative past become blurred, should contain enough fuel to propel the reader ahead, closer to the resolution of the crime, while leaving enough space for drawing interesting characters and memorable moments. Tension seeks release, and mystery genre readers expect a reveal of some kind, though it may not be the apprehension of the criminal.

Temporality in a hardboiled-inspired narrative is not limited to causality, however. There is room for strategically placed moments of surprise or meditation on the treatment of time, even in first-person point of view, such as in the lyrical passages by PI Marlowe and in the dream sequences of Sara Gran's feminist sleuth Claire DeWitt ('That night I dreamed about Constance').¹⁹² These temporal interruptions – and indeed a dream is its own category of deregulated time – work because they provide the reader with information about the sleuth's mindset, information that may warp the causal nature of their investigative processes and the ways she or he plan to mete out justice. The aforementioned example from Gran is also relatively economical, and its succinctness helps it cohere with the action that comes before and after. Ultimately, I argue that the interconnectedness of content and form is elevated in the sleuth story; forward momentum, even in a prayer, dream, or flashback, must still help the reader accelerate toward a narrative resolution. Most of the sex scenes in *The Scorched Cross* occur in the

¹⁹⁰ Karol Berger, 'Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Presentation', *The Journal of Musicology*, 12, no. 4, (1994), pp. 407–433. (p. 407).

¹⁹¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 32.

¹⁹² Sara Gran, *Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 100.

narrative past, via flashback ('I recall the softness of her skin as I rested my face on her stomach').¹⁹³

To keep the narrative energy moving ahead in the novel without flattening scenes, the writer must closely calibrate the interplay of action, dialogue, and internalisation in order to move the reader through the exterior and interior worlds seamlessly. The balance is key because if pacing goes wrong, or the story slows too much, weighted down by heavy exposition, reader engagement is threatened. If a reader loses interest because of lopsided placement of backstory, circuitous digression, or prosaic flourishes, the crime fiction promise of solving the riddle is compromised. How, then, can flashbacks still serve to nudge the reader forward?

To begin to answer this question, it is useful to consider narratology, the study of narrative, particularly the work of Gérard Genette and Theodore Martin, who examine the variety of temporal relations between 'story time' and 'narrative time'.¹⁹⁴ Story time relates to time 'implied by the chronological happenings of the story' whereas narrative time refers to the 'time that reshapes that story in the telling'.¹⁹⁵ For instance, although Sister Holiday's mother died in the van fire three years before the 'present' day, readers learn of the event after the second school fire and second death on campus as the protagonist sits and reflects in a church pew, on page 92. Accepting that time is a construct within a construct (the novel), I wanted to unlock the 'narrative's capacity for temporal autonomy' that results from disrupting chronology.¹⁹⁶ I concluded that a nuanced temporal treatment would also serve the motivations of the defiant sleuth protagonist as she struggles to claim and understand her own independence,

¹⁹³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 239.

¹⁹⁴ Theodore Martin, 'Temporality and Literary Theory' (Oxford: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, 2016), p. 2.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁶ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 85.

pre- and post-conversion. Nonlinear narrative models, such as those found in touchstone novels by Virginia Woolf and Kurt Vonnegut, portray events out of chronological order, freeing the significance of these events outside of their causality patterns. While the reader of Joyce and Woolf, for example, may be aware of the nonlinearity of the text and accept the lack of temporal concurrence as part of the reading experience, the detective fiction reader, who might be considered a ‘paranoid’ reader, the influential category of reader defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, may not be so flexible.¹⁹⁷ A paranoid reader is a highly attuned reader, digesting and scrutinising every detail as pertinent to plot, and only at the end of the tale does it become clear which features were indicative of a setting or character rather than a vital plot point. The sleuth protagonist and the reader (a proxy sleuth) scan for clues and discover the world in tandem. Therefore, the adroit reader of detective fiction would most likely expect nonlinearity or a chronological inconsistency to also serve plot.

For these reasons, I experimented with structural nonlinearity in the middle section of the book. I created partitions through a three-act structure in which the past and present were interleaved in Part Two alone. However, reader feedback on Draft Twelve revealed that this strategy did not contribute to the overall narrative experience. In fact, it threatened to slow the story’s cumulative velocity. As Jack M. Bickham observes, ‘Disaster works (moves the story *forward*) by seeming to move the central figure further back from his goal, leaving him in worse trouble than he was before the scene started’.¹⁹⁸ The isolation of the disasters of the ‘narrative past’, such as Toni’s death and the consolidation of the memories exclusively in Part Two, was too lopsided. Therefore, I chose to marble in the memories (disasters and their contexts)

¹⁹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 127.

¹⁹⁸ Jack M. Bickham, *Scene and Structure* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1993), p. 42.

throughout the entirety of the book rather than load all of the weight of the past into Part Two. The alternative method of marbled flashbacks proved to be a more cogent method.

Though they must be used with discipline, and, ultimately, must not decelerate the story, flashbacks can also free a narrative from the convention that time is a straight line. Just like other materials used by the writer to fit the goals of a project, time can be bent, sped up, knotted, or slowed down for strategic purposes, within the framework of the protagonist's storytelling. This is particularly interesting in the queer novel because, as Elizabeth Freeman argues in *Time Binds*, an exploration of queer temporality, chronological dissonance and sexual otherness are fundamentally intertwined, because queer people experience self-actualisation – to whatever degree – on their own timelines.¹⁹⁹ There can be an illusory sense of a 'before' and an 'after' coming out of the closet; it is a 'discontinuous history'.²⁰⁰ Sister Holiday is not straight nor conventional in any way, and rules both *do* and *do not* apply to her; therefore marbled flashbacks honour this disjointed character. With tight control, a flashback can become a portal. Moreover, by marbling in the 'then' and the 'now' for the duration of the novel, the reader experiences specific moments of time in Sister Holiday's past *as* present. Marbling backstory is another way of signalling an indistinct present and past, suggesting that the sleuth's history is not over. The danger of the flashback is that it can be unpredictable. Within a disciplined structure, the 'then/now' temporality is regulated so that the paranoid or alert genre reader is not frustrated. This approach also allowed me to orchestrate certain reveals that needed to feel organic in this unique story world and in the sleuth's 'mess'.²⁰¹ And since my goal was to create a character-

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xii.

²⁰⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. x.

²⁰¹ Victoria Lynn Schmidt, *Story Structure Architect* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2005), p. 44.

driven pacey detective novel, I attempted to draft the book with a tonal consistency. Fleeting remembrances come and go, and readers learn that the past is as inescapable as the sleuth's tattoos. Her pre-conversion and post-conversion selves are closer than Sister Holiday cares to admit, and sometimes her old and new selves overlap, such as when Audrey visits her in New Orleans. Sister Holiday is indeed the totality of her ill-fitting parts, whether she likes it or not; she cannot fly to New Orleans, start a new life, take a new name, and erase her past. My goal with threading in flashbacks is to offer the illusion of the dematerialisation of temporal and spatial markers. With careful control of the memories to assist the reader in redirecting their attentions, this temporal mode facilitates the kaleidoscopic effect by letting Sister Holiday live convincingly side-by-side with Holiday, her old rowdy self, an important element of the overall narrative experience.

Strategies for Compelling Characters

To support my ambition of developing fascinating characters, I have developed a map of Saint Sebastian's School and a grid of personality traits. James Scott Bell finds character grids of this ilk useful to 'create dynamic character interactions and find points of conflict from the past, present, or future'.²⁰² I have written complex backstories for characters, including secrets they have not shared with other characters, details that did not make into the first draft let alone the final draft. Similarly, Patricia Highsmith sees the utility in pre-writing – ideating before the first draft – to develop a strong foundation for a suspense novel. About her own practice Highsmith observes:

²⁰² James Scott Bell, *Conflict & Suspense* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, Revised Edition, 2001), p. 57.

My notebooks are filled with pages, perhaps twenty or more, for each book I have written, which are simply tangential or fantastic rambles around the germ or the main action or situation, which is the only thing that remained constant in the developing process. These divagations usually bear no resemblance to the final book. But they are necessary for better ideas to come later.²⁰³

Overwriting character backstories, casting characters with real photographs, and creating a map in which scenes play out can help not only reveal how characters move through the constructed novel world but also how they can operate like an orchestra. Each ‘character’ has a specific role to play, but the ways they interact – sparking friction, annoying each other, soothing each other, as in the case of Bernard and Sister Holiday – add texture and helps to create the literary atmosphere (‘[Bernard’s] punk attire was so much like my old wardrobe. A cruel mirror’).²⁰⁴ The relationships between characters, especially between Sister Holiday and Prince Dempsey, provide additional opportunities to understand the protagonist’s preoccupations, flaws, blind spots, skills, and overall sleuthing process.

Though she has pledged to walk the ‘righteous path’, Holiday is obsessed with and suspicious of Prince Dempsey, whatever he does or does not do.²⁰⁵ Prince (an ironic name) represents the patriarchy (‘Crazy bitch’) and yet Sister Holiday saves his life by helping to inject him with insulin in the ‘butt cheek’ during a dangerous diabetic episode.²⁰⁶ After Draft Six, I realised that the narrative needed more events where Prince’s behaviour, coincidental or otherwise, seems to confirm Sister Holiday’s suspicions and give her what she believes to be hard evidence. One of those scenes added is when Prince urinates on the sidewalk shrine, extinguishing the flames of solidarity with his own bodily fluid. Additionally, he uses fire-related

²⁰³ Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, First edition, 2001), p. 48.

²⁰⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 266.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

language to fuel his homophobia, but his connection to the crime is still tenuous at best. This uncertainty helps to keep the reader questioning Prince's guilt or if Sister Holiday is obsessed with him because it fits within her feminist or extremist predilections. This hopefully helps the reader view Sister Holiday as a person with flaws and miscalculations – hamartia – rather than irreversible mortal failings.²⁰⁷ I do not want Sister Holiday to be a caricature; she is trying to be patient but she must fight her instincts ('I wanted to ... pin him down by the throat like a fox').²⁰⁸ She must address this bifurcation – the cleaving between her emotional and rational halves – if she is to advance on both the nun's path and the sleuth's path. Similarly, Prince's character development needed variation and pathos, so therefore in Draft Ten I added scenes that depict his sincere devotion to his one-eyed rescue dog, BonTon.

Charting Shifts from Draft to Draft

Throughout this thesis, particularly in my exegesis of point of view, I refer to my drafting process. Pierre-Marc De Biasi suggests that rough drafts 'constitute the moment when the project passes from the state of hypothetical scheme to the state of textualized verbal material'.²⁰⁹ Therefore, I will explain the salient points of major drafts and the correlating significance for my overall narrative method.

The working title of Draft One was *Sister Holiday's Divine Mysteries: Baptism by Fire*.

The protagonist was originally called Sister Holiday Brennan and I drafted the book in close-

²⁰⁷ Robert R. Dyer "Hamartia" in the "Poetics" and Aristotle's Model of Failure', in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 4, no. 4 (1965), pp. 658–664.

²⁰⁸ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 52.

²⁰⁹ Pierre-Marc De Biasi and Ingrid Wassenaar, 'What Is a Literary Draft? Toward a Functional Typology of Genetic Documentation', *Yale French Studies*, 89 (1996), 26–58 (p. 30).

third-person viewpoint. Told mostly in flashbacks, readers experienced Holiday's younger ruffian days. There was nothing substantive by way of plot in this draft, however. No outline had been created yet. In its initial third-person iteration, the Brooklyn bar fight felt lopsided:

It takes an incredibly precise angle to knock someone out with one punch. Holiday Brennan doesn't know that angle nor could she guess anything close to it. But she knows pain, she how to make something hurt, so she thrust her fist in the direction of the linebacker's face.²¹⁰

As I read more hardboiled works, I became interested in the idea of a dyke dick appropriating or inhabiting classic tropes of hardboiled masculinity while simultaneously parodying the private dicks and critiquing misogyny.

Draft Three was a cumbersome amalgam of close-third person, omniscient, and first person. I settled on the decision to explore first person as the narratorial mode. Converting from close third took many long months, but the change to first person injected the draft with more intimacy and partiality of vision. This is evident when comparing the introduction of the alley in Draft Three ('Sister Holiday sat out of view, in the alley, on the warped stoop of a disused school exit, smoking a cigarette confiscated from a student earlier that day') to the alley's introduction in the final draft ('the alley behind my school. It was the only place I could smoke. I never bought cigarettes – I wasn't that dumb').²¹¹ The first-person mode helped to focus the telescope on Sister Holiday as well as on what she sees and feels.

In Draft Six I worked to refine the sleuth as an anti-hero with whom readers could connect. The dynamism of the sleuth is paramount for a multi-book series. I also wanted to evoke New Orleans and Brooklyn in the relevant chapters, providing important information about Holiday's past. However, after a close read of this draft, I realised that I did not address

²¹⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, Draft Two (2016)

²¹¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, Draft Three (2016) and Draft Twelve (2019)

when Holiday started detecting, so I edited the backstory to include Gabriel/Moose's violent assault.

In Draft Seven, I gave Sister Holiday more verbs and wrote more scenes of her actively sleuthing. She interrogates friends and foes. She feels for clues in the trash and along the classroom cubbies. She thinks she is being watched ('Eyes were hunting me'); low-grade paranoia simmers.²¹² Additionally, Holiday was too intent on Prince Dempsey's guilt, so I strived to integrate more ways to convince the reader and other characters that Sister Holiday's fears were warranted.

Sister Augustine's confession felt too rushed in Draft Seven, so I created more of a sense of her trying to save the school – and to keep Catholicism alive – earlier in Draft Eight ('In the hysteria, the faithful were needed again').²¹³ Like Sister Augustine, Bernard Gregory dies in the final fiery blaze, and the two deaths are existentially dismantling for Sister Holiday ('I don't have much of anything left').²¹⁴ I tried to set the opening fire scene and the final blaze at the same register; the intensity of the heat should make the reader wince. Starting on an urgent note only works if the urgency continues to increase, and hence I attempted to draft more nail-biting moments of conflicts, such as Sister Honour and Sister Holiday's heated scrap in the teacher's lounge.²¹⁵ I believe that sustained sensorial engagement – the raining sweat, the tender lungs – is a necessary element of the experience of this crime fiction novel. I also constructed two new Prison Birth Centre scenes; Sister Holiday connects with women who are broken. She notices their 'scars and stories'.²¹⁶ The women of the Prison Birth Centre admit they will do what is

²¹² *The Scorched Cross*: Draft Seven, p. 73.

²¹³ *The Scorched Cross*: Draft Seven, p. 140.

²¹⁴ *The Scorched Cross*: Draft Eight, p. 331.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58

necessary to survive, which also relates to the symbolism of Judith and Holofernes and Sister Augustine's turn to criminality.

In Draft Nine, I decided to break Chapters One and Two in the middle of fraught high-stakes moments ('He's not going to make it').²¹⁷ There is a danger in breaking chapters in acutely tense moments because it is not their natural terminal points, but cliff-hanger types of interruptions can keep readers on the edge of their seats, so to speak, eager to turn the page to discover what will happen next.

Draft Eleven included revisions designed to emphasise the layers of irritants, opposition, and internal and external pressures that create a purgatory for Holiday, such as the curfew, relentless heat, and hysteria from her Sisters, students, and parents who capriciously pull children from her class. Sister Holiday also struggles with her limits and lack of empathy ('Why was I so hard on Prince? He was broken and damaged, like me').²¹⁸ Ultimately, Sister Holiday should never fully relax into her character. I believe this is useful for the page-turning thrust and sustained suspense I strive to achieve.

The Final Draft

While I originally felt that the narrative device of a confessional booth would lend itself to a structured retelling by the narrator, reader feedback on Draft Twelve revealed that the device was too constricting and contrived. Therefore, I excised the confessional booth in the final draft, Draft Thirteen, to let the narrative breathe.

²¹⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 6.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

After reviewing reader questions about the veracity of certain forensic details in Draft Twelve, I conducted additional research, including secondary interviews and workshops with Detective Sergeant Vic Caputo of the Northampton Police Department and Easthampton, Massachusetts Fire Captain Sandy Krauss.²¹⁹ I also consulted with a mechanic and revised the rationale for the explosion of the van to result from a lit cigarette being thrown onto fuel-soaked leaves ('you parked over dry leaves. Some drunk probably threw a cig. Or a match. The fire started beneath the van').²²⁰

Other key plot points were amended so the final draft would hinge more on a structural investigation with an overall queer investigative sensibility. The novel has been revised to more thoroughly present strategic clues and structural evidence, such as (1) the mysterious shadow in the hallway, later revealed to be Sister Augustine, (2) the compulsive frequency of Sister Augustine's prayer at candle shrine, (3) the burned blouse found in the trash, (4) the calendula burn cream, (5) the guitar pick left on Sister Therese's body, (6) the cigarettes and alcohol confiscated by the narrator, (7) \$100 missing from school till, (8) the grooming of the Prison Birth Centre women to exploit their trust and poach their arson knowledge, (9) the dwindling church congregation as people turn away from the Catholic church, and, ultimately, as readers learn, (10) Sister Holiday's initial acceptance in the convent, which was a ruse. These clues, including the clues nested *within* character and the narrative context, were sown strategically to allow readers to get ahead of the narrative and identify Sister Augustine as the culprit. The clues also tie into Sister Holiday's queer experience and queer sensibility – in other words, her alterity. My ultimate goal was for the central character to achieve the status of a queer sleuth through

²¹⁹ 'She grabbed it with a handkerchief and dropped it into a plastic bag. She shut it tight and placed the evidence bag into another bag.' *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 84

²²⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 94.

detecting more overtly as part of evolving, incremental, less dumb-luck picaresque plot detours (for example, ‘The job was *clean*. Extremely precise. Someone practised this – rehearsed this.’).²²¹ Plot connections were fortified to show how the fires stimulate church attendance (as vulnerable people seek reassurance) but shrink school attendance (as worried parents pull their children from class).

Sister Augustine’s character was also developed further. For the final iteration of the novel, the principal’s motivations take root in psychopathy and obsession, which in turn feed themes of masque, ritual, and punishment through *auto da fé* that seeks ultimately to redeem. In fact, Sister Augustine was deceiving Sister Holiday the entire three years of her novice period, using the gold-toothed novice as bait (‘I accepted you – deviant, sick pervert’).²²² For all of Sister Holiday’s tough talk, she was an incredibly easy mark because of her desire to fit in and her overwhelming guilt over Toni’s death (‘The Sisters of the Sublime Blood who advocated for me, unlike my own parents, who would not abandon me, despite my temptations and sins’).²²³

This revision was also conceived to let the reader tease out the underlying motivations of various main characters. For example, it is revealed that Sister Augustine is secretly harming Prince, meddling with his insulin, exploiting the malcontent teenager in order to disorient him further and increase his reliance on her (e.g. ‘Sister Augustine was the designated health carer for Prince’s diabetes medicine’).²²⁴ Sister Augustine also feeds Prince Dempsey and Ryan Brown the contraband – tobacco and alcohol – because she knows Sister Holiday will likely confiscate it.

²²¹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 117.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 316.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

The scene with Sister Augustine testifying in court was edited after reader feedback. In the final draft, the character has already committed to giving testimony; thus, raising her hand to take the oath reveals her burn. Sister Holiday's tendency to read between the lines – into the narrow space between sleeve and hand – opens the intuitive window onto the truth. In this regard, it is her queerness that provides both the *ability* to see, because her survival has depended on a (re)training of the eyes, as well as the *method* of seeing – habitually reading between the lines.

I revisited the pace and detail of the final section of the novel in order to establish actions and motivations to avoid narrative deceleration and the contrived 'spill all'. For example, in the penultimate draft, the novel concluded with a community healing yoga class in the school gymnasium. Though there was tense dialogue between Sister Holiday and Riveaux, and Sister Holiday and Rosemary Flynn, there was very little action, and, as a result, readers were disengaged. The novel now ends on the smoky street, immediately following the unexpected and fiery deaths of Sister Augustine and Bernard Gregory.

Reader feedback also flagged the underdevelopment of New Orleans as a setting, so in my revision, I fortified the sense of place with more detail, colour, menace, and suggestion that there is much more than meets the eye ('wires are buried deep underground').²²⁵ I also moved the novel toward a more believable set of plot drivers that also tie into the extravagant and carnivalesque sense of New Orleans as a city of apocalyptic Acts of God, emancipation, mystery, ritual, masquerade, and musical rhythms in which the novel is set ('Haunted elegance ... If it's not grotesque, don't bother'.).²²⁶ While voodoo is often cited as a New Orleans signifier, voodoo has all but died out in the city; I therefore determined it would feel inauthentic to weave in this

²²⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 95.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

practice. I did, however, create a new character named Voodoo, a black feral cat who represents the interstitial space between wild and tame. Voodoo adopts the Saint Sebastian's garden as her home before the creature is killed by Sister Augustine. This killing also serves as a microcosmic representation of Sister Augustine's justification of and ease with the crime of murder.

Reader feedback also illuminated the underdevelopment of masquerade and deception themes. Therefore, for the final draft, I enhanced the sense of masquerade throughout the novel, in microcosmic and macrocosmic manifestations, in scenes such as the proxy Mardi Gras where students transform via masks and costumes, and Fleur asks, 'Why aren't you wearing a mask?', to which the protagonist replies, 'I am.' There are various permutations of Sister Holiday's disguise, including wearing make-up, passing as straight when she needs to, and leveraging her inscrutability as needed. The oxygen mask is also used as a salutary tool for Sister Holiday, post-fire – 'I threw my head back to pray but the mask yanked me forward' – though it also constrains her.²²⁷ Sister Holiday uses other deceptive tactics, such as pretending to be invisible to eavesdrop ('With my black gloves and scarf – my generic black uniform – and new name, I became just another nun').²²⁸ I also drew more attention to Sister Holiday's lust for make-up (material used to alter appearance) and high femme signatures when they were unavailable to her. In another aspect of masquerade, the character conceals herself ritualistically with tattoos as Holiday, and then with black garments and gloves as a nun ('With my black gloves and scarf – my generic black uniform – and new name, I became just another nun. Invisibility was my disguise.').²²⁹

The theme of the tattooed body was also developed to enrich the characterisation and narrative tension. The reader learns more about the relationship between the rebelliousness,

²²⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 48.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

extremist proclivities, desecration as adornment, and the ritualised masochism that led to Sister Holiday's tattooing ('My Tree of Life would stay concealed, like every other tattoo, under my generic black nun's uniform. One self buried under a new one').²³⁰ Within this framework, I attempt to exploit tensions between the reading of the 'surface' (altered skin) versus the reading or inference of interior depth and its mysteries. I explore the way music has informed part of the character's decorative impetus. This is another illumination of my critical-into-creative methodology. My analysis of Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones's theory of a 'text as evidence' inspired me to shape a self-aware sleuth character who troubles the notion of deciphering patterns by tattooing herself from neck to toes with contradictory religious iconography. The development of the tattooed body motif – ritualised desecration and consecration – allows for various 'readings' of the narrator; the sleuth becomes a mysterious/coded text within a mysterious/coded text (such as 'She traced the tattoo ... anyone who reads music could decipher my code. D-E-F-A-C-E-D').²³¹ Rather than pledging theoretical fealty, or using theory as a centering rubric, the critical work I explored during the Ph.D. helped me expand my thinking and vigorously interrogate craft strategies within a range of alternatives.

Point of View

Narrative point of view has been one of the most challenging and intellectually instructive elements of my craft process. In this section of my thesis, I probe my point-of-view rationale, including my revision strategy, in an attempt to understand the mechanics and the effect of my narrative mode on the reader.

²³⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 60.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

As discussed in the previous section, I appreciate how the third-person point of view can help establish scenes with a wider angle, creating an aerial view of the main character and her world. There is a centrality of pace in the crime novel; therefore, I drafted the first version of this novel in third person in the hopes that it would emphasise action and keep scenes moving swiftly. According to *John Gardner*, ‘first-person locks us into one character’s mind, locks us into one kind of diction throughout’ and therefore filters everything through that lens.²³² This can give the narration an immediate sense of who this character is, but it can confine readers to a telescopic way of seeing. However, when it became clear that I wanted to explore Sister Holiday’s quirks and inner life more deeply, close-third felt limiting. My protagonist felt flat – two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional. Therefore, in Draft Three, I switched from third person to first person, and while it was an onerous process, I believe it afforded the freedom to create an idiosyncratic worldview, a vision with biases, prejudices, and contradictions.

In the first-person narratorial mode, any unreliability can be credited to the speaker/narrator, her omissions and interpretations, rather than to a disembodied third-person narrator who fails in their task of omniscience. This sense of partiality, or the incompleteness of that character's point of view, appeals to me for detective-style storytelling, especially hardboiled narration. What the character witnesses, we witness, and what she fails to see, we too will miss. This mode also offers the possibility of Sister Holiday observing a detail but failing to understand its importance, while leaving the reader the chance to be smarter than sleuth. Additionally, to prove to the reader that this sleuth is intrepid enough for a reader to follow into an inferno, I felt that Sister Holiday, in her own words, should describe or try to describe the

²³² John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 76.

overwhelming heat and smoke, and the vertigo of losing her orientation and losing a sense of time ('stripping away all coordinates')²³³

A voice that speaks for itself has a powerful sense of intimacy. When Herman Melville's narrator recites *Moby-Dick*'s opening line – 'Call me Ishmael'. – it is not just a declarative statement, it is a demand.²³⁴ Full stop. Changed to third person, the line might read this way: 'He asks them to call him Ishmael,' or this way, 'They call him Ishmael'. Those permutations carry less immediacy and heft. Structure and word order influence how content might be interpreted. In just three words, 'Call me Ishmael', an unknown sailor becomes known and stays known more than one hundred and sixty years after publication of *Moby-Dick* because the reader instantly meets a character with confidence and a desire for familiarity.

My novel's opening line is longer than three words, but its construction adds a similar inflection on the narrator's personality. Like *Moby-Dick* and many seminal hardboiled works, my first-person aesthetic is a method to establish a sense of direct intimacy and let the narrator's style become the style of the book. My goal for *Sister Holiday* as the narrator is to draw attention to readers' literal and figurative expectations, starting on page one; she is unafraid to acknowledge, disappoint, or contradict the reader's presupposition, mirroring her own vacillations. Her voice is simultaneously belligerent and resigned. This challenges readers to confront *Sister Holiday* as the cognitive architect of her recollection as well as the malleability of narrative itself. On the first page of the novel, with her declaration that 'No mystery worth solving is simple', *Sister Holiday* both articulates and obfuscates the sleight-of-hand trick of the storytelling experience.²³⁵ This foreshadows that, for the duration of the novel, she will be

²³³ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 10.

²³⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2003), p. 14.

²³⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 3.

instructing us, on her terms, where to look, what to smell, and what to taste, and for how long. I aim to generate this desire by creating various opportunities to experience her narrative predicaments and invest in satisfactory outcomes ('How long before I sin again?').²³⁶ Do not rely on an orthodox retelling of narrative, Sister Holiday's own narrative style suggests, because you will not find it here. There is also a Darwinian angle to Sister Holiday's struggle to recollect and shape her own recollections: humans remember the past to anticipate – and survive – the future.

A first-person point of view can also provide a blueprint for understanding the relationship between causality and morality. The concept of the moral compass is nothing new in crime fiction. The 'good guys' versus 'bad guys' conceit is an integral aspect of the hardboiled genre. Lee Horsley argues that hardboiled protagonists often crave structure and possess a stubborn sense of right and wrong because they have suffered grave trauma in their own lives.

In the best-known parable of ordinary life disrupted, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade (*Maltese Falcon*) tells the story of Flitcraft, who comes to realise life's arbitrariness and absurdity when he is nearly killed by a falling beam.²³⁷

Unlike Flitcraft's recognition of life's absurdity, in Sister Holiday's vulnerability a need for order was born. Holiday's old wounds, including the rape of her brother and her own hand in her mother's death in the van fire, still animate her. And while Holiday Walsh tries to leave her old life behind and start again in a new city with a new name, her demons follow her in the forms of self-doubt and temptation.

There are other examples of successful deployment of the first-person perspective in detective fiction, especially hardboiled, where point of view and aesthetics are linked. As illustrated in Chandler's hardboiled passages, the later words in the sentence are often accentuated in some way, to track the emotional beats.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 331.

²³⁷ Lee Horsley, 'American Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction, 1920s-1940s', *The Noir Thriller: Crime Files* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 16.

I like bars just after they open for the evening. When the air inside is still cool and clean and everything is shiny and the barkeep is giving himself that last look in the mirror to see if his tie is straight and his hair is smooth. I like the neat bottles on the bar back ... I like to watch the man mix the first one. I like to taste it slowly.²³⁸

In that example, Terry Lenox's repetition of 'I like' creates rhythm and a potent sense of gratification in being present with what he seeks. The scene illustrates another touchstone of hardboiled first-person point of view: succinct sentences designed to be deliberately ordinary, with few or no conjunctions. The characters' parlance includes everyday words. There is no excessive showing off in the line level. The narration is intimate, as if it were being whispered into your ear. I strive to employ a style that is similar in the regard that the storyteller is in direct contact with the reader. Sister Holiday's delivery is head-on and intentionally messy; it insists more on her personal style rather than rules of grammar. In my novel of eighty thousand words, there is not one semicolon used. There are only commas, en dashes, and full stops. My goal with my punctuation strategy and intentional omission of semicolons is to establish a distinct and identifiable voice for Sister Holiday (and only Sister Holiday). The shorter lines are also crafted to add to the cumulative velocity, as illustrated in this passage.

Go ahead. Say what you will about Eve. The garden, the apple, the snake. But don't deny for one second that Eve wasn't a badass to take what she wanted. A stone-cold queen. And Lilith. And Mary, my pillar, my silent pilot.²³⁹

My aesthetic goal with *The Scorched Cross* is not exclusively choppy lines, but a concise style with a unique tempo. Just as syntax is a storytelling tool so is the *disruption* of syntax. With fragments adding to the sense of metre, musicality, and fracture, I attempt to distort the character's diegetic narration (her reconstruction of the events) with prayer to facilitate a story that unfolds in fits and starts and yet threads her reliance on prayer. An example of where this can be seen is when she attacks Prince in a typical hardboiled style of intimidation ('I lashed his

²³⁸ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p. 23.

²³⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 12.

knees with the ruler ... *Hail Mary*').²⁴⁰ My goal here is to give the voice a sui generis style and to create a conversational tone that makes you *feel* as if Sister Holiday is talking to herself, to God and Mary, and to the reader simultaneously. Grammatical rules are being broken because this protagonist-sleuth is a rule-breaker even though she has taken temporary vows to abide by specific rules. Expect her to frustrate herself and the reader in turn.

Sue Grafton offers another interpretation of pacey, first-person narration in her chick-dick hardboiled-inspired feminist crime fiction 'Alphabet' series. The first page of *A is for Alibi* introduces the reader to the charismatic, strong-willed, and sometimes self-defeating PI.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind.²⁴¹

In this passage, Sue Grafton uses a staccato style reminiscent of Mickey Spillane (who she also references, intertextually) to not just show how her protagonist's mind works, but to take us *into* her mind. We learn granular details but we also enter into the rhythm of the narrator's thoughts. Grafton's sentences are mostly short and unadorned. She furnishes enough information to avoid ambiguity but doesn't indulge in lavish description. This style establishes a rhythm and concision to the storytelling immediately and without pretension. PI Millhone is tough – not overly emotional – but she has a conscience. She kills someone ('I blew him away'), and while the killing 'weighs' on her, she still ticks through the scene's details with precision, as if she is rattling off items on her grocery list. She doesn't want to live in an ornamental world ('I've lived in trailers most of my life, but lately they've been getting too elaborate for my taste, so now I live in one room'), therefore each word holds meaning.²⁴² Additionally, Millhone moves swiftly, chasing down suspects with her gun cocked, and her verbal celerity echoes that. It would be

²⁴⁰ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 75.

²⁴¹ Sue Grafton, *A is for Alibi: A Kinsey Millhone Mystery* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), p. 1.

²⁴² Sue Grafton, *A is for Alibi: A Kinsey Millhone Mystery* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), p. 1.

incongruous for Grafton to employ the filigree styling when describing a shoot-first type of PI like Millhone.

Like Kinsey Millhone, Sister Holiday is the narrator and her eyes are the camera lenses for the reader. Once I locked into the direct-address mode, my strategy was to draft the fire scenes, integrating the sensorial details and line variation that would dial up reader engagement. After the fire scenes were constructed, I then returned to the draft to thread in reasons *why* Sister Holiday would be there. This was not an effective strategy, however. Causal interplay is essential in crime fiction, and the demands of this genre balance conflict with believable characters who readers should want to follow wherever they go, down the mean streets or into burning schools. The details Sister Holiday notices and shares, and how and when she filters or delivers the information, tells us as much about her as it does about the unfolding story. But for the narrative elements to cohere, the timeline and causality must be sound.

Figurative Language

The judicious use of figurative language, irony, dark satire, symbolism, and unexpected imagery can help to layer the storytelling experience in a sleuth novel. In praise of Dashiell Hammett's writing style, Raymond Chandler points to Hammett's original vision and ability to render scenes in strikingly new ways: 'He [Hammett] was spare, frugal, hard-boiled, but he did over and over again what only the best writers can ever do at all. He wrote scenes that seemed never to have been written before'.²⁴³ Integral to my narrative method is a similar emphasis on communicating new viewpoints and nudging the reader into new areas – underpinning the sensibility of discovery. I attempt to do this through the use of hyperbole, similes, metaphors, and personification to explore new emotional territories and hitherto undiscovered observations.

Because hardboiled fiction pivots around the sleuth – her likes and dislikes, habits, and detection methodology – and the sleuth herself is the primary lens for interpreting the world, I attempted to incorporate original symbolism as a separate motor of narrative development for *Sister Holiday*. Literary symbols can take on enhanced significance because they can furnish essential details about a character's inner worlds. In a closed environment, such as Saint Sebastian's School, where everyone could potentially be a suspect, the alert reader is actively scanning for clues, and the cross-fertilisation of symbols, such as *The Book of Judith*, mirrors, the cross, and the crucifix, can reveal important information or be used to mislead the reader. The symbol of the crucifix, for example, provides different data points about whomever is viewing it. *Sister Holiday* sees sacrifice and Godliness represented in the crucifix she wears

²⁴³ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 15.

around her neck ('like the skeleton under my skin, it moved as I moved'), whereas Rosemary Flynn considers the crucifix 'ghastly' as an 'open wound' and Prince Dempsey sees braggadocio in it ('Christ is saying, "I'm still here, bitches. Can't beat me.').²⁴⁴

Like symbolism, metaphor and simile can weave in useful subtextual information about characters and plot points into the flow of a dramatized scene. As it – whatever 'it' is – sparks in the synapses of the storyteller's mind, it sparks in ours. The hardboiled school consists of richly varied styles: Spillane favoured brutally spare lines, like bullets, while Chandler stacked metaphors elaborately, and James M. Cain wrote in a straightforward style with a reliance on monosyllabic words that emphasised physical action and imitated reportage ('We shook hands, and he went. In a minute I heard him singing. He had a swell voice).²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, to be 'hardboiled' is to generally understood as an embrace of the 'hard' versus the soft. Hardboiled is commonly cited (and lauded) for its everyday lexicon and linguistic frugality. What, then, are we to make of Raymond Chandler's craft which relied so heavily on the metaphor and the simile, sometimes piling four similes into one paragraph? In *the Long Goodbye*, Marlowe asserts that 'All tough guys are monotonous. Like playing cards with a deck that's all aces. You've got everything and you've got nothing'.²⁴⁶ This moment is memorable because of the stunning originality of the comparison and the vice inherent in it. The repetition of 'you've got' and fragmentation imbues the section with distinct beats and musicality. The simile is also split into three fragments that when synced together make a whole. Stephen King confides, 'My all-time favorite similes, by the way, come from hardboiled-detective fiction of the forties and fifties ... I lit a cigarette [that] tasted like a plumber's handkerchief' (Raymond Chandler).²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 86.

²⁴⁵ James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 5.

²⁴⁶ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992), p. 79.

²⁴⁷ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 179.

I strive to foreground similarly eloquent yet gritty figurative language in my practice. For example, when Sister Holiday smokes in the alley – a transgressive moment in a ‘blind spot’ – she remarks that ‘the crescent moon floats like a talon’. A talon is usually associated with a bird of prey, a killer, and this image reveals the menace lurking in the narrator’s mind. But the feeling doesn’t have to end with peril. As Gaston Bachelard writes about poetic imagery in *The Poetics of Space*, ‘Through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away’.²⁴⁸ While genre readers are, arguably, engaging with a puzzle in order to solve the mystery, inference is still crucially important, and figurative language can provide opportunities for varied interpretations. There should still be space for discovery within a genre-recognisable work. In another example from Chapter One of my novel – ‘Smoke reached down through the ceiling, unfurling with sick elegance, like black irises’ – the simile helps to train the reader’s eye on where to look. The juxtaposition (‘sick’ with ‘elegance’) suggests the narrator’s unusual worldview.²⁴⁹ And while metaphors and similes achieve a similar effect – comparing different objects for a desired effect – the latter is more conscious than the former. However, Stephen King reminds writers that ‘symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity’.²⁵⁰ Too many ‘like’ or ‘as’ comparisons risk bogging down exposition and diluting the desired effect, however, so it is incumbent on the writer to find the right ratio of description to action.

After reflecting critically on the craft elements of crime fiction, and exploring how key theories might influence my practice, I have learnt that the content-driven factors of drafting, such as motif, character development, and atmosphere, come more naturally to me as a writer. I

²⁴⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press Edition, 1994), p. xvi.

²⁴⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 4.

²⁵⁰ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000). p. 200.

have realised that, before my Ph.D., the technical construction of form, plot, and logistics were secondary factors in my method. This is partially due to my formative experience as a poet and an ongoing interest in imagery-driven poetry as a creative practice. To realise my broader writing ambitions, however, it is clear that my craft methodology must foreground structure and structural clues. I have begun the next Sister Holiday novel – *The Blessed Water* – with a precise outline of plot points in concert with the ecosystem of the novel (place, mood, tone, atmosphere). Beginning with an outline that shows how structural clues, temporal, and character elements operate will help to ensure a more consistent reading experience and more economical writing experience. In no way do I believe this process amendment will make my crime fiction process less imaginative. To the contrary, I argue that the constraints of sleuth fiction are vehicles conducive to exploring ideology and consciousness, and therefore the writer who can access a poetic sensibility within the constraints may possess a unique advantage. Take, for example, this section of *The Big Sleep* which Grant Tracey considers ‘one of the most elegiac insights’ in Raymond Chandler’s novel, an organization of rhetorical questions and observations that plunges Marlowe deeper into the ‘world of the pyrrhic’.²⁵¹

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell.²⁵²

Language like this – language that feels alive, via syntactical originality, luminous yet grounded metaphor, repetition, and word choice – electrifies the page, even in a voiceover containing no action. I also strive to sink Sister Holiday into the ‘nastiness’, in a hardboiled-inspired sense, vis-à-vis the character’s personal and professional danger, by crafting language with similar vitality

²⁵¹ Grant Tracy, ‘Crime and Sensibility: The Art of Raymond Chandler’, *North American Review* (September 23, 2019) <<https://northamericanreview.org/open-space/crime-and-sensibility>>

²⁵² Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books Edition, 1988), p. 139.

that serves my accretive storytelling ambitions, language that generates its own heat and gravity for the characters and supports the novel's thematic synthesis regarding the conflicts of adversarial yet imbricated queer, religious, and vocational identities.

Conclusion

After writing one-hundred thousand words over five years, and editing the novel down to eighty thousand words, I now have a thirteenth and final draft of a sleuth novel, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*. In the creation of this novel and the simultaneity of the rigorous reflection that drove the creation of this thesis, I have aimed to sharpen my ability to merge criticality and creativity, integrating literary criticism and theory and queer theory into my writing. An aspiration for my crime-fiction practice is to speak two languages at once: writing a whodunit that works on the macro genre level (presenting a mystery to be solved) and the micro narrative level (creating dynamic queer characters with whom readers might want to spend time and who might introduce thematic variations).

An investigation of a crime is itself a structural experience, and, as such, a novel that centres an investigator requires solid and consistent structural treatment. Only through reader feedback/engagement and the revision process did I realise the paramount importance of structure as a process of engagement. I realised I took too much for granted in early drafts, playing more to subtlety and subtext rather than hard, structural clues that also reiterated the queer sensibility. While texture and atmosphere invite creative touches, and restraint in dialogue is one of my ambitions, structural subtlety is a luxury not available to a crime writer. Only late in the drafting process, after the reader feedback on Draft Twelve, when the arduous work of fixing logistical problems took significant time, did I realise how critically important it is to start with a bulletproof blueprint of plot points and causal evidence. I spent months engaged in retroactive plotting, clarifying the timeline and patching up plot holes, like pouring tar to fill potholes, crater

after crater, rather than resurfacing the entire road.²⁵³ While the imaginative spirit of a piece is still my primary inspiration, I have learnt that in order to actualize the thematic and stylistic synthesis I seek, it is crucially important to start with a technical engineering plan. Fine-print plot details – essential for sustained suspense and the overall investigative flow – are like the load-bearing walls that keep an edifice standing. This new structural awareness was a eureka moment for me, and it has challenged me to dramatically revise my workflow. I now consider detective novels as exercises in engineering in which character, setting, theme, plot concerns, and structure carrying equal weight. Like Eliot, I admire the detective genre for its requirement to innovate within constraints (‘the beauty of the mathematics problem’), and I also appreciate the puzzler for its exacting requirements.

Besides illuminating how my crime fiction practice needs to evolve in order to further my ambitions, I benefited from a scrupulous examination of genre. Genre is a term that implies both style and form, and as such it invites interpretation. Nonetheless, a detective story still hinges on a crime or a mystery and the subsequent detection of clues. In Chapter One of this thesis, I outline notable approaches to the cause-and-effect and cat-and-mouse nature of detective novels, from eloquent Golden Age mysteries to gritty hardboiled romps. Since my novel chronicles an amateur sleuth struggling to unmask the identity of a serial arsonist as well as to understand herself in her new role as a Catholic Sister, I found the hardboiled register particularly constructive.

In Chapter Two I itemise the influence of gender and queer theory on my reflection practice and in the creation of my novel. I document the challenges and opportunities of trying to write a thrilling work of crime fiction that can also provide social comment. To that end, a major

²⁵³ Major plot holes included *why* Sister Honour hates Sister Holiday, how long does it take to question all the Saint Sebastian’s students, why was there no funeral for Jack or Sister Therese, and what happened to the burnt blouse.

breakthrough occurred when I analysed classic hardboiled novels alongside their feminist and queer counter-traditions, as if the books were in conversation with one another. Reading these popular texts, I became interested in narrative strategies that transposed the hardboiled code of virility into a quirky lesbian protagonist. Stephen King notes that ‘The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing’.²⁵⁴ The more I read (past tense) and read (present tense) and the more I engage with this living genre, the closer I get to crafting a signature queer hardboiled practice and voice.

Ultimately, I believe that applying queer analysis and accenting queer storylines in crime fiction, as I do in my novel, can situate a sleuth on the margins of heteronormativity, thereby affording her skills that are particularly useful for a problem-solver, such as decoding, translation, and inference. Engaging with Katherine V. Forrest’s laconic Detective Delafield and Sue Grafton’s tough-as-nails PI Millhone, for example, invited a discourse about what ‘law and order’ might look like from a contemporary queer feminist perspective. Researching and conceptualising Chapter Two in concert with drafting my novel, I began to crystallise how and why an anti-heroic lesbian portrayal with nuanced gender and religious expressions might innovate the sleuth genre. Furthermore, to remix, reinterpret, and reimagine tropes in a narrative method is fundamentally aligned with queer ideals. The Western contemporary usage of the word ‘queer’ is, at its heart, a reclamation. Defined as ‘strange’ or ‘odd’, the word queer is now used and understood as an umbrella term for people who are not heterosexual or not cisgender. The architects of queer liberation made a strenuous effort (and in many ways the effort is ongoing) to take this word back from the confines of a pejorative to recast it as a symbol of radical empowerment and recognise an evolving, inclusive, and fluid community.

²⁵⁴ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 150.

In Chapter Three I reflected on craft, detailing my struggles and moments of enlightenment with point of view, temporality, and plot. A probing examination during this process clarified that was not enough beat-by-beat action in Part Two of my novel. The middle 150 pages sagged, containing very little causation. The first draft had no deaths and the original ending let the sleuth off the hook far too easily. When I focussed too much on Sister Holiday's visceral reality or interior geography, the looseness of plot trapped the reader in a holding pattern. Conceptualising the flow of Chapter Three helped me formulate more persuasive red herrings. I realised that the Prince-Holiday enmity was not persuasive. More friction and suspicious moments were needed to warrant the obsession and enmity. Similarly, funnelling all of the 'narrative past' into Part Two created a host of logistical problems, and the revision of temporality – the interleaving into marbled flashbacks – proved to be one of the more instructive edits in my process.

Working on Chapter Three of the thesis also elucidated the need to layer opposition for the sleuth. In fact, it was in ideating more critically about the irritant concept, while drafting Chapter Three, that I decided to give Sister Holiday scar tissue after the last fire. The itchy wound yokes the young nun to the older nun, to Sister Augustine's burn, and locks Sister Holiday in a state of discomfort and pain as the story concludes. These details, growing cumulatively in their effect, helped me to raise the stakes for the characters and, hopefully, the reader. I tried to make the smells more fetid, the trash slimier, the pinches harder, and the temptations jucier. My goal with the last draft was to push the walls in on the protagonist. What I discovered, clarified by refining Chapter Three of this thesis, is that by piling on more pressure – and keeping the pressure consistent – the book read faster.

After reader feedback in 2019, I addressed fourteen key issues in my final revision with the overall goal of fully realising a believable detective fiction narrative and embodying its key characteristic as a carnivalesque masque of disguise and revelation. The final revisions included the aforementioned temporal editing and the excision of the narrative device of the Catholic confessional to let the novel breathe.

For the final draft, I also revised the inciting incident, a modification I explored in Chapter Three. This edit also seeds the fire/flame symbolism into Holiday's past and introduces fire as a force of reckoning, recalibrating Sister Holiday's guilt from general to specific, as it was presented in earlier drafts.

My central thesis, that the 'queering' of investigative sensibility enhances and informs the PI's perception, should now be discernable throughout the final draft. The elements of Holiday's identity/perception that are related to a queer identity are a capacity to decipher codes, reading for subtext, reading between the lines, and inhabiting alterity to garner unexpected insights. I revised the queer element significantly and layered it with the unique abilities of a purpose-driven religious sleuth (such as Sister Holiday's belief that solving the mystery can serve as her 'offering' to God). This was undertaken in support of my ambition to establish original storytelling methods for queer-religious sleuths.

I attempted to enhance the theme of musicality with more research, optimizing the rich symbolism of the 'instrument' and intensifying tension between the dissident 'punk' and 'melodic' sides of Sister Holiday (e.g., 'Bringing a whole sonic palette – pushing and pulling – into conversation. Thrashing power chords ... It's a form of whole-body prayer.').²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 102.

For as much as I was able to include in this thesis, there are notable elements of my process I did not have the space to examine. I did not have the opportunity to explicate the aesthetics of sex scenes. As a queer narrative, the sex scenes – their level of detail, and how they are interpreted and communicated by Sister Holiday in her reconstruction – are important for both overall narrative flow and her characterisation. There is a hardboiled genre expectation for titillation; narrativising sex and violence are methods of delivering excitement of this ilk, particularly in the hardboiled thrillers of Mickey Spillane, for example. There is a cost to omitting a critical reflection of the rendering of sex scenes, as the topic is both useful and fascinating theoretical territory within the queer context. I plan to explore the role of queer eroticism and the craft of sex scenes in crime fiction in future critical studies.²⁵⁶

Similar to deconstructing the creation of and theories on sex scenes and the depiction of Sister Holiday's amorous yearnings, I was also unable to apply a racial analysis to the novel or critically explore the role of race within the New Orleans setting. A novel set in the storied setting of New Orleans – a city of miracles and curses – would benefit from an intersectional discussion of race, class, identity, agency, and criminality. Additionally, Investigator Riveaux's character is African-American ('first black female fire investigator in New Orleans'), and her foil is crucially important for the sleuth.²⁵⁷ I hope to explore this aspect of my crime fiction practice in the continuation of my critical work next year.

From an immersive sense of place, to the gold tooth of the nun who narrates the tale, my ultimate goals were to create a novel with literary merit that breaks new ground in terms of its

²⁵⁶ In 2019, I received a Sisters In Crime (SInC) Academic Research Grant to continue critical work on sexuality and intersectionality in lesbian hardboiled detective fiction. 'Founded by Sara Paretsky in 1986, Sisters in Crime is a community of writers, editors, publishers, scholars, and librarians devoted to promoting the ongoing advancement, recognition, and professional development of women and underrepresented crime writers'.
<<https://www.sistersincrime.org>>

²⁵⁷ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 28.

thematic and stylistic synthesis by offering an original variation on the sleuth story within a broader conversation about identity politics, life purpose, and self-awareness. I believe that even if you know ‘the reveal’, a detective novel should still be enticing enough to want to take the literary journey. That maxim inspires everything I write, including *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*. To that end, the final draft represents a radical reshaping of the narrative of the early versions. While the arsonist has been unmasked by the time readers reach the novel’s conclusion, Sister Holiday rejects tidy closure. This is another code of hardboiled.²⁵⁸ Sister Holiday is still selfish as the novel closes, but she recognises and articulates that she is a work in progress (‘will I take permanent vows?’).²⁵⁹ My hope is that readers have enough confidence in her character to follow her queer sleuthing instincts into the next book in the series.

I also believe that the first-person voice and hardboiled attributes have made the novel richer and simultaneously provided a doorway into a larger project – exploring the pedogeological value of intersectionality, intertextuality, and multimodality in crime fiction. My contention is that intertextuality and intersectionality can expand the crime fiction conversation. If, for example, Dashiell Hammett is to be referenced as a model for students who wish to write crime fiction, the discussion could entail not just his writerly strategies for creating a sense of place, itemising the costs of isolation, how to render deceptive characters, but also how historical context informs the reader’s comprehension of social strata, notions of authenticity, and the performativity of gender. A rigorous reading of Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* (a third-person hardboiled novel featuring white heterosexual PIs) alongside Cheryl A. Head’s *Bury When I’m*

²⁵⁸ ‘Because hard-boiled novels don’t resolve as neatly as the puzzle-like “Golden Age” mysteries that they supplanted, they create a fundamental ambiguity about whether order has in fact been restored and justice has been done. This ambiguity (for hard-boiled novels regularly question whether justice is even possible) draws consistently on literary sentimentalism for its imagery and symbolic lexicon’. –Leonard Cassuto, *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 81.

²⁵⁹ *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 331.

Dead: A Charlie Mack Motown Mystery (a third-person hardboiled style novel featuring a black lesbian PI), invites a discussion about the relationship between third-person point-of-view and the individualised self, privilege and power/powerlessness, strategies for writing ironic distance, and violence within a queer crime fiction framework.

Similarly, a crime fiction pedagogy that also considers queer theory would be enriched by multimodal engagement – reading, critically exploring, watching, expanding on, intervening in, and interacting with myriad permutations of PI storytelling. In the Creative Writing workshop, this might take the form of analytical work (the historical contexts and evolution of the genre and subgenres through a queer deconstructionist lens), and multimodal engagement that spurs creative synthesis among canonical fiction models, videogames, mobile apps, and private-eye TV programmes. I envisage a workshop in which students attempt to visualise or map the narrative space of Marlowe’s Los Angeles, change the genders of certain characters to see what narrative possibilities emerge, or write new endings and dialogue for shows like *Jessica Jones* or *Veronica Mars* that parody Cain, Spillane, Paretsky, or Grafton.²⁶⁰ These inquiries and exercises would present writers not only with an assortment of storytelling devices from which to choose, it could spark ‘an awareness of the political effects of aesthetic decisions’, according to Paul Dawson.²⁶¹ Exercises of this ilk might inspire and challenge students to give voice to the otherwise voiceless.

In this application, crime fiction can occupy space in a larger discussion about the relationship between diversity, inclusion, and cultural (re)production. Priscilla L. Walton and

²⁶⁰ Rob Pope’s *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995) is an insightful and valuable reference for creative and critical interventions, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

²⁶¹ Paul Dawson, ‘What is a Literary Intellectual? Creative Writing and the New Humanities’, Vol 9, No 1, *Affective Community* (Sydney: University of Technology Sydney Press, 2003), pp. 161-179.

Manina Jones argue that contemporary women writers who appropriate the hardboiled style reclaim the territory ‘as a viable (if limited) locus of feminist analysis’ and make ‘the hardboiled narrative of investigation available as an instrument of literary and social critique’.²⁶² Again this illuminates the generative relationship between criticality and creativity for queer crime fiction writers. Similarly, rather than bifurcating – severing theory from creative practice – this programme has served as an integrative enterprise for me. I believe the expansive engagement of a critical-into-creative method – and the creative-into-critical mode in turn – represents the important role of the Creative Writing Ph.D. in the academy and wider artistic discourse.

²⁶² Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hardboiled Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). p. 124.

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