

Queer Investigations: Foxy Ladies and Dandy Detectives in American Dime Novels

The person addressed as Gus Giles was a young man of twenty-five or thereabouts; and he was dressed in the very tip-top height of fashion.

In fact, a casual observer would put him down as a dude at first sight.

Gus Giles was tall and thin, with a beardless feminine face, and light blue eyes.

But he was not a dude by any means.

He sported a cane, but that cane could be converted into a fearful weapon at times.

His hands were long and thin, yet it was surprising with what effect Gus could deliver a blow with those almost milk-white 'maulies.'

His legs appeared to be spindles when encased in his tight-fitting pants, yet very few of the professional runners could cover a mile on the race-track in better time than Gus Giles.

Gus was a private detective, and he was one of the very ablest in the country in his own line.

His very particular friends called him Gay Gus, the lady detective.

(Allan Arnold, *The Broken Blackthorn*, 1883)

Gay Gus Giles is a rather unexpected detective hero for an 1883 dime novel, since, as this quotation suggests, he performs his gender in more complex ways than we might expect to find in a work of popular

literature. Superficially, he wears gender markers—his fashionable clothes and cane—that identify him as a dandy rather than a hero. However, it is not only through his clothing that Gus performs a liminal gender identity. His very body is marked by unmanly characteristics: the “beardless feminine face,” the milk-white hands, the spindly legs. We are told immediately that Gus’s ambiguously gendered body, like his apparel, is capable of more manly feats than is apparent, and yet his identification with the dandy is more than simply a disguise. Instead of making it easier for Gus to infiltrate criminal circles (the key function of disguise in most detective dime novels), Gus’s androgynous appearance acts to draw attention to him. Besides, as the last line of the quotation suggests, Gus’s appearance is part of his real identity and not an adopted disguise, since it is his most intimate friends who refer to him as “Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective.” As we learn upon further reading, his enemies have rather less flattering soubriquets for him.

So, what are we to make of Allan Arnold’s unlikely detective hero, Gay Gus Giles? It turns out that although he is certainly unusual, Gus is not alone among *New York Detective Library* detectives in representing complexly gendered heroes. In fact, several other detectives who perform gender in intriguing ways are also attributed to the house name “Allan Arnold”.¹ I specifically examine Gay Gus Giles and Nina the Female Detective here, although the “Allan Arnold” corpus includes, along with less complex detectives, a number of other interesting examples like Dick Darcy the Dandy Detective and Belle Boyd, Girl Detective. These detectives are not as well known as the more stereotypically gendered serialized detectives of the day like Nick Carter and Old Sleuth, and yet they were certainly popular, since the *New York Detective Library* continued to commission and sell their stories under the name of Allan Arnold for almost two decades. Close examination of these Allan Arnold books reveals the richness of representations explored in the dime novel, a class of book often considered unworthy of close critical attention.² The presence of significant gender critique in such books as *The Broken Blackthorn* (1883) and *A Diamond Ear-ring; or, Nina the Female Detective* (1888), whether intended or not, demonstrates the potential of detective fiction to speak meaningfully to questions of gender, a potential often considered problematic even in the study of explicitly feminist detective narratives of recent years.

The detective story has often been considered a highly gendered form in which dominant structures of power are reified through the ritual of the narrative: a disruption to social order labeled as crime is followed by the restoration of that order by the figure of the detective. Within the triangular configuration of the characters central to this genre—detective, criminal and victim—performed gender has often been understood as already assigned. The detective, many have argued, always occupies a symbolically male position whether or not his biological gender is male. Marty Roth makes this claim most dramatically in the introduction to *Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction*, when he states: “my controlling assumption is that in detective fiction gender is genre and genre is male; Jane Marple and Modesty Blaise are feminine notations that perform a masculine function” (xiv). Conversely, several gender critics of detective fiction have suggested that because the victim in a detective narrative is literally reduced to “body,” he or she—again regardless of biological sex—occupies a feminine position within the framework of the narrative.³ The criminal’s gender has not been as strictly delineated, a phenomenon that Kathleen Gregory Klein notes when she describes the criminal as a “cross-dresser,” arguing that the criminal is dominant in the criminal/victim binary, and then subordinate in the detective/criminal binary (“Habeus” 173). Dime novels, and other forms of detective fiction, include many examples of criminals acting in the position of the feminized other when disrupting society’s norms, while simultaneously performing a masculine role in providing the detective with a worthy masculine opponent through which the detective can perform a heroic ideal.

The stability of the triangle as a central metaphor for relationships within the detective genre suggests a lack of flexibility; the triangle, after all, is the most stable geometric shape. Teresa Ebert highlights the genre’s restrictiveness in a compelling Marxist analysis, arguing that the very bounds of the genre are invested in reifying patriarchal norms through the restoration of those norms at the conclusion of every detective narrative. She examines a number of texts ranging from masculinist hardboiled narratives of the 1930s and ‘40s to more recent explicitly feminist texts featuring popular detectives such as Sara Paretsky’s hardboiled detective V.I. Warshawski and Amanda Cross’s academic detective Kate Fansler, showing that the reader’s participation in the gender conservatism of the genre occurs even

in these texts. Ebert suggests that the presence of these detectives is particularly important in accomplishing the work of the patriarchy because:

Detecting, in short, is a disciplinary practice that enlists individuals—regardless of their “gender” (anatomy)—as agents of phallic authority who act to restore patriarchal order and hegemony. Thus, women who engage in the ideologically encoded practice of detecting (whether as “detectives” or readers) do not indicate a significant alteration of the sexual politics of the genre but rather an expansion of patriarchal agency and authority—often in spite of the women’s own intentions. (13)

This work of the woman detective becomes particularly insidious because detective narratives work largely through reader identification. According to Ebert, “the phallic figure/detective is the ideological agent activating the desire of the reader....Through such imaginary relations, the reader takes up his place in the male subject position signaled by the detective and makes sense of himself as possessor of the phallus and agent-enforcer of the Law-of-the-Father” (10). This level of reader identification, combined with the resolution that necessarily completes all detective narratives, would tend to preclude gender subversion.

If this is the case, can political work be done through the genre of detective fiction without changing the very boundaries of that genre? Anne Cranny Francis has argued that explicitly feminist writers of the 1970s and the 1980s have tapped into the enormous and already established audience for genre fiction to perform feminist moves effectively and to garner an audience not already attracted to gender studies. Carolyn Heilbrun, who wrote feminist detective fiction under the name of Amanda Cross, has argued for the power of the detective genre saying that: “with the momentum of a mystery and the trajectory of a good story with a solution, the author is left free to dabble in a little profound revolutionary thought” (7). Heilbrun’s work as Amanda Cross has been read as engaging subversive ideas, perhaps specifically, as Susan Leonardi suggests, because “the academic detective novel’s native bent, like that of the academic herself, is to goad, gently if possible, readers/students into the exploration of the strange and unsettling” (122). And yet, Ebert argues in a compelling reading of Heilbrun’s *Death in a Tenured Position* that even this text, which traces the investigation by a feminist professor of a female colleague’s suspicious death, fails in its attempt to subvert the patriarchal ideologies that underlie detective

fiction. According to Ebert, Kate Fansler, despite her feminism, ends up being the agent who clears of suspicion the patriarchal forces represented by the old-boy network when she discovers that the victim has taken her own life, the only escape she had from the oppressive environment of the university (15-16).

If a feminist thinker like Carolyn Heilbrun does not escape the gender conservatism of the detective genre, is there any reason to expect subversion in dime novel detective fiction? Kathleen Gregory Klein's exploration of seven female dime novel detectives identifies three ways in which feminist detectives in the dime novel fail to move beyond the conflict she identifies as critical in this form of writing, a conflict between the needs of the detective's story and those of the woman's story. Some female detectives, she shows, are too masculine to be really considered women. Others, although sometimes named in the title of the novel, are in fact subordinated to male counterparts within the narrative, and a third category of female detectives give up their detective work when they participate in the marriage plot that often ends dime novel detective stories.

Nonetheless, a few voices have emerged arguing for detective fiction's potential to engage in complex cultural critique. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple suggest that "the boundaries of the detective fiction genre, like any genre, are relatively fluid and do not necessarily have conservative implications" (45), citing such classic texts as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as examples of narratives that play with conventions in meaningful ways. Catherine Ross Nickerson, who examines "domestic detective fiction," a type of detective story written by and about middle-class women and sold as cloth-bound books in the same period as the dime novel, suggests that Kathleen Gregory Klein's emphasis on endings is too restrictive in understanding the gender politics embedded in early women detective novels. Nickerson argues that while the formulaic conclusion of most detective narratives upholds and maintains current structures of power, detective stories are full of multiple potential readings due to their very nature, which is based in two narratives: that of the detective and that of the crime he or she is investigating. The multiplicity of these potential narratives then creates space for complexity at various sites of power. Ruby Rich examines much more recent texts in her argument about a technique of gender critique used by the "lady dick,"

whose “most coherent expression is in the lesbian detective subgenre” (26). The new mandate Rich identifies involves a doubling of narrative interest, as the lady dick “doesn’t just find the killer, she finds herself” (25). The narrative of personal identity, which often includes negotiations with gender, becomes a potential site of subversion.

The two Allan Arnold novels I examine here both employ multiple strategies that perform gender critique while leaving the detective genre intact, although neither detective quite fits Rich’s classification of “Lady Dick.” In fact, although *A Diamond Ear-Ring* treats Nina, a powerful woman detective, and *The Broken Blackthorn* presents Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective, both narratives work through the *same* three subversive strategies. First, both detectives perform gender in intriguing ways that mark them as queer bodies. Second, the reader identification with patriarchal agents, those Ebert sees as key to the gender conservatism of the detective genre, is disrupted through a reformulation of the detective-victim-criminal triangle that includes two victims. Finally, although both dime novels participate in the convention of marking the happy ending with a marriage, both distort that marriage plot in ways that undermine rather than reify dominant norms.

The Foxy Lady

Nina Renard, heroine of *A Diamond Ear-ring; or Nina the Female Detective*, is a police detective working the case of a murdered sailor. Although Nina does not have a partner, she is occasionally assisted by other members of the law enforcement community (the medical examiner, the morgue attendant, beat cops, etc). The plot develops around two victims. The murder victim is Percy Randolph, a young married man of genteel origins who has been sent off to sea against his will by his cousin Millie Burnham, who is attempting to rob him and his wife of his inheritance. His wife, Amy, becomes the more relevant and fully developed victim, since her husband’s death puts her in danger from Millie and from an unsavory mercenary named Tunis Shivvy; she is also pursued by Millie’s twin brother Harvey, a rejected suitor of Amy’s who is obsessed with possessing her and her fortune. Nina must trace a number of clues, including the diamond

earing of the title, to uncover the plot against Amy and her husband as well as capture the criminal.

Nina Renard, as her name suggests a “foxy” lady, performs complex gender identification that can productively be considered “queer.” In fact, the text highlights the importance of “renard” (French for “fox”) by naming Nina’s late father, also a detective, “Foxy Renard.” She is not specifically marked as a lesbian like the “lady dicks” examined by Rich, nor, I would argue, should she be labeled “freaky,” the term Roberts, Hoppenstand, and Browne use in their examination of three female dime novel detectives who enact heroism of a masculine type throughout their stories but embrace their femininity at the conclusion when they allow marriage to end their detective careers. Roberts, Hoppenstand, and Browne use “freak” in the sense of Robert Bogden’s work, which highlights the creation of spectacle along with the doubleness of normalcy and freakishness in the figure of the freak. This analysis, though, focuses only on the figure of the freak at the site of women: “So they [female detectives] were doubly talented; no man of the time could assume the double roles women played as detective hero—hero and weakling, masterful and subservient—or had to. Men did not have to be freaky—women did” (9).

Although Nina and Gay Guy Giles precede queer theory by almost a century, their gender performances align them with the “queer” as described by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott in their discussion of the potentials of “queer”:

Rather than setting up categories such as ‘lesbian’ as the basis of political identity, Queer sought to destabilize the binary oppositions between men and women, and straight and gay. Such identities were not to be seen as authentic properties of individual subjects, but as fluid and shifting, to be adopted and discarded, played with and subverted, strategically deployed in differing contexts. (15)

The notion of queer subjects “strategically deploying” gender performatively provides insights into Nina and Gus. After all, both use disguise regularly as part of their detective work, and that disguise often inflects the way their genders are read by others. And yet, for these and other queer detectives, strategic gender performance is not linked only to their work, but also to their personal and erotic identities.

Although she carries a police badge that provides her with authority, Nina is more than a representative of authority who functions in a predominantly masculine role. In fact, several descriptions of Nina performing her detective work highlight complexly marked erotic pleasures therein. The most erotically charged description of the female detective occurs when, dressed as a boy, she shoots and injures Tunis Shivvy in self-defense. After firing her “dainty little revolver”:

Her pretty face had been quite pale over the jeopardy of her situation, but it now flushed up.

Her large dark eyes flashed fire, and her trim little figure, so nicely fitted in a boy’s suit, quivered all over with excitement from the effect of her shot. (11)

Nina’s symbolic orgasm is reached as she engages in an act of daring and violence, melding elements of masculine and feminine sexuality. She is disguised as male, and the discharge of the gun suggests male orgasm, but the weapon is a “dainty” woman’s version of a gun, and the quivering and flushing suggest female climax. The “trim little figure” in “a boy’s suit” highlights the duality in gender representation. This duality encourages a reading that disrupts the “binary opposites between men and women, straight and gay” that Jackson and Scott see as marking queer readings. Here, Nina is not simply working toward a reaffirmation of dominant values; she takes pleasure—eroticized pleasure—in saving Amy’s life and honor through an act of violence.

Nina’s identification with Amy again shows up the liminality of her gender construction. On the two occasions in which Amy is put into positions of physical danger, Nina goes disguised in her place. During a meeting between Nina-disguised-as-Amy and Harvey, Nina’s unstable gender identity comes to the fore once again. When Harvey pours out his desire for the recently widowed Mrs. Randolph, “a most peculiar effect was produced on Nina’s senses” (18). The sights, smells and sounds at Harvey’s hideout also excite Nina: “There was, besides, a lurking danger and romantic element that thrilled the girl: but at the same time it added to the fascination of the situation in which she found herself” (18). Nina turns to her intellectual side, though, when Harvey comments on his history of avoiding the public because he is a well-known criminal; Nina wonders about his criminal identity, because “she had, through her father, familiarized herself with the record of all known standard and trascient [sic] crooks in the metropolis” (18).

When Harvey asks for a kiss to seal the deal he has made with Amy/Nina, the detective processes the erotically charged request logically rather than emotionally. Deciding that kissing him would be too risky since it might endanger her disguise, she instead slaps him with a passionate comment on his impudence (which is in keeping with a realistic reaction from retiring Amy): Nina is more concerned about compromising her disguise than compromising her honor. In his discussion of hardboiled fiction, Roth positions the female criminal as a disruption to patriarchal order; such a woman's uncontrolled sexuality is a threat not only to masculine identity but to social order. In Nina, with her melding of female sexuality and masculinely marked powers of logic, we see the disruptive force placed in the detective position, where it challenges the gender conservatism of the genre.

Dominant modes of power are again disrupted through Nina's interactions with Amy, since the two-victim formulation in *A Diamond Earring* destabilizes the triangular relationship at the center of many detective narratives. Instead of the detective and criminal meeting over the passive body of a feminized subject, the initial victim is often a wealthy man whose prominent social position clearly identifies him with dominant norms; the solution of his murder then serves to reaffirm those norms. A more compelling second victim, though, is still alive and is usually a young woman whose safety is at risk: she may be the kidnapped sister of the initial victim, or a young woman whose honor is threatened by the criminal. The most feminized victim, then, is often a victim not of murder, but of dishonorable intentions or deceit. In many dime novels, this victim is available as a prize for the male detective, who saves and eventually marries her.

In the case of Nina and Amy, the victim is not available as a passive prize for the male detective. Instead, the close relationship that develops between Nina and Amy leads to reader identification on the detective-victim axis of the triangle, which disrupts the sense of potentially oppressive identification Ebert finds when the reader identifies with the detective, who unambiguously possesses and is aligned with phallic power. Often, the reader identifies primarily with the detective, and perhaps secondarily with the criminal, since the detective must identify with the criminal to some degree in order to understand and solve the crime. Identification with the criminal maintains the power politics identified by Ebert, since the criminal attempts to take power by disrupting the patriarchal order, but still within the

framework of that order. The criminal's punishment and the detective's victory are equally persuasive in maintaining dominant modes of power. But I would argue that when the reader identifies primarily with the detective and the detective identifies with the victim, the reader's complex identification is no longer aligned strictly with dominant values, since the victim's perspective of helplessness within the dominant system includes within it an implicit call for subversion.

In *A Diamond Ear-ring*, Nina's identification with the victim becomes a challenge to the power structure inherent to the detective-criminal-victim triad. By taking on the role of the victim through her disguise as Amy, Nina brings a new vitality to that role, merging victim and detective into a powerful entity that successfully entraps the criminal, who, in this case, is aligned to the patriarchy through his belief that he is entitled to possession of a woman's body and fortune. It is not simply a matter of strong Nina playing the role of the victim, though. Through her identification with Amy, Nina convinces the weaker woman to take part in the final sting that brings Harvey to justice. This empowers Amy to successfully face her husband's killer and participate in his capture. In this case, a female detective's act of empowering another woman becomes a significant and subversive part of the detective narrative.

The final scene of the novel is a massive disruption of the conventional marriage plot, a disruption that acts to further empower the joint enterprise of detective and victim in subverting dominant norms. As mentioned above, in many dime novel detective stories, the resolution of the detective intrigue is marked as a happy ending in part by its intersection with a marriage plot. In single-issue male detective stories, the marriage plot often involves the detective, and in serials, it involves two secondary characters who have been uncomplicatedly portrayed as good and deserving. In the female dime novel detective stories examined by Roberts, Hoppenstand, and Browne and Klein, happy marriage at the end of the story marks the end of the female detective's foray into detection. The typical ending, then, enacts a double resolution: the criminal's capture marks a return to social order and the happy marriage plot marks a return to orderly gender roles.

A Diamond Ear-ring ends in carnivalesque mode with a mock wedding scene orchestrated by Nina and Amy, a scene that places the criminal's

capture against a backdrop of empty domestic celebration. At Nina's suggestion, Amy agrees to marry Harvey in exchange for the name of her late husband's killer. The ceremony takes place in the dark, at ostensibly retiring Amy's insistence, and it concludes with Harvey's admission that he is the murderer. When the lights come up, everyone—including the reader—learns that Amy has switched places in the dark with an actress who is Harvey's ex-wife, and the room is full of police officers who have heard the confession and are prepared to arrest the murderer. In the end, neither Amy nor Nina partake in nuptials, a fact that is highlighted in the final segment of the narrative, the site always reserved for announcements of the characters' happy endings:

The papers were found in a safe deposit vault that put a large fortune in Mrs. Randolph's hands.

The diamond ear-rings went back to their owners, and Nina received not only a magnificent pecuniary compensation, but was made a heroine by all those on the force who knew her.

She is yet engaged at her secret vocation [i.e. Secret Service work], adding laurels to those she won, daily, and at present is considered the keenest young woman on the force. (27)

The detective and the victim in *A Diamond Ear-ring*, then, are rewarded with financial independence rather than love. Nina is “engaged” at her vocation instead of being engaged to a man, and Amy is mistress of her own fortune. This move away from the standard single-issue dime novel detective story resolution, in which the detective is doubly rewarded with pecuniary recompense and marriage (usually to the victim), reveals a flexibility in the detective genre being explored over a century ago. Although *A Diamond Ear-ring* almost certainly was not part of a queer or feminist ideological project, it enacts a great deal of play at the site of gender performance, a play that is even more coherently integrated into the narrative of the male detective known to his friends as “Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective.”

The Dandy Detective

The Broken Blackthorn contains frequent interactions between the detective's story and the narrative he is uncovering, with the main focus

on Gus's continuing relationships with those involved in the initial narrative. Gus is a private detective working for an agency owned by John Barrett, and he is called upon to solve the murder of Jasper Clarke, a sporting man who has been robbed and killed. As Gus pursues the killer, he realizes that Dora, his affianced, is associated with Justin Blood, a clearly unsavory man who may be the killer Gus seeks. He sees Dora with this man numerous times, even though she acts as if she does not recognize Gus when with Justin. The reader learns that Dora has a twin sister, Sadie, who is at once a fallen woman, the widow of Jasper Clark, and Justin Blood's ladylove. Both girls have long been estranged from their father. To the reader's great surprise—and Gus's even greater surprise, since he may not be a reader of dime novels—Sadie and Dora's father turns out to be John Barrett, Gus's boss. It is Sadie who is involved with Justin, but even after Dora and her father reunite midway through the novel, they do not tell Gus of the twins' existence until the very end, because they are still trying to save Sadie from ruin and prison, and they play on Gus's love for Dora to save her twin sister.

"Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective," as shown at the opening of this essay, clearly performs his gender in complex ways that mark his as a queer body, complete with complexly gendered performance at once fluid and strategically deployed. Like other dandy detective narratives, Gus's story blatantly explores the concepts of cross-dressing and gender fluidity within the genre of detective fiction. From the opening description of Gus and throughout the narrative, this novel demonstrates that gender identity can work like detective identity: it can employ tropes of disguise and performance to accomplish important socio-cultural work.

Gus's complex gender performance serves several important functions within the narrative. Although his "dandy" identity does not help Gus gain access to underworld sites, it serves to mark the character of other personages he meets. For example, Gus participates in two physical conflicts within the first few chapters of the novel. He easily overcomes Mike Shannon, the janitor of the dead man's building, after this brawny Irishman challenges Gus to a fistfight because he does not look like a detective. After receiving a few surprisingly well-delivered blows, Mike renounces his earlier assertion that Gus might be unfit for detective work and the two men come to terms:

"By all that's magical, but I'll never take a man by his looks again."

“We are friends then, Mike?”

“Is it Mike Shannon to bear a grudge for a clip or two like that?”

“Then you will serve me?”

“I’ll go through fire and water to serve ye, me fine young buck,
for you’re a darling.” (5)

Gus’s physical prowess has caused Shannon to revise his reading of Gus, and Shannon moves from the earlier descriptive language of a “spook” to a more nuanced move between a “fine young buck,” a potent and dominant male, and the more effeminately marked “darling.” The language here points to the homoerotics that continually mark this narrative.

Gus’s second physical encounter is with Clarence Vernon, a crook whom Gus suspects is associated with the crime he is investigating. Clarence insults Gus by repeatedly calling him a “quill” and mocking his feminine appearance. Gus is versatile enough to meet Clarence on his own terms; when the two men discuss possible weapons for their upcoming duel, Gus refuses pistols because they are the weapon of gentlemen, and Clarence is a blackguard (8). Clarence learns from his beating at Gus’s fists that a feminized man can still be powerful, but he refuses to accept that he was honestly bested, and he continues to attack Gus throughout the story; in future attacks, though, he symbolically admits what he will not admit verbally (that Gus is the stronger man) when he tries to take Gus unawares. These reactions to Gus’s effeminacy, although both involving physical violence, serve to disrupt the notions of gender and power we see in the hardboiled detective fiction of the 1930s. The character who understands Gus’s queer body as a powerful entity is marked as a good guy, while the character who refuses to acknowledge and understand the dandy’s power and authority is represented as a villain.

The good guys also understand and even encourage Gus’s development of his feminine side. Despite the “tough-guy” capabilities Gus conceals beneath his dandy exterior, he also enacts behavior at odds with ideals of nineteenth-century masculinity. For example, the only serious injury he suffers throughout a plot full of violent confrontations occurs at the hands of a woman disguised as a man (Sadie). More frequently, he articulates emotion in an unmasculine way. In the opening scene, for example, John Barrett asks the young detective a professional question, and Gus responds by pouring out his fears about his upcoming marriage, confiding that he is seeking an

excuse to postpone the wedding. The discussion between the two men is emotionally open and highlights Gus's sensitivity:

'Don't you love her?'

'To distraction.'

'Have you heard anything against her?'

'Not a tittle.'

'Then why in the mischief do you wish to break with the woman, I'd like to know?'

'I can't explain my reasons, as I have none, in fact. I only feel that, while I am madly in love with her, I have a presentiment that she will make my life miserable. I know it's foolish.'

'I don't know about that, Gus. Presentiments come to us for a purpose. Take this work in hand and postpone the marriage. I'll fix an excuse.' (3)

The attention to presentiment and the foregrounding of the personal over the professional move Gus's narrative rather far from the realm of the hardboiled detective fiction that is typically understood as arising out of the dime novels. Gus's resistance to his upcoming marriage could easily be read as the resistance of a gay man to entering into a lifelong heterosexual commitment, and Barrett's reaction as support of his decision.

John Barrett's interest and engagement in Gus's personal problem is only one of several instances in which other characters are developed through the ways in which they respond to Gus's feminine or homosexual side. Certainly, John Barrett's willingness to accept and support Gus in his performance of ambiguous gender demonstrates the potential of compassion in a figure aligned with dominant socio-cultural norms by virtue of his position as head of a private detective agency. The focus on reactions of other characters to Gus's effeminacy places the reader in the complex position of identifying with Gus the hero while simultaneously processing the gazes of other characters upon him.

The complex sexual dynamic surrounding Gus is continually marked by the object that gives this dime novel its title: the broken blackthorn. This blackthorn—a walking stick—becomes a marker of undercurrents in the social and sexual economy of the novel. The stick has multiple powers and meanings, as it is not only the murder weapon that killed Jasper Clark and the clue that leads Gus to initially suspect Dora's involvement in the case; more importantly, the blackthorn is also a magical Irish talisman that brings

fortune to its bearer, a quality that is borne out repeatedly as its many holders profit as a result of its presence. At the same time as the stick represents the rational and methodical quest for evidence—it has broken when it was used to kill Jasper, thus marking it as incontrovertibly the murder weapon—it also stands for a belief in charms and superstition that is part of Mike Shannon's Irish heritage. The blackthorn, it turns out, is doubly marked as a blessing and a curse, since Mike's brother profited from and was eventually killed by the stick before it found its way to America, where it is once more involved in a murder. The powerful blackthorn, now broken but still potent, can be read as symbolizing an ongoing battle for phallic power as the male characters continually try to possess it, bodily wresting it from each other's grasp in several scenes. In the end, Mike Shannon and Justin Blood (his brother's murderer) wrestle over the stick on a dock; the blackthorn is transformed once again into a weapon as Mike uses it to kill Justin, an act framed as the justifiable avenging of his brother's death. The stick is then lost in the water, its power to bring fortune, bring death, and bring men together lost forever. The melding of rationality and superstition in the broken blackthorn, overlaid with the phallic associations of the stick as men bodily fight over it, makes it a complex symbol at the center of this dime novel's struggle to represent gender and gender relations.

As in Nina's story, *The Broken Blackthorn* offers potentially disruptive reader identification through a destabilization at the victim position within the triangle. This tale also opens over the dead body of a man who acts as a catalyst to the tale, but is never developed as a character. The more interesting victim in the story is Sadie, Dora's twin sister, whose fall from her middle-class position to vague criminality is explained in ways that include a critique of dominant systems of power and morality. John Barrett became estranged from both his daughters when they chose life on the stage, a space characterized by contested opportunities for women, a subversive space of disguise and exhibitionism. Dora fell in love with an actor, married him, and is now a respectable widow at the age of 22. Sadie, on the other hand, fell in love with an actor who betrayed her, and is now not only a fallen woman, but also the widow of a second man, the murder victim. Barrett realizes too late that he was wrong in not supporting his daughters' choices, and through the case he is reunited with Dora, but suffers the loss of Sadie through his own participation in a system of judgment about appro-

priate gender behavior. The reader's identification is complex. Sadie is initially marked as a potential opponent to the hero, since he and the reader believe her to be Dora, but Dora fraternizing with criminals. By the fifth chapter, though, the reader is made privy to information Gus lacks, and Sadie is briefly made the focal point of the narrative, causing the reader to identify with the strong but victimized woman. As Sadie and Justin Blood go out one night, the reader learns: "Although naturally sanguine and cheerful, she was very much depressed that night...Were it not that she was devotedly attached to that murderous gambler, the oppressed and guilty creature would have fallen on the way" (25). At the conclusion, Dora explains to Gus that Sadie was within reach of salvation, but fate worked against her. In fact, the woman is killed by her ruffian husband, who shoots her accidentally as he aims at Gus. This woman, then, becomes not only a victim but also a sacrifice for Gus. The wavering identification between the queer detective and the fallen woman seems rather far from the identification with the agent of patriarchy that Ebert places at the necessary center of the detective genre.

Dominant values are even more fully disrupted in the final marriage plot, when Gus himself becomes a victim of a sort. Gus participates in a variation of the economy of women identified by Gayle Rubin when he marries Dora at the end of the story.⁴ In *The Broken Blackthorn*, money changes hands at the site of a human body in an intriguingly performed dowry. In Gus's fight with Clarence Vernon, many bets are made against Gus, and John Barrett and Gus end up with a sizeable sum to split between them. This money is marked in complex ways, since it is a symbol of the power inherent in Gus's liminal masculinity; the fight scene is not exactly a hustle, because Gus does not deliberately engage in deception, but most of the men at the fight bet against him because they fail to understand the power of the dandy. John's support of Gus shows once again that he understands Gus's gender performance. Before they have split the money, John and Gus make another bet for the whole sum, a bet made possible by the fact that John does not yet know that Gus's affianced Dora is actually his estranged daughter: Gus bets that Dora is pure, while John bets that she is "nothing but a vile adventuress" (10). At various points John tries to withdraw the bet because he does not want to add insult to injury, since Dora certainly seems guilty of criminal acts. After Sadie's attack, an attack

in which Gus believes her to be Dora, John does some investigating of his own and changes his mind about the fiancée, proclaiming to Gus: “You will yet win the money as well as the fair bride” (13). The dowry by this point has a complex significance, since it was earned by Gus’s complex gender performance and yet it becomes attached to Dora in a transaction between John and Gus.

In the denouement there is some evidence that the bond between Gus and John, now cemented by the exchange of Dora, is less than ideal for the younger detective. In fact, the bond can also be read as occurring between John and his long-lost daughter and cemented by the exchange of Gus, thus placing the dandy in the position of object of exchange. Gus has been deceived by Dora and her father—for honorable reasons, to be sure—but in ways that have injured him emotionally. He is almost crazy with despair when he thinks the woman he loves is a traitor, a despair that John Barrett does little to dispel. At the conclusion, Gus confronts Dora by asking “Was it not very cruel of you to keep me in such agony? I was almost broken-hearted when I felt assured that it was you.” Dora responds to this outpouring of feminine anxiety by invoking her father: “I felt as deeply as you could, but what could I do? I acted throughout on father’s advice; and he assured me that all would be well” (30). Gus’s open expression of the fact that he is tormented by love feminizes him once again, as does the fact that his initial presentiment warning him against marriage to Dora—apparently a result of incomplete information—may well have been warranted. The happy ending statement is: “Gus is married to the pretty Dora, and they are both living with John Barrett” (31). Since both Gus and Dora had lodgings of their own before their marriage, their new living arrangement in the home of the patriarch—a patriarch who has learned a great deal through his fallen daughter’s death and his interactions with Gay Gus, to be sure—indicates a complexly marked conclusion.

Conclusion

Douglas Greene argues that female detectives in American dime novels are simply part of “a whole slew of unusual detectives” (6), suggesting that focus on unusual detectives was a marketing tactic used by publishing houses to tempt readers to enjoy the exotic within the reassuring bounds

of the dime novel detective genre. Certainly, many unusual dime novel detectives demonstrate exoticism that is highlighted in titles and on cover images before being subsumed into dominant ideologies within the narratives. It is also important to keep in mind the economic pressures that marked the writing of dime novels: these texts were, after all, produced in a context in which production and marketing were inextricably linked. To me, however, the context of dime novel production and consumption as a serious financial undertaking makes even more important their occasional subversiveness at the site of gender. These texts sold. The highly successful businessmen running the Street & Smith dime novel empire continued to use the name “Allan Arnold” to market texts like Gus’s that perform real gender subversion through queer detectives, complex reader identification and disruptions of generic features like happy marriages.

The detective genre’s strict generic formulations certainly lead to a great number of highly conservative texts, but I believe that it is the very strictness of those generic conventions that allows for critique within the genre. When the detective is *not* an easily recognizable agent of dominant ideologies, when reader identification does *not* work strictly through the detective figure, when the return to social order is *not* a mere reaffirmation of that social order, meaningful socio-cultural critique can and does occur. Ruby Rich brings up extreme versions of these techniques for disruption in her discussion of recent detective fiction featuring lesbian detectives and narratives that refuse to restore social order in their conclusions. My examination of dime novel detective narratives from over a century ago shows that such recent moves within the genre do not mark a radical disjunction within the development of detective fiction, but rather indicate the continuing presence of a small but meaningful number of texts that perform social and gender critique within a genre whose popularity rests largely on its conservatism.

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Notes

¹House names were commonly used in the dime novel industry, referring to author names owned by publishing houses. Several authors might contribute to a single house name, which was more of a brand than a mark of authorship.

²Even Michael Denning, whose *Mechanic Accents* is generally considered the premier text in the field of dime novel studies, argues that because dime novel writing is analogous to journalistic writing, it is unpromising to select specific examples from among the tens of thousands of dime novels for examination through the lens of literary criticism.

³See, for example, Tomc, Nyman, Klein (“Habeus Corpus”).

⁴Rubin’s “The Traffic of Women” suggests that women have long acted as objects of exchange among men, and she documents a trend among both tribal and industrialized societies wherein adult males maintain their power by producing customs and legislation that place women in a position not only of extreme passivity, but also objects of exchange. The woman becomes, then, a means for men to forge useful links to each other. The productive economic and social ties made between families whose children marry in tribal life have continued to be sought in modern life, where the dowry that accompanied a woman to her new union has become money instead of a piece of livestock or some other piece of barter.

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