

Garner Trouble: Reading *The First Stone* as a Detective Narrative

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Helen Garner's The First Stone (1995) has commonly been read as a feminist-authored attack on feminism. I concur with this reading, but also argue that this text contains some distinctly 'queer' aspects that have previously been overlooked by critics. I suggest that a useful way of emphasising and exploring these aspects is by reading The First Stone as a detective narrative. I contend that Garner creates a sense of 'gender trouble' by performing the traditionally 'masculine' role of detective. The Ormond complainants are portrayed as femme fatales - figures of mystery and desire for the author/sleuth. I move on to question whether, in creating gender trouble, Garner's 'detective narrative' reinforces traditional gender roles as well. I also ask: what do the The First Stone's sexual politics say about the broader political culture in which the text was published? This paper aims to provide a fresh and provocative perspective on one of the most controversial Australian books of recent decades. I also aim to demonstrate the usefulness of reading ostensibly 'heterosexual' texts through a queer lens.

In 1995, Helen Garner published *The First Stone: Some Questions About Sex and Power*. The text purports to detail the events surrounding the sexual harassment allegations brought against the Master of a Melbourne University residential college by a pair of female students. The text also chronicles Garner's (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to interview the two complainants. *The First Stone* has elicited a range of critical responses (many of them hostile) since it first appeared on bookshelves. There is a sense that there is nothing new to be said about this text. I aim to prove that assumption wrong through rereading *The First Stone* as a detective narrative. I contend that this reading brings to light the provocative messages about gender roles and sexual identity that appear in Garner's text, but which have been elided by critics.

The paper will be divided into three sections. The first will summarise existing commentaries on Garner's text, emphasising some of their limitations, such as overlooking the suggestions of gender role-play and queerness in *The First Stone*. In the second section, I argue that Garner creates a sense of 'gender trouble' (to use Judith Butler's famous concept) by portraying herself as a detective figure, and the Ormond complainants as femme fatales – figures of anxiety, mystery *and* desire for our amateur sleuth. In the third section, I ask whether, in creating gender trouble, Garner's 'detective narrative' subverts traditional gender roles or reinforces them – or both? I also consider what the sexual politics of *The First Stone* reveal about the broader political culture in which the book was published.

Casting *The First Stone* Again

Before addressing *The First Stone* itself, I will briefly describe the sexual harassment allegations upon which Garner's text focuses. This harassment is alleged to have taken

place at Ormond College, a residential college at Melbourne University,¹ in October 1991. Five female Ormond students filed 'informal complaints of sexual harassment' against Dr Alan Gregory, then the College Master.² The students claimed that this harassment took place at a student party following the Valedictory Dinner that was held at Ormond that month. In March 1992, the College council released a statement declaring that 'although it believed the students had acted in "good faith";' they still had 'confidence in the Master's ability to continue in his position'.³ Shortly afterwards, two complainants brought their harassment allegations to the police. The allegations progressed to the Melbourne Magistrate's Court, where Gregory was found guilty of sexually harassing one of the two complainants. This charge was later overturned in an appeal hearing at the Victorian County Court. In May 1993, Gregory officially resigned from his position at Ormond.⁴

The First Stone opens with a transcript of Gregory's interview with police following their receipt of the allegations. Garner moves on to document her increasing interest in the case. This interest is generated primarily through reading about the allegations in the media, though she concedes that she knew several women who were acquainted with the complainants.⁵ Garner recalls her attendance at court hearings. She describes her attempts to interview the two complainants – the three other women who claimed to have been sexually harassed by Gregory, but who did not seek legal redress, are not mentioned. Garner claims that interviewing the two complainants will enable her to 'make more complex sense' of the allegations 'than the press had so far been able to'.⁶ In saying this, Garner advises that she has no interest in trying to establish Shepherd's guilt.⁷ The author wants to know 'why the girls went to the police'.⁸ However, Garner's attempts to speak with these two women are blocked by their supporters.

The First Stone generated a storm of controversy that was played out in newspapers and scholarly journals, as well as the books *Generation f* (1996), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life* (1997), and *Talking Up: Young Women's Take on Feminism* (1998). Some critics have contested the generational conflict that Garner evokes between so-called 'older' feminists such as herself and 'younger' feminists such as those who were apparently supporting the Ormond complainants.⁹ Yet other critics

¹For an overview of the residential colleges at Melbourne University, see Thornton McCamish, *The University of Melbourne: A Visitor's Guide*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2008, pp.173-186.

²Jenna Mead and Amanda Lohrey, 'Sexual Harassment and Feminism' *RePublica*, 2, 1995, p.166.

³ibid.

⁴ibid.

⁵These different characters are actually based on one woman – Jenna Mead, whose important role in the Ormond harassment case will be discussed shortly. Garner renamed several people (including Mead) in her book to avoid legal repercussions. See Helen Garner, *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1996, p.178.

⁶Helen Garner, *The First Stone: Some Questions About Sex and Power*, Pan Macmillan, New South Wales, 1995, p.59.

⁷ibid, p.50.

⁸ibid.

⁹See Rosamund Else-Mitchell and Naomi Flutter (eds), *Talking Up: Young Women's Take on Feminism*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, 1998; Virginia Trioli, *Generation f: Sex, Power and the Young Feminist*, Minerva, Melbourne, 1996; and, Jenna Mead, *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*, Vintage, New South Wales, 1997. For an insightful analysis of so-called 'generational conflict' between feminists, particularly as this has been evoked in Australian

read the text as being a reaction against a feminism which Garner perceived to be fixated on male domination and female subordination. I want to look closely at the contention that *The First Stone* is a reactionary text, as this will be crucial to my overall argument.

One of *The First Stone's* most trenchant critics has been Jenna Mead, who was an Ormond tutor at the time of the alleged harassment. In the introduction to *Bodyjamming*, Mead argues:

The First Stone enabled Helen Garner, celebrity journalist and cultural icon, to mobilise all the melodrama of a woman victimised by other women, portraying herself in the media as the humble and resolute seeker after truth.¹⁰

As cultural critic Mark Davis points out, Garner describes the feminists who are apparently victimising her in unfavourable and particularly unsubtle terms:

Garner ... speaks of "several other university feminists who had supported the complainants," of a "faceless group of women," of "radical feminists" and "ideological passions ...on the rampage," of "puritan feminists" who exerted a "certain influence." of "faceless supporters," "feminist ideologues" and "the politically correct gang," who as a group "maintained facelessness and voicelessness." What sort of feminists are these?¹¹

Davis argues that in *The First Stone*, Garner 'reverses the underlying power dynamic' of the alleged harassment at Ormond.¹² According to Garner, the complainants somehow wield the 'incredible power'¹³ required to destroy the career of a well-respected college Master. The question of whether Gregory subjected the complainants to unwanted sexual advances, and therefore abused his institutional power, is never explored.

I agree that *The First Stone* is politically reactionary. Yet I would also suggest that reading *The First Stone* as a salvo thrown in a media-fuelled attack on feminism does not *in itself* recognise the complexity of the book's sexual politics. This kind of reading says nothing about sexual identity, or the fact that the text was conceived in a political culture that was shaped by neoliberalism. According to the terms of this reading, Garner is simply a 'celebrity feminist' who spouts what may be regarded as anti-feminist views about the politics of sexual harassment, and receives considerable media coverage for doing so.¹⁴ Garner apparently feels nothing for the complainants except hostility, or at

contexts, see Jane Long "'A Certain Kind of Modern Feminism": Memory, Feminist Futures and 'Generational Cleavage' in Historical Perspective', *Outskirts: feminism along the edge*, 8, 2001, viewed 1 July 2011, <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume8/long>

¹⁰Jenna Mead, 'Introduction: Tell It Like it Is', in Jenna Mead (ed.), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*, Vintage, New South Wales, 1997, p.27.

¹¹Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, Allen and Unwin, New South Wales, 1997, p.79.

¹²ibid, p.78.

¹³ibid.

¹⁴Anthea Taylor, *Mediating Australian Feminism: Re-reading The First Stone as Media Event*, Peter Lang, Oxford and Bern, 2008. Taylor provides a comprehensive analysis of the media reaction to Garner's text. For accounts of Garner's literary career, see Kerryn Goldsworthy, *Helen Garner*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Kate Legge, 'The Lives of Others: Truly Helen: Interview with Helen Garner', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, March 29-30 2008, pp.18-21.

the very least, she fails to understand why they sought legal redress for what Gregory allegedly did to them.

I argue that *The First Stone* evokes a sense of gender trouble and queer desire *at the same time* as it endorses quite conservative ideas about men, women and sex. By investigating these aspects of *The First Stone*, I follow a long line of queer theorists who have sought to expose the 'non-heterosexual' aspects of even avowedly 'heterosexual' texts. This 'queering' of popular culture has, in turn, been part of a far broader 'challenge' to the heterosexism of much 'mainstream opinion and representation'.¹⁵ 'Queering' a text does not simply involve labelling it as 'lesbian' or 'gay'. Queer theory has been concerned with deconstructing – or at least moving beyond – traditional identity categories such as 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'heterosexual', as well as 'male' and 'female', 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Queer textual analyses focus on moments of desire that cannot be easily subsumed under the above categories. In particular, these analyses look for moments (even fleeting moments) within a text that are situated inside that realm of heterosexual desire that is specifically geared towards marriage and reproduction.¹⁶ Queer readings also investigate moments in which particular modes of gender expression are not tied to their culturally-assigned bodies. These includes moments in which a female protagonist adopts what might be regarded as a 'masculine' – or even non-gender specific – identification of some kind.

I argue that a useful and creative way of illuminating the queer aspects of *The First Stone* is through reading the text as a detective narrative. The term 'detective' will be used to denote a man or woman who is employed as a 'private detective', 'police detective' or 'police investigator'. This term will also refer to a man or woman who occupies none of the above occupations, but who investigates certain persons and/or events.¹⁷ I draw comparisons between Garner's text and several other literary and filmic detective narratives. Some of these examples are relatively recent, while others are dated from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. I engage with several feminist and queer analyses of detective narratives, including works by Glenwood Irons, Sally R. Munt and Anna Wilson.

Also, I reference texts which might more accurately be aligned with 'noir' fiction and film.¹⁸ In these texts, there is no 'detective' figure of any kind; such texts include the

¹⁵Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, 'Introduction', in Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (eds), *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995, p.1.

¹⁶For overviews of queer theory, see Creekmur and Doty; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003.

¹⁷Lisa M. Dresner argues that 'the word "detective" implies professionalism ... in the sense of receiving a monetary reward and a certain amount of recognition for one's detective work.' Dresner argues that those sleuths who do not fit such a description should be classified simply as 'investigators'. See her book *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, McFarland Company, Inc., North Carolina, 2007, p.6. Alas, Dresner's reference to 'a certain amount or recognition' is opaque. I ask, recognition from *whom*, exactly? I might also add that the term 'professionalism' sits uneasily with the kind of unethical behaviour displayed by many popular culture detectives.

¹⁸Used as a marker of genre or style, 'noir' is most frequently associated with a number of crime films produced in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s. However, the term 'noir' has also been applied to more recent filmic and literary works that have been produced within and outside the United States. See Stuart Christie, *Arena Two: Noir Fiction*, PM Press, Chicago, 2011; John T. Irwin, *"Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them": Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir*, Johns Hopkins

film *Gross Misconduct* (1993). I cite these noir texts because they foreground the figure of the femme fatale and the erotic 'spell' she casts over the male protagonist. In such noir texts, the male protagonist is usually a happily-married, middle class, 'respectable' man. He embodies quite a different model of masculinity to many male detectives in popular culture, although like these detectives, this 'respectable' man finds his masculinity sorely tested by the bad girl he falls for.

My final disclaimer before addressing *The First Stone* concerns Garner's use of pseudonyms. Garner changed many names in her book in order to avoid legal problems. Gregory is named 'Colin Shepherd', while the complainants are referred to as 'Elizabeth Rosen' and 'Nicole Stewart'. When I use these pseudonyms, I emphasise that I am not referring to the 'real-life' men and women involved in the Ormond case; rather, I am referring to Garner's *representations* of these men and women.

When Garner Met Butler

My decision to read *The First Stone* as a detective narrative may seem unusual given that the text is framed as a work of journalism.¹⁹ In true journalistic style, the author declares that she will not 'take sides or make judgments'.²⁰ Garner's account of the Ormond harassment episode and its aftermath are interspersed with reflections on the episode by those who have been connected in different ways with Ormond College over the years. Garner also cites opinions on the case that have been provided to her by people she encounters in her everyday life, for example, shop attendants and friends.

Some critics have noted the influence of detective and noir texts upon *The First Stone*. John Docker has likened Garner's role in this book to that of 'Miss Marple', Agatha Christie's famous amateur sleuth,²¹ while Mark Davis and Anthea Taylor have acknowledged that Garner's book draws on familiar femme fatale narratives.²² These kinds of narratives were trademarks of the 'hardboiled' crime fiction published during the 1930s and 1940s by authors such as James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.²³ Such narratives have continued to play out (albeit with different variations) in detective fiction and film, as well as in *The First Stone*. In the narratives I am referring to, a male detective is assigned to investigate a beautiful and mysterious woman. The woman seduces the detective and, in doing so, brings upon his personal and professional downfall.

The narratives that I have just described foreground two gender stereotypes. The first is the macho male detective. This man is aggressive, unfeeling, a loner. He is familiar with the criminal underworld and not above bending the law in order to get his

University Press, Baltimore, 2006; E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, New Edition, BFI Publishing, London, 1998.

¹⁹Matthew Ricketson, 'Helen Garner's *The First Stone*: Hitchhiking on the Credibility of Other Writers', in Jenna Mead (ed.), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*, Vintage, New South Wales, 1997, pp.79-100; Brigid Rooney, *Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian Public Life*, University of Queensland Press, Queensland, 2009, p.143. Rooney cites the influence on *The First Stone* of US journalist Janet Malcolm's work.

²⁰Garner, *The First Stone*, p.59.

²¹John Docker, 'Their Their Their Delilah: John Docker on *The First Stone*', *Arena*, 18, August-September 1995, p.15; cited in Taylor, *Mediating Australian Feminism*, p.34.

²²Davis, p.89; Anthea Taylor, 'Victims and Vixens: Recurrent gendered tropes in Helen Garner's 'non-fiction'', *Politics and Culture*, 4, 2005, viewed 23 November 2011, <http://www.politicsandculture.org/2010/08/17/victims-and-vixens-2/>

²³For an overview of 'hardboiled' crime fiction, see Irwin.

way.²⁴ The second stereotype is, of course, that of the 'femme fatale'. This woman is an enigma, mysterious and erotic, as well as lethal. This woman is situated outside the traditionally 'femininised' spheres of the home and the nuclear family. Frequently, the femme fatale is situated outside the realm of the law itself, as she is romantically involved with criminals, is plotting a murder, or is engaged in some other heinous crime. The femme fatale has dangerous designs on the detective which he only discovers once it is too late.

In *The First Stone*, the detective is a woman – in fact it is Garner herself. The author alerts her readers early on that – like all popular culture detectives – she is no stranger to investigating crime. Garner recalls that, around the time that she first read about the Ormond case in the newspaper, she was reporting 'the trial of a man accused of having murdered his girlfriend's two-year-old son'.²⁵ She became fascinated with the Ormond case, and declares that she wanted to meet the complainants, to interrogate them. This declaration is made with all the stoicism and resolve of Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and Philip Marlowe in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939).

By portraying herself as a detective figure, I contend that Garner creates a certain degree of gender trouble. The concept of 'gender trouble' was coined by Butler in her text of the same name. I want now to provide a brief overview of this concept, as well as that of 'gender performativity'. Butler's work on both concepts has been hugely influential on queer theory and contemporary feminisms, and this work will inform the argument that follows.²⁶ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that the 'best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality' involves a radical rethinking of the relationship between the categories 'sex' and 'gender'.²⁷ Butler argues that just as 'gender' has been commonly understood as an expression of 'sex', so 'sex' has been seen as the 'natural' self that gender expresses.²⁸ That is, '(if) gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way'.²⁹ Creating gender trouble means severing – or at least problematising – this link between gender roles and sexed bodies.

Central to Butler's conceptualisation of 'gender trouble' is her argument that gender is 'performative'. She elaborates on this argument in the following, oft-cited passage: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'³⁰ In her essay 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (1991), Butler develops the above point even further when she argues that gender is 'a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an

²⁴Glenwood Irons, 'Introduction: Gender and Genre: The Woman Detective and the Diffusion of Generic Voices', in Glenwood Irons (ed.), *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1995, p.xiii.

²⁵Garner, *The First Stone*, p.39. The murdered child was Daniel Valerio.

²⁶See Margaret Sonser Breen and Warren J. Blumenfield (eds), *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2005.

²⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Second Edition, Routledge, New York and London, 1999, p.xxx.

²⁸ibid, p.xxxi.

²⁹ibid, p.9.

³⁰ibid, p.45.

effect and consequence of the imitation itself.³¹ The naturalistic effects of heterosexualised genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect.³² Gender performativity should not be understood as a feminist or queer political strategy. As I will argue later in this essay, some gender performances are politically conservative.

Nevertheless, the interrelated concepts of 'gender trouble' and 'gender performativity' are useful to the extent that they demonstrate that 'heterosexualised genders' (masculine/active = male, feminine/passive = female) are not biological or inevitable. These 'ideals' 'congeal over time'³³ to serve a view of the world where heterosexuality seems natural and men are always powerful (sexually and otherwise). Mismatching gender roles and sexed bodies (for example, in the case of the 'masculine' lesbian) can be a compelling and provocative way of showing how 'heterosexual gender roles' – and, by extension, 'compulsory heterosexuality'³⁴ – are illusions, not givens.³⁵

Butler has famously argued that gender performativity and gender trouble are both exemplified by drag performances and lesbian butch-femme roleplaying;³⁶ I suggest these are exemplified by some textual representations of the female detective. The female detective is not a new cultural figure,³⁷ nor is she always politically transgressive (a point I will return to later). Nevertheless, within some feminist fiction the female detective engages in what Butler would describe as 'gender trouble'. Within this fiction, the female detective must 'inhabit the hard-boiled form and parody it at the same time'.³⁸ This figure debunks the idea that the detective is always male. As Glenwood Irons points out, some female detectives also debunk the assumption that the detective must adhere to a model of unreconstructed masculinity. Irons supports her point by considering Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski novels. In these novels, Warshawski 'takes in and works with a young girl whose father has been murdered', and 'enjoys the help of (mostly) female friends'.³⁹ Compare this with the many male detectives who are depicted as 'loners' who protect *their own* interests.⁴⁰

The above remarks have relevance to my reading of *The First Stone*. In this text, I suggest that there are moments in which Garner is (to some degree) a troubling figure, and not simply due to her controversial politics. She is a woman *and* a feminist who

³¹Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p.313.

³²ibid.

³³ibid, p.45.

³⁴The term 'compulsory heterosexuality' was coined by Adrienne Rich in her essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in Ann Snitow (ed.), *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Virago, London, 1984, pp.212- 241.

³⁵In writing this, I would warn against reading Butler's model of 'gender performativity' as simply involving women wearing 'male' clothing. Butler herself cautions against this kind of simplistic reading in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p.x.

³⁶Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp.186-189.

³⁷See Lucy Sussex, *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2010.

³⁸Anna Wilson, 'Death and the Mainstream: Lesbian Detective Fiction and the Killing of the Coming-Out Story', *Feminist Studies*, 22, 2, 1996, pp.254-255.

³⁹Irons, pp.xii-xv.

⁴⁰ibid.

takes on a detective-type role. She has found a mystery and she wants to solve it. In trying to solve this mystery, Detective Garner moves through a world of courtrooms and legal proceedings which she discovers to be masculine and anti-feminist. Perhaps as a result of this pervasive masculinity, she displays 'flashes of empathy' for the complainants.⁴¹ For example, Garner cites the example of the QC in the County Court who asks Stewart why she did not simply 'slap' the Master when he gave her unwanted sexual attention.⁴² Garner responds by angrily noting that this is a question that 'every woman in the room could answer'.⁴³

A key source of narrative tension in the text concerns Garner's efforts to interrogate Rosen and Stewart. The author pursues these complaints with all the relentlessness that the detectives in Marc Behm's novel *The Eye of the Beholder* (1980) and Bob Rafelson's film *Black Widow* (1987) pursued the female objects of their desire.⁴⁴ Garner writes letters to Rosen and Stewart, requesting a moment of their time. Her pursuit continues even after she is sternly warned by the complainants' solicitor and one of their supporters that the harassment episode 'is not being played out for the benefit of (Garner's) finer feelings'.⁴⁵

I argue that Garner's powerful desire to interview the complainants can be read in a distinctly queer light, particularly after reading her descriptions of one complainant's perceived sexual appeal. I want now to look closely at this reading, as it momentarily disrupts the heterosexism which (as I will soon argue) permeates *The First Stone*. Of Rosen, Garner asks rhetorically:

Can a young woman really expect to go through life without ever having to take responsibility? Has a girl like Elizabeth Rosen even the faintest idea what a powerful anima figure she is to the men she encounters in her life? She told the court that Dr Shepherd had got down on his knees before her. Which of them does the word *humiliated* apply to here?⁴⁶

Garner's impression of Rosen's sexual appeal becomes more explicit when she describes a photograph of the young woman that was taken on the night of the Valedictory Dinner. Garner's description of this photograph bears quoting at length:

(Rosen) is wearing a dark, strapless evening dress, out of which the double mass of her splendid bosom – the only possible word for it – is bursting. Her face and shoulders are tanned, her eyes are glowing, her dark-lipped, enormous mouth is split wide in a frank grin, showing perfect teeth. Her face is so dazzling that her hair, worn up and back

⁴¹Davis, p.80.

⁴²Garner, *The First Stone*, p.27.

⁴³ibid.

⁴⁴*Black Widow* is essentially a loose cinematic adaptation of *Eye of the Beholder*, albeit with gender differences. In Behm's novel, a male private eye follows and becomes obsessed with a mysterious woman who seduces and murders wealthy men. In Rafelson's film, both detective and villain are women. *Black Widow* is ostensibly a 'mainstream, heterosexual' movie, but – as with *The First Stone* – it lends itself to a 'queer' reading. See Valerie Traub, 'The Ambiguities of "Lesbian" Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)articulations of *Black Widow*', in Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (eds), *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995, pp.115-136.

⁴⁵Garner, *The First Stone*, pp.60 & 70.

⁴⁶ibid, p.89; emphasis Garner's.

except for one free curl over her right eye, is only a shadow. It is impossible not to be moved by her daring beauty. She is a woman in the full glory of her youth, as joyful as a goddess, elated by her own careless authority and power.⁴⁷

According to Garner, the 'sight of this photo administers a jolt to men and women alike'.⁴⁸ When gazing at this shot, 'women sigh' and 'men make lewd remarks'.⁴⁹

The above description of Rosen could have been lifted from a 1940s noir movie. Recall the first appearance of the femme fatale in the films *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). As described by Garner, the Rosen of this photograph (which was taken on the same night that she was allegedly harassed by Shepherd) absolutely connotes what film theorist Laura Mulvey famously called 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.⁵⁰ Rosen becomes a source of erotic 'spectacle', but this erotic spectacle is not being played out only for a heterosexual male gaze.

Like all detectives, Garner seeks important information from the complainants. This aspect of *The First Stone* is, I suggest, particularly crucial to a queer reading of the text. Garner wants to find out what 'really' happened at that October 1991 party, and why the young women went to the police, but is that all? Could the complainants hold some knowledge that may be useful to Garner herself – indeed, some knowledge *about* Garner herself? As Anna Wilson points out, the lesbian detective faces two major discoveries: the criminal's identity and also the discovery of her own 'hidden sexual identity'.⁵¹

Yet unlike the avowedly 'lesbian' detective fiction texts which Wilson analyses, I argue that *The First Stone* is sexually ambiguous. The ambiguity is in keeping with queer theory's tendency to avoid representing desire according to the standard sexual categories. The erstwhile heterosexually-identified Garner never discovers a hidden 'lesbian' identity. Nor does she ever get to interrogate the complainants. These women remain silent, both within and outside Garner's text. Their 'real' names were not used in either *The First Stone* or the media coverage surrounding their allegations, and these young women were not photographed for the press. As Garner acknowledges, Australian 'law forbids the identification of the complainants in cases of alleged indecent assault'.⁵² Significantly for my analysis, a sense of mysteriousness has been a distinguishing feature of the femme fatale. One is also reminded of the cinematic female protagonist theorised by lesbian studies scholars Terry Castle and Patricia White.⁵³ This

⁴⁷ibid, p.59.

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹ibid.

⁵⁰Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, p.19.

⁵¹Wilson, p.257.

⁵²Garner, *The First Stone*, unpaginated. See also Jenna Mead, 'The Case of the Missing Body: The 'Ormond College' Case and the Media' in Adrian Howe (ed.), *Sexed Crime in the News*, The Federation Press, New South Wales, 1998, p.82. Mead argues that the complainants were able to resist being portrayed by the media as victims because 'there was no 'body' available to be represented in the print media – no names, no descriptions, no photographs.' Mead does not deny the hostility that these women were subject to by sections of the media, as well as by Garner herself.

⁵³Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993; Patricia White, *UnInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999. Castle

is the woman who occupies the margins of the narrative, alluring and enigmatic, her sexuality a mystery to those around her. Rosen and Stewart will not reveal themselves or their 'secrets' to anyone – even another woman.

The Neoliberal Feminist Detective

I have now demonstrated that *The First Stone* is amenable to a queer reading. So far, so good. But so what? Does identifying gender role-playing and queerness in Garner's book mean that it is not reactionary? I suggest that this text mobilises suggestions of queerness and gender trouble while *also* having a deeply reactionary side. In *The First Stone*, Garner can certainly be read as a detective figure, and a sexual ambiguity certainly underscores her interest in Ormond complainants. Overall, though, I would suggest that Detective Garner is not politically subversive in the way that Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski is, or the sapphic sleuths theorised by Anna Wilson are. Rather, Garner is a feminist detective who is ultimately best suited to a neoliberal era.

The economic, political and cultural phenomenon known as 'neoliberalism' has its ideological genesis as far back as the late 1930s.⁵⁴ However, neoliberalism really gained force during the 1980s and 1990s, and has continued into the twenty-first century. In Australia, neoliberalism first became evident in several of the economic policies and initiatives issued by the Bob Hawke/Paul Keating Labor government (1983 to 1996).⁵⁵ The influence of neoliberalism on Australian political culture became even more pronounced during the John Howard-led Liberal Party's eleven years (1996-2007) in Federal Government. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is based around the assumption that

"the market", when free from state imposed constraints, (is) the most efficient, and most moral, way of producing and distributing most goods and services in society – whether they be consumer items or public goods such as education and healthcare ...⁵⁶

and White focus largely on classical Hollywood cinema. This was a cinema in which representations of 'heterosexualised genders' (to use Butler's term) were prevalent, and strict censorship laws attempted to banish filmic representations of homosexuality. These attempts at censorship were, as Castle and White persuasively argue, ultimately unsuccessful.

⁵⁴Kean Birch and Vlad Mykhnenko, 'Introduction: A World Turned Right Way Up', in Kean Birch and Vlad Mykhnenko (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism: The Collapse of an Economic Order?*, Zed Books, London and New York, 2010, pp.2-5. Birch and Mykhnenko provide a history of the neoliberal agenda. And see also Michael Charles Howard and John Edward King, *The Rise of Neoliberalism in Advanced Capitalist Economies: A Materialist Analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2008; Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

⁵⁵Damian Cahill, 'The radical neoliberal movement and its impact upon Australian politics,' paper presented at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, 29 September -1 October 2004, viewed 10 August 2011, http://www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/docs_papers/Aust%20Pol/cahill.pdf accessed 16 August 2011. Hawke was Prime Minister of Australia between March 1983 and December 1991. He was succeeded by Keating, who had previously been Federal Treasurer in Hawke's government. Keating held the role of Prime Minister until being voted out in the Federal Election held in March 1996.

⁵⁶ibid.

Neoliberals have argued for 'a utopian mode of capitalism in which the state acts as a night-watchman and individuals realise their liberty through voluntary market exchanges'.⁵⁷ According to this logic, the efforts and achievements of 'individuals' are more significant and worthwhile than those of 'groups' or – more broadly – 'society'. As Britain's then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, famously declared in 1987: 'and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.'⁵⁸

Thatcher's reference to 'individual men and women ... and families' suggests how, in the neoliberal era, 'individualism' and 'the family' are closely intertwined, at least on a symbolic level. The endorsement of 'traditional' family values by conservatives in Australia, Britain and the United States, amongst other countries, is a second key feature of neoliberalism. The 'traditional' family here is the heterosexual nuclear family unit, with children, a mother and a father. This traditional family is also patriarchal: the father is still the 'head' of the family, still the one who knows best.⁵⁹ Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe make this point when describing how the concept of 'family values' was deployed politically during John Howard's time as Prime Minister (Howard was elected to this position a year after *The First Stone's* publication). Boucher and Sharpe argue that 'family values' has not referred to 'valuing family life'⁶⁰ so much as it has referred to a 'renewed deference to paternal authority'.⁶¹

A third key feature of neoliberalism is a denial (both conscious and unconscious) of 'difference' and social inequality. The Australian cultural theorist Jon Stratton argues that, in a neoliberal era, 'state membership is consequent upon the denial of any attribute that could be understood in terms of group membership from gender, race, sexuality, disability, through to union membership ...'⁶² This denial is premised on the assumption that 'identifying groups, and given (sic) group members particularised treatment depending on their circumstances within the state, would cause a malformation in the governing free market.'⁶³ These groups would include women, gays and lesbians. The 'particularised treatment' that Stratton mentions would also (according to this line of thought) reinforce the perceived oppression of these groups.

One example of the influence that neoliberalism has had upon both feminism and popular culture is what Sally R. Munt refers to as 'liberal feminist crime fiction'. Munt applies this label to a selection of texts published (mostly in Britain and North America) during the 1980s, the very decade in which neoliberalism was gaining ascendance.⁶⁴ Munt contends that the key protagonist of 'liberal feminist crime fiction' is

⁵⁷ibid.

⁵⁸Jon Stratton, 'The Murderous State: The Naturalisation of Violence and Exclusion in the Films of Neoliberal Australia', *Cultural Studies Review*, 15.1, 2009, p.14. Individualism is not entirely odious, to the extent that it encompasses such values as 'individual responsibility' and 'self-development'. See Albert W. Musschenga, 'Introduction', in Albert W. Musschenga and Anton van Harskamp (eds), *The Many Faces of Individualism*, Peeters, Paris and Virginia, 2001, pp.9-10. I am critical of the excesses of individualism.

These include judging the world solely or frequently on the basis of one's own experiences and opinions.

⁵⁹Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, *The Times Will Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, New South Wales, 2008, p.200.

⁶⁰ibid, p.202.

⁶¹ibid, p.203.

⁶²Stratton, p.22.

⁶³ibid.

⁶⁴Neoliberalism has shaped (some) contemporary feminisms in complex and far-reaching ways. See Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*, Paradigm Publishers, Colorado, 2009; Malini Johar Schueller, 'Cross-cultural

'equal to the male role but still retains femininity – strong within her gender role'.⁶⁵ Munt argues that the liberal feminist detective 'resolves three unstable forms close to the liberal feminist heart – the individual, the family and the state'.⁶⁶ What Munt means here is, the liberal feminist detective tries to resolve the contradiction of being a strong and independent feminist woman who embraces (or is at least uncritical of) the above institutions.

In *The First Stone*, Garner – like the classic hardboiled male detective, as well as the 'liberal feminist detective' theorised by Munt – values 'the individual'. She is very much 'on her own' in this book: we hear more about those who are supposedly trying to impede her investigation (namely the supporters of the Ormond complainants) than we do about her friends or allies. When we do hear about the complainants' supporters, they are portrayed as a monolithic feminist army who overemphasise female subjugation: witness the use of terms such as the 'politically correct gang' to describe these women. Clearly, in Garner's text, women who appear to work collectively or in a group – as opposed to those who labour on their own – are seen as threatening. In *The First Stone*, women who identify instances of gender inequality are apparently exaggerating the extent of this inequality.

A powerful sense of individualism is further evident in Garner's attempts to understand Rosen and Stewart's distress following their alleged harassment. These attempts are shaped almost exclusively by her own experiences and emotions. For example, the author describes an episode from her teenage years, in which (while travelling on a train) she allowed a drunken male passenger to kiss her. Garner acknowledges that she permitted this kiss 'out of embarrassment, or politeness, or passivity, or lack of a clear sense of what I wanted.'⁶⁷ The author never identifies her fellow passenger's behaviour as being in any way problematic. Importantly for my argument, Garner does not suggest that her own lack of distress at these unwanted sexual advances may not represent other women's responses to unwanted sexual advances. Nor does she hint at what this male passenger's behaviour might say about relations (sexual and otherwise) between men and women.

In comparison, I suggest that it is puzzling that Garner's investigation is not shaped by the 'empathy' she occasionally feels for the complainants, for example, when Stewart is asked by the QC why she did not simply 'slap' Shepherd. Garner also seems to distance herself from the desire that is unmistakable in her description of Rosen's photograph. The author never investigates what her desire could mean, or (relatedly) why the complainants – and particularly Rosen – fascinate her to the point where she just *has* to speak with them, even after being denied the opportunity to do so on several occasions.

Rather, I contend that the question of what Rosen and Stewart might represent to Garner – what kind of knowledge these women might provide the author about herself – remains unanswered. This question becomes just too difficult (or too confronting) for Detective Garner. The author becomes more interested in discussing desire and sexual attraction in relation to the concept of 'eros'. Garner approvingly quotes 'a laughing Catholic mother in her early fifties' as saying that women initiate 'eros' by 'flirting' with

Identification, Neoliberal Feminism, and Afghan Women', *Genders OnLine Journal*, 53, 2011, viewed 24 August 2011, http://www.genders.org/g53/g53_schueller.html

⁶⁵Munt, p.33.

⁶⁶ibid, p.31.

⁶⁷Garner, *The First Stone*, p.63.

men.⁶⁸ According to Garner, 'eros' is 'the spark that ignites and connects' men and women in a romantic and sexual sense.⁶⁹

In these remarks about 'eros', Garner frames desire as a somewhat individualistic emotion. Desire becomes a force that binds a man and a woman, and it is completely removed from the wider field of sexual politics. Here, Garner also attempts to normalise heterosexual desire. For all her musings about Rosen's spectacular beauty, there is never any suggestion that 'eros' might exist between two women (or two men). The author also seems to suggest that, if indeed Shepherd is guilty as charged, then it is only because he could not possibly resist such alluring young women.⁷⁰

Additionally, I suggest that Garner endorses the myth that women are responsible for the way they are treated sexually by men. The very question that supposedly motivated her investigation – why did the complainants go to the police? – becomes: how could these women not know they could incite male lust? Because surely, if they knew they could have such an effect, Rosen and Stewart would not have bothered to seek protection from the law. In true neoliberal style, the very real social inequalities that exist between men and women are rendered invisible.⁷¹

Furthermore, I argue that Garner's inability to understand why the complainants sought legal redress for their alleged harassment is yet more evidence of the text's individualism. For the detective/author, behavior that might be regarded (rightly or wrongly) as 'sexual harassment' should be addressed by the recipient/s of this abuse, and not be a matter for the state to intervene in via sexual harassment laws, police interrogations, court cases. As feminist academic Renate Klein put it, women readers of *The First Stone* are effectively being told that seeking legal redress for sexual harassment is 'not the right way' to respond to such harassment, and that 'they should try and cope with it as best they can on their own'.⁷²

That Garner identifies on a personal and political level with Shepherd is indisputable. Early in *The First Stone*, she quotes a letter she wrote to the Master in which she counts herself as one of the many 'women ... who step back in dismay from the kind

⁶⁸ibid, p.112.

⁶⁹ibid.

⁷⁰Davis, p.77. Davis explains that the complainants only went to the police 'after six months of informal negotiations in good faith' with Ormond were unsuccessful. The complainant referred to as 'Elizabeth Rosen' has described the immense institutional support that Shepherd/Gregory received after the allegations were initially made. This includes a glowing character reference on television by David Penington, who was at that point the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University. See 'XX', 'Sticks and Stones', in Jenna Mead (ed.), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*, Vintage, New South Wales, 1997, pp.49-62. Garner never mentions this institutional support; as I will soon argue, she paints Shepherd/Gregory as a victim.

⁷¹Amy Webster, 'The Re-conceptualisation of Domestic Violence Under the Howard Government Since 1996', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, 16, 2007, pp.57-68. Webster demonstrates how the Howard government's approach to domestic violence glossed over the fact that such violence is 'the broader oppression and inequality experienced by women in Australian society.' This approach, argues Webster, exemplifies the Howard government's 'fundamentally neoliberal' politics.

⁷²Cited in Taylor, *Mediating Australian Feminism*, p.206. For a historical overview of sexual harassment laws in Australia, see Gail Mason and Anna Chapman, *Defining Sexual Harassment: A History of the Commonwealth Legislation and its Critiques*, Working Paper No.27, Centre for Employment and Labour Relations Law, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2003.

of treatment you have received'.⁷³ This letter was sent before she had met Shepherd or had the opportunity to investigate the Ormond case. Garner's opinions about Shepherd do not change dramatically when she actually meets the man. Later in the text, Garner remarks that when she has 'spoken to Colin Shepherd I've been struck by the absence of anger in his demeanour or tone. He shows rather a kind of stunned fatigue, and sadness ...⁷⁴

The doubling of the male 'hero' and 'villain' is a key feature of detective and noir texts. I suggest that the significant difference in *The First Stone* is that we find a woman identifying with a man. Garner recognises that both herself and Shepherd are oppressed – or, more accurately, see themselves as being oppressed – by a pair of vindictive femme fatales and their equally shady crew of feminist supporters. These women are accusing Shepherd of sexual harassment, and are denying Garner an interview for her supposedly objective book. His pain is her pain, and vice versa.⁷⁵

In the above depiction of seduction and victimisation, Garner is 'performing' the role of a wounded 'male', but this particular gender performance is hardly radical or politically subversive. As Annamarie Jagose reminds us, 'empowerment is not what (gender) performativity promises'.⁷⁶ Nor is gender performativity always conducive with feminist politics. Garner's gender performance demonstrates how not having a male body does not preclude one from assuming a certain male/masculine gender role. We discover that even a feminist-identified woman can (at least on an unconscious level) assume the role of a man who is supposedly being pilloried by man-hating feminists.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Garner's accounts of the devastation which the harassment allegations caused Shepherd's immediate family and his Ormond 'family' are the most emotionally-wrenching moments in the book. I say 'unsurprisingly' for two reasons. Firstly, the destruction (threatened and actual) of the nuclear family is a key motif in detective and noir narratives. Witness *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *Gross Misconduct*,⁷⁷ in which the nuclear family unit is endangered by powerful and sexual women. Secondly, as I have mentioned, the valorisation of the traditional nuclear family model (and the 'deference to paternal authority' that is implicit within this model) has been a key feature of neoliberalism.

In *The First Stone*, Shepherd is repeatedly portrayed as a caring and loving man to his wife and children, as well as the wider Ormond community. He is a 'paternal figure', one who has everyone's best interests in heart, and particularly the best interests of women. Garner reports:

He appointed two female medical officers and a female librarian; and the two holders of the college's prestigious visiting Scott Fellowship during his Mastership were women ... Most ironic of all, in the light of later events, was his response when he discovered that Ormond had no policy on Equal Opportunity, and no 'grievance procedures' to advise him on how to correct this, he had set up an EO committee ...⁷⁸

⁷³Garner, *The First Stone*, p.16.

⁷⁴ibid, p. 79.

⁷⁵Taylor, 'Victims and Vixens'.

⁷⁶Jagose, p.89.

⁷⁷In *Gross Misconduct*, a handsome male academic has a brief and consensual fling with an attractive female student. The student subsequently accuses him of sexual abuse. Coincidentally, this movie was shot at Melbourne University around the time that the events which comprised the Ormond harassment case were unfolding. Davis, p.89.

⁷⁸Garner, *The First Stone*, p.51.

It seems that the man who only wanted to protect his wife and female colleagues had no idea that he would be punished by a group of feminists, some of whom lived at Ormond.

Shepherd's wife is quoted as saying that the harassment allegations have caused their family immense 'grief' and ensued that, as a result of these allegations, her husband 'won't have a pleasant end to his life'.⁷⁹ When Garner advises her that one of the complainants had recently been arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, the wife responds: '... if *she* was drinking because she was traumatised, I should be drunk! Our whole family should be strung up on a rope!'⁸⁰

Garner suggests that the allegations made by Rosen and Stewart stemmed (in part) from a desire to avenge what they wrongly considered to be ill-treatment at Shepherd's hands. This, too, is relevant to my overall argument. In a transcript of his interview with police, Shepherd is quoted as saying that Rosen's room at Ormond was found (by cleaners) to be 'in an absolutely disgusting state', and that he 'punished' her by temporarily relocating her to a 'very poor room'.⁸¹ Shepherd advises police that this incident put him 'on a bad footing' with Rosen.⁸² A former Ormond student is quoted as describing Stewart as an 'intellectual' who 'would stand up at Students' Club meetings and say, "you stupid men"'.⁸³

The figure of the 'vengeful woman'⁸⁴ is not a new one, as aficionados of detective and noir texts can attest. Witness the femme fatales in *Eye of the Beholder* and *Gross Misconduct*. These women have been shabbily treated by one man and, as a result, have developed a disdain for *all* men. Or perhaps (like Stewart) they have always had a misandrist bent. The femme fatales in these texts attempt to avenge their unhappy encounters with the opposite sex by victimising innocent and unsuspecting men. They ensnare these men by using their sexual allure and, of course, the power of 'eros'. As Stratton argues, the motif of revenge is well-suited to neoliberalism because it 'celebrates the perpetrator, the individual in a world without society'.⁸⁵ In *The First Stone*, Garner does not dispute suggestions that the two women were vengeful, but she never really entertains the suggestion that their alleged treatment at Shepherd's hands may be related to a broader inequality between the sexes. Such a suggestion could only be advanced by 'puritan feminists'.

I have argued that reading *The First Stone* as a detective narrative brings to the fore aspects of the text that might be regarded as 'queer'. These aspects have never been explored in the many existing commentaries on Garner's book, and yet they enable a truly nuanced understanding of this text's complex and controversial sexual politics. I have suggested that Garner troubles gender and sexual identities to some extent by performing the role of 'detective' and portraying the Ormond complainants as alluring femme fatales. Garner ostensibly pursues these women in order to find out why they reported their alleged harassment to the police, but the reader wonders whether the complainants are also the bearers of some secret (sexual) knowledge for the author-turned-gumshoe. As I have also argued, though, the desire that Garner feels for the

⁷⁹ibid, p.141.

⁸⁰ibid; emphasis Garner's.

⁸¹ibid, p.5.

⁸²ibid.

⁸³ibid, pp.133-134; emphasis hers.

⁸⁴The term 'vengeful woman' is used by feminist historian Marilyn Lake in 'Response to *The First Stone*' *Australian Book Review*, 174, 1995, pp.26-27. See also Taylor, 'Victims and Vixens'.

⁸⁵Stratton, p.19. Stratton makes this observation during an analysis of the Australian comedy-noir *Suburban Mayhem* (2006), in which a working-class femme fatale reaps a substantial financial reward by killing her father and blaming the murder on her brother.

complainants (particularly the one she names 'Elizabeth Rosen') is overshadowed by a number of factors. These include her defence of Shepherd and his family, a disdain for supposedly victim-fixated feminists, and the fact that her 'investigation' is inflected with individualism. In *The First Stone*, there is indeed a 'female dick', but she turns out to be more suited to neoliberalism than to sexual subversion.