'More Intimate Than Violence': Sexual Violation in Sarah Dunant's *Transgressions*

The following *Daily Mail* headline captures the crux of the controversy surrounding Sarah Dunant's 1997 thriller *Transgressions*: 'How can an intelligent, famous feminist write a book in which a rape victim is sexually aroused by her brutal ordeal?'[1] The unspeakable had occurred, as the outraged reviewer went on to tell potential readers. Dunant, a self-identified feminist, had written a novel including one of the oldest pornographic scenarios in the book: a rape scene in which a woman ends up enjoying the experience. Though few reviewers would join the *Mail* in its condemnation of *Transgressions* for being 'as explicitly erotic and exploitative of women as strip joints, sex shops and the worst hard-core porn',[2] a taboo did, in fact, appear to have been broken. As the *Guardian*'s reviewer, Angela Neustatter, asked: 'Is accusing *Transgressions* of being exploitative pornography missing the point, or has the writer got it right this time in suggesting that Dunant, 46, has abandoned her feminist principles and gone sleazy?'[3]

This pointed reference to Dunant's age situates the media response to *Transgressions* within a broader public presentation of the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. By all accounts, Dunant is a rather unlikely candidate for a literary sex scandal. Best known in Britain for her stint as a television presenter on the BBC arts programme, *The Late Show*, Dunant has since

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1 Cited in Sarah Dunant, 'Rape: My Side of the Story', *Observer*, 1 June 1997.

2 Ibid.

3 Angela Neustatter, 'Fear and Loathing: A Rape Victim Who Seduces Her Attacker? What can Sarah Dunant have been thinking of when she included *that* scene in her new novel?', *Guardian*, 27 May 1997.

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become recognized for a series of well-received feminist detective novels. It was the apparently scandalous incongruity between the alleged pornographic subject matter of the novel and the second-wave feminist politics of its author that turned *Transgressions* into a media sensation before it hit the shelves. As one commentator summed up the controversy: 'Nothing gives quite the same pleasure as a story about a feminist stepping out of line.'[4]

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Dunant dismissed the charge of pornography as outrageous: 'It genuinely never occurred to me that anyone would call me exploitative. I was so clear that this was a major fictional attempt to take exploitation by the scruff of the neck and shake it.' For Dunant, reviewers were reading something into her novel that simply was not there. Nowhere, she insisted, did she depict a woman who enjoys getting raped. 'For a second when she is seducing the man,' Dunant explains, 'she recognises that she has actually got control and she experiences a *frisson* of power. We know there is a connection between power and arousal, and I think that is the point, rather than that she actually gets turned on.'[5] Leaving aside for the moment the distinction Dunant makes here between sexual arousal and sexual pleasure, it is worth pointing out that, despite media pronouncements to the contrary, it is by no means certain that *Transgressions* does depict female sexual pleasure in male sexual violence.

At the centre of the debate over the feminist status of *Transgressions* lies a question about the contract between the feminist writer and her female readers. After considering Dunant's argument that her novel challenges fictional stereotypes of women as passive victims, Neustatter, writing for the Women's Page of the *Guardian*, asked: 'This is all very well, but couldn't it be deeply upsetting to a woman who has been raped and felt paralysed with fear, unable to do anything but exist, to see fiction suggesting she could have done better if she had been up to a quick seduction?'[6] By introducing this figure of the raped woman as potential reader of the text, Neustatter is articulating the demand that feminism—in literature, as in life—must not risk upsetting a victimized woman. The underlying concern is that female readers who come to the novel expecting a feminist representation of rape may be sorely disappointed—if not deeply traumatized—by what they find. Though what a feminist representation of rape might look like is certainly open to debate, the assumption here is that it is one that is inextricably connected to the 'real' of women's lives.

But is there, as the dispute over *Transgressions* implies, such a thing as a 'feminist representation' of rape, a specific image we can readily identify? If we turn to the favourable reviews of the novel, we find critics insisting that *Transgressions* and its representation of rape *is* 'feminist', though what that means exactly remains unclear. Acknowledging that the novel 'provoked

4 Harvey Porlock, 'Sarah Dunant's novel has got a lot of knickers in a twist', *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1997.

5 Neustatter.

6 Ibid.

fierce debate about female response—physical and psychological—during a sexual attack', Joan Smith dismisses the charge of pornography on the following grounds: 'I do not think many women readers will be in much doubt about the legitimacy of the course of action Elizabeth embarks on to save her life, nor the label the act deserves.'[7] Leaving aside the ambiguity of this statement (what label, one wonders, *does* the act deserve?) it begs the question: If women readers will not be in much doubt about the legitimacy of Elizabeth's course of action, is the implication, then, that male readers will be? And if so, what does this tell us about the classification of *Transgressions* as 'feminist'?

By raising these questions, I do not mean to suggest that it is important, or even possible, to come up with a definitive feminist representation of rape. What is most interesting about this dispute is not the question of whether *Transgressions* is pornographic (indeed, as several commentators noted, the novel hardly qualifies as the 'worst hard-core porn'), but, rather, the claim that is being made for literature in the scandal surrounding the novel's fictionalizing of sexual violence. For, what is being argued over—in the debate over the novel's so-called 'rape scene'—is the more general question of how we should think about fiction or, more specifically, the relationship between fiction and sexual violence. Is it possible to fictionalize rape? Do feminists want to preserve literature as a space where something can happen that does not usually happen?

In its explicit engagement with these questions, *Transgressions*, along with the responses it provoked, invites us to enquire into the role that rape plays in the establishment of feminist fiction. In her defence of *Transgressions*, Dunant suggests that she uses fiction to empower her female heroine: 'I wanted to see what it felt like to give a woman a fair chance in a sexually aggressive encounter—one not of her own making, but one in which she triumphs, albeit briefly. She decides she will do whatever it takes not to be a victim.'[8] If, as I have suggested, part of the scandal of *Transgressions* is that it is somehow seen to be inadequate to the demands of the 'real', this response asks us to remember that we are dealing with fiction, not real life.[9]

At the extreme end of the attempt to characterize *Transgressions* as a feminist text is the argument that it serves an educative purpose for its readership. As one (male) reader, Henry MacGregor, suggested, in a letter to the *Sunday Times*:

> Dunant has tried to envisage how a woman might gain some control back in her life when such a horrific event takes place. The unfair treatment that Dunant has met at the hands of some critics, who have accused her of making her female character enjoy a rape scene, misunderstands what she is trying to do. There is a huge difference between taking control when your life is at risk and seeking enjoyment from such frightening

7 Joan Smith, 'A Woman's Right to Choose', *Sunday Times*, 8 June 1997.

8 Dunant, 'Rape'.

9 As Elizabeth Cowie (1992:142) argues, it is precisely because rape represents the extreme of women's disempowerment in the 'real world' that it can be used—in fiction—to represent a fantasy of women's empowerment.

> sexual attacks. This is an instance of fiction helping us to come to terms with fearful situations in real life (15 June 1997).

There is arguably something almost desperate about the attempt to characterize *Transgressions* in this way. It is as if the only way to answer the charge that Dunant makes her female character enjoy a rape scene is to cast the novel as a user's manual for how to deal with real-life rape situations. Where the novel's critics worry that actual female victims might not be able to live up to the seductive ways of Dunant's fictional heroine, the novel's proponents argue that, in fact, the rape scene might help women to cope with real-life trauma. Both views posit a notion of fiction 'predicated on the idea that stories are supposed to function as instruction manuals' (Gaitskill 1994:43).

In her introduction to a collection of stories on the art of seduction, Jenny Newman suggests that 'if there is any relationship at all between literature and life, the history of fictional seduction is bound to throw the nature of our sexual politics into sharp relief' (1988:ix). This observation is followed by another: 'Women writers have always been slower than men to look on the bright side of seduction, perhaps because as members of the second sex they are more aware of its dangers' (xviii). It is in terms of the question about how to negotiate the dangerous space between 'courtship' and 'rape', between 'pleasure' and 'danger', that we can read *Transgressions* and its representation of seduction. What Dunant is doing with male sexuality in *Transgressions* is at least as interesting—and perhaps as scandalous—as what she is doing with female sexuality. That the issue of male sexuality is the blind spot in the dispute over the novel attests to the continuing reluctance to read for anything other than male brutality and female victimization, what Carol Clover refers to as 'our ultimate gender story' (1992:227).

Redistributing Genders

Stripped to its essentials, the plot of *Transgressions* can be summarized as follows: a woman finds herself in a life-threatening situation. Refusing to become a victim she manages to empower herself within a sexually violent scenario. In the aftermath of the event, she must cope with the 'physical, emotional and sexual ramifications of violence'.[10] Ultimately, she emerges bruised but triumphant.

With certain variations, this narrative scenario occurs repeatedly in feminist crime thrillers. More than simply a backdrop to women's crime narratives, scenes of rape and sexual victimization articulate a fundamental conflict between the role of the female heroine as an investigator and as a

10 Sarah Dunant, 'Rewriting the Detectives', *Guardian*, 29 June 1993.

victim of crime. As a text in which sexual violence is intimately bound up with the attempt to refigure the meanings of the thriller, *Transgressions* is exemplary of this significant genre of women's writing, in which the primary concern is to find a way out of what Ruby Rich has called 'one of the great feminist debates—women-as-agent versus women-as-victim' (1986:556).

As the novel begins, Elizabeth Skvorecky, a self-described 'single white female', has just received instructions to translate a violent, hard-boiled Czech thriller into English.[11] The narrative of *Transgressions* is interrupted by several extracts from this thriller, which forms a separate, but related text: a thriller-within-a-thriller. The first-person narrative tells the story of Elizabeth's life as she attempts to recover from the end of a long relationship; the thriller, told in the third person, narrates the adventures of American cop Jake Biderman, on assignment in Prague to break a drugs ring when his ex-wife Mirka is kidnapped by drug barons. The novel is structured so that the two different worlds—Elizabeth's and the pulp thriller's—run alongside each other. As the narrative progresses, the two worlds become more and more intertwined, gradually bleeding into one another to such an extent that it is at times difficult to tell which 'text' the reader is in.

Elizabeth's running commentary on the conventions of the male thriller represents the novel's attempt to use fiction as a means of critiquing the cultural fixation with images of sexual violence. From the start, it is clear that Elizabeth does not approve of the story she is translating:

> As a story the whole thing was shot through with a careless misogyny. All acceptable within the genre, but none the less distasteful for that. How will I feel, she had thought when she decided to take it on, sitting at night in an empty house translating scenes of women being threatened and abused by men who enjoy their pain rather than their sexuality? Rape, fear, torture—it was so common nowadays that it was almost a form of punctuation for a certain kind of novel (26).

As the prototypical feminist reader who calls attention to the misogyny of male-authored texts, Elizabeth fits the description of what Judith Fetterley first defined in 'the resisting reader': a woman who challenges a tradition of male writing that excludes her (Fetterley 1978). Given the emphasis placed on the female reader in the debate over the novel, it seems significant to note that Dunant's text has the model of its own reception built into itself. At almost every juncture of the narrative, we have an image of Elizabeth reading the text back to herself, dissecting words and images for the gender bias they are invariably seen to yield up.

Though I would avoid simply conflating Elizabeth with Sarah Dunant, there is an interesting comparison to be made between the role of the translator and the role of the female crime-writer. In *Murder by the Book?*

11 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Dunant 1997.

Feminism and the Crime Novel, Sally Munt argues that the parodic nature of the detective format is readily appropriated by a feminist practice seeking to destabilize 'dominant myths of gender and sexuality' (1994:206). This idea of parody as undermining dominant codes and myths of gender, turning established representations of sexuality into something less familiar, links up with a definition of translation: to be transformed or converted into. By including excerpts from a male thriller, and having her female heroine translate, and dissect, its workings, Dunant is inflecting the re-assembling and rewriting of convention that is an integral part of the genre of feminist detective/thriller writing.

Disgusted by the sadistic treatment of female victims in the male-authored thriller, Elizabeth complains that the least the author could have done was 'to fight fantasy with fantasy' (105). In the fantasy Elizabeth imagines, the female victim of a psychopath would be turned into 'a kind of avenging angel for women in trouble, swooping down on violent men and snapping their bodies between their dog-like teeth' (105). This notion of fighting fantasy with fantasy comes up again in the text, when Elizabeth imagines how she would exact her 'own revenge like the avenging angels' of her fantasies (153). It is in the next chapter that fantasy becomes 'reality' when Elizabeth awakes to find that this time 'the nightmare was real' (156).

Awaking to find a male intruder sitting on the edge of her bed, Elizabeth's first thought is that she is going to die. Her second thought is to wonder how she can survive the attack. Dismissing the advice typically given to rape victims—'If you can't fight it, lie back and let it happen'—as 'bullshit', Elizabeth also dispenses with the idea of physical resistance: 'If she resisted he would hit her. He could do it now if he wanted; smash in the side of her head with his hammer, then fuck her in a pool of blood' (162). As minutes pass, and the intruder makes no move to hurt her, Elizabeth 'instinctively' realizes that his death threat ('You . . . do anything funny and I'll kill you') is really an expression of his underlying 'fear and longing' (159). With its connotations of mindlessness and brute natural impulse, 'instinct' is arguably one of the primary means by which the text attempts to qualify Elizabeth's decision to seduce the intruder: 'She was working on instinct now, moving to a place where reason couldn't reach. Survival versus fear' (163).

Considering the fuss surrounding the scene that follows, the casual reader of the controversy might be forgiven for expecting, if not necessarily the 'worst hard-core porn' then, at the very least, a rather titillating read. Suffice it to say, the reader will be sorely disappointed.[12] As the novel describes it: 'The taste of him repulsed her, the saliva and the smell making her want to puke. She punched away the thought and sucked his tongue back into her' (166). Overcoming her urge to 'puke', Elizabeth carries on with the grim business of seduction, disarming her assailant of his weapon and gradually 'teasing' his penis into erection.

12 As reviewer Vicky Hutchings notes: 'Awash with bodily secretions of one kind or another, the seduction is not a pretty read' ('If you find slugs too arousing, read this', *New Statesman*, 11 July 1997).

One of the most striking, and strangely unremarked upon, aspects of this scene is its depiction of masculinity. For if, following Dunant's own commentary, we read this scene as a fictional attempt to show a woman as something other than a victim to the event of male violence, the question becomes: what has to happen to male sexuality in order to turn rape into seduction? What's interesting is that in order to effect this transformation the text has to produce an utterly emasculated version of male sexuality. On the feminization of the stalker, the text could not be more blatant. Slipping her fingers into his mouth, Elizabeth feels 'the moistness' of the 'fleshy bit inside' (164). The 'flesh was alive with muscle, rough and quivering, almost like the feel of her own vagina. It sent a shudder through her and she had to steel herself not to pull out. No time for the faint-hearted now' (164). His 'skin was surprisingly soft, almost like a girl's, soft and wet with sweat. She felt a sudden shaft of power' (166). It is as if the categories of masculinity and femininity are being redistributed here: as the stalker becomes like a 'girl', Elizabeth gains the potency of masculinity with her 'shaft of power'.

During the seduction scene, Elizabeth finds a certain 'pleasure in her own control' (166). But along with this pleasure comes the controversial sexual arousal of the media reports: 'His fingers found her nipples, swollen from the cold and the fear and a sudden, muddied, confused kind of desire' (167). Again, this muddied desire is presented as an instinctual, indeed involuntary, reaction. What follows next is the text's most direct depiction of the woman's sexual arousal: 'To her amazement she realised she was wet. The discovery sent its own shock wave through the pit of her stomach' (168). Sexual arousal certainly, but sexual pleasure? It is telling that in the reviews of the novel the sexual arousal described in the above passage is simply conflated with the 'pleasure' of a few pages before. To refer to Dunant's commentary on the scene: 'We know there is a connection between power and arousal, and I think that is the point rather than that she actually gets turned on.'[13] This idea of desire without pleasure, arousal without enjoyment, is central to the text's vision of women's agency in scenes of sexual danger.[14]

The seduction scene ends with the stalker's (notably not Elizabeth's) climax. Determined to get on with the rest of her life, Elizabeth decides not to phone the police, knowing that 'in some unfathomable way what had passed between them was more intimate than violence, and she would never be able to tell it' (172). Something more, and something different, than the scene of male violence and female sexual subordination, 'more intimate than violence' represents the novel's attempt to complicate a well-known narrative of male sadism and female victimization. The question is: does it work? Is *Transgressions* transgressive?

Susan Suleiman has noted how 'the experience of transgression is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it

13 Cited in Neustatter.

14 See *Fatlands*, Dunant's 1993 crime novel featuring private eye Hannah Wolfe, for an early working through of the issues that occupy centre-stage in *Transgressions*.

violates; indeed, it is precisely by and through its transgression that the force of a prohibition becomes fully realized' (1986:75). By this account, transgression is about exceeding the bounds of 'rational, everyday behaviour', the accepted modes of being. 'The characteristic feeling accompanying transgression', Suleiman writes, 'is one of intense pleasure (at the exceeding of boundaries) *and* of intense anguish (at the full realization of the force of those boundaries)' (75).

In *Transgressions*, the fleeting pleasure Dunant's heroine experiences as a result of her 'transgression' is followed by remorse and anguish. More interesting, perhaps, is the question of how Dunant copes with her transgression as a feminist author. For while the novel's critics may accuse Dunant of betraying her feminist principles in writing *Transgressions*, Dunant is arguably nowhere more aware of those principles than in her depiction of seduction. To put this in Suleiman's terms, Dunant's depiction of seduction is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates: namely, the feminist taboo on rape fantasy.

Indeed, the latter half of the novel can be read as an anxious attempt to reassert the very series of oppositions it has been attempting to undermine: between rape and seduction, between woman as victim and man as aggressor. The text veers between wanting to complicate the implications of the seduction scene and wanting to contain them. On the one hand, any equivocation or ambivalence the seduction scene may have suggested is tempered by the retrospective rewriting of the seduction as a 'rape': evoking the memory of her dead mother, Elizabeth tells herself that 'maybe what she really needed was a pair of arms to hold her and let her cry it out. Forget it, Elizabeth. She's dead and you're raped' (177). But at other moments the novel returns to the implications of the woman's sexual arousal, entertaining the possibility that a woman might find pleasure *in* danger: 'Sex. Everyone's dark secret . . . She could do what she liked. With whom she liked. So what was it she wanted to do? Was this about the power of powerlessness?' (261). Yet the novel does not really pursue the idea of a sadomasochistic sexuality. Instead, in passages that portray Elizabeth attempting to understand the 'pain' beneath the violence of her stalker/rapist, the novel comes dangerously close to endorsing what Robin Morgan referred to in 1980 as 'the Pity the Poor Rapist approach', a fiction that 'tells us we must be sorry for our attacker. He is sick, he cannot help himself, he needs help' (1980:135). The text seems to need this fiction of the Poor Rapist in order to account for woman's complicity in the scene of sexual violence.

There is another fiction the text seems to require as well. In the second half of the novel the image of the Poor Rapist is transformed into a more unremittingly violent masculinity: the serial rapist/sex murderer, 'a figure darker than the darkness . . . no character, no feeling, just a cold madness intent on violence' (88). In *Transgressions*, the woman's bid for empowerment

requires—indeed demands—that these two forms of violent masculinity be played off against each other.[15]

As she is attempting to recover from her ordeal, Elizabeth comes on a newspaper report in the supermarket: 'HAMMER RAPIST STRIKES AGAIN'. The article tells of a series of sexual assaults on women in North London by 'The Holloway Hammer'. To her horror, Elizabeth learns that her stalker has other victims. Though this introduction of the serial killer serves a clear plot function—the rape and murder of these other women is what compels Elizabeth to turn herself into an avenger, going after her attacker—there is something unsettling about this return of sexual violence. For the novel seems to end up relying on the very syntax of violence it has been criticizing, in which the 'sexually assaulted, mutilated, even dismembered' female body becomes 'part of the grammar of the form' (Dunant 1993:28).

In the novel's contrived final pages, Elizabeth uses fiction to entrap her assailant, luring him to her house by providing more fodder for his fantasies. She sends him the final sex scene of the Czech thriller: *Jake and Mirka. Last scene, final draft.* In having Elizabeth meet up with her assailant again, Dunant is conforming to the dictates of genre: 'After all, it's . . . part of the myth that the hero gets to meet the bad guy again' (Dunant 1993:28). As in the seduction scene, Elizabeth's immediate fear is for her life: 'Please don't let me die' (328). Rape is presented as a clear alternative to murder. Unlike in the seduction scene, however, Elizabeth's attempts to comfort the intruder fail and he gives way to violence: 'This time there was no moisture to welcome him. This time it hurt. And not just in her cunt. Inside her head a voice was talking. Is this what you wanted? It was saying. Pleasure like this. You wrote it, babe, you better live it' (331–2). If, in order to effect seduction, Elizabeth had to acquire an imaginary penis (her 'shaft of power'), here her surrogate male member becomes a pair of scissors. Holding them up to defend herself, the stalker rams into them and is fatally stabbed.

In the novel's final plot twist, Elizabeth discovers that her assailant was a stalker and not a serial killer. It could well be argued that one of the more difficult aspects of *Transgressions* is the way in which the resolution of the plot appears to offer some sort of apologia for the activities of the solitary rapist. For there is a strange sense in which the novel brings back a pre-feminist notion of rape as an isolated incident between individuals. When the stalker reveals that he has been watching Elizabeth all night, she realizes he could not have been responsible for the murder of the woman that occurred some distance away. This also means that he could not have been responsible for the other rapes that were happening in the area. As he lies dying in Elizabeth's arms, she says: 'It was only me, wasn't it? That's what you meant about choosing me. You never did anything to anybody else, did you? It was always only me' (337). The novel returns to the idea that his violence was just a cover for his 'pain'. Just as she had initially blamed her ex-lover Tom for the

15 Far from being exclusive to *Transgressions*, this division of masculinity into two categories—the sadist and the serial killer—is commonplace in the emerging genre of feminist sex thrillers. It is the central plot twist, for example, in Susanna Moore's 1995 novel, *In the Cut*. By story's end, the heroine's inability to tell the difference between the good cop and the bad cop (the sadist and the serial killer) results in her gruesome death. It is also the central premise of Jenny Diski's *Nothing Natural* (1990), a novel that stages its exploration of sexual difference in relation to a felt tension between women's fantasies of rape and violation, and the impact of feminist consciousness-raising about women's victimization.

strange occurrences in her home, Elizabeth has again blamed the wrong man, erroneously thinking that her 'mad stalker' was a serial killer, when in fact there 'was only one scene to his crime, and only one victim' (340). The violence of the stalker, along with Elizabeth's complicity in that violence, is displaced on to the figure of the serial killer:

> Like many before him, the real Holloway Hammer had turned out to be an otherwise respectable fellow; a freelance car mechanic, married with two kids . . . He'd been playing with his kids when they got to him, setting up a Christmas model garage for his youngest boy, his wife in the kitchen peeling the sprouts for lunch. Just a regular sort of bloke (340).

The over-determined nature of this account of the serial killer as a 'regular bloke' suggests something of the symbolic weight he bears in the narrative as the representative other of violence, the figure that neatly ties up all the loose ends of the plot.

The Art of Translation

I want to consider another definition of 'translation': to renovate, make new from old. The question of how to rework or renovate the story of female victimization and male violence, 'our ultimate gender story', is one of the most important challenges facing feminist writers (Clover 1992:227). This challenge is particularly acute for women crime writers who are openly caught up in the business of transforming the conventions of genre. The irony, as Dunant sees it, is that 'as the genre of the crime thriller has become more misogynistic, so more and more women have been entering it . . . In many cases, women have picked this form precisely because it has been so male' (Dunant 1993:28). The question of how to distinguish it from the masculine form of the genre is a source of intense pleasure, and anxiety, for the female crime writer.

In *Transgressions*, Dunant compares the female translator and her 'small notation[s]' to the 'Renaissance biblical copyists leaving their individual mark on the page' (106). But does *Trangressions* succeed in making new from old? Though the purpose of including the thriller is to show how a woman writer can fight fantasy with fantasy, *Transgressions* ends up seeming too much of the same. One is left wondering whether the novel is not its own opponent.

In the wake of her trauma with the stalker, Elizabeth tries to empower the thriller's fictional heroine, Mirka. In fiction that mirrors 'real life', Elizabeth writes a seduction scene for her heroine. There is a certain confusion here as to whether this is the thriller, the main narrative or both: 'The words flowed like genital juices. But still she made Mirka work at

it, made her use the slap-slurp sound of sex and her own extravagant groans to cover up the scrape of the knife as she slid it up from the steel tray beside the bed' (222). In passages like these, the intertextuality of *Transgressions*, and its build-up of references to popular texts, starts to work against itself. So accurately do some of its criticisms of the thriller apply to the formulaic narrative action of the last half of *Transgressions* that the novel might be referring to itself. But the fact that *Transgressions* openly reveals its inconsistencies and contradictions only serves to raise discussion of the purchase rape holds for feminist crime fiction as a narrative scenario for working through questions of female victimization and agency. More than any other issue, perhaps, rape shows what fiction can be for feminism.

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