

## **Murder and Emancipation: Agatha Christie and Critical Qualitative Methods**

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### **Abstract**

Prominent cultural studies scholars, beginning as early as the Frankfurt School and continuing through to today, have routinely identified the mystery novel as a worthy cultural product because it serves to valorize scientism by illustrating the virtue of scientific methods of crime solving. However, this research has neglected to fully consider how other, less empirical, forms of inquiry have also been featured in the mystery genre, particularly in the work of the most widely read mystery author of all time, Agatha Christie. My research highlights Christie's tendency to focus on the utility of qualitative methods that result in emancipatory action for marginalized characters. For Miss Marple, Christie's popular sleuth, this emancipation results from her use of what scholars call a critical qualitative method that enjoins stakeholders in an empowering process of collective inquiry. By establishing that Christie's work evidences progressive social scientific research methods, this article engages with the work of previous scholars who have overlooked the legacy of her novels as purveyors of scientism to the public, and as means of repudiating hegemonic discourses of institutional authority.

**Keywords:** cultural studies, action research, Agatha Christie, crime fiction, scientism, methods

## Introduction

Though few people realize it today, Agatha Christie's global sales of more than two billion books tie her with Shakespeare as the most popular author of all time, with her work impacting the 192 different cultures where translations of her books exist (Curran, 2011). She's been studied by cultural studies, gender and literary scholars, but none have recognized her as perhaps the world's most notable exponent of academic inquiry. The Miss Marple books in particular are often examined by scholars interested in questions of gender identity (Makinen, 2006; York, 2007; Shaw & Vanacker, 1991), but overlooked as models of social science methods. As a sleuth, Miss Marple is sometimes compared negatively to Poirot, who makes explicit references to method and psychology as a means of detection (Bloom, 1990; Wagoner, 1986; Mann, 1981), but this comparison ignores the fact that, like Poirot, Miss Marple adheres closely to the social science paradigm, though with a more profound tendency toward critical methods. In this light Christie's work can be properly understood to have made a significant contribution to cultural life by drawing into the broader discourse of scientific inquiry qualitative social science methods that diverge from the positivist traditions so heavily associated with the scientific method. In so doing she continued the tradition laid out by earlier mystery novelists of using the genre as a means of advancing the public's knowledge of scientific methods, but this time focusing on a different type.

Miss Marple eschews traditional views of authority by working side by side with her suspects to solve crimes through collaboration and qualitative inquiry. Specifically, Miss Marple's approach to sleuthing illustrates the qualitative method of critical inquiry that contemporary methodologists call participatory action research (Chandler & Torbert, 2003) an approach that contrasts sharply with the empirical methods of other fictional detectives. Participatory Action Research (hereafter PAR) is defined by Berg & Lune (2012, p. 259) as an ethnographic method that "embraces principles of participation, reflection, empowerment, and emancipation of people and groups interested in improving their social situation." The central concept behind PAR is that a researcher enjoins a community's stakeholders to collaborate in a process of reflective investigation about a specific local problem in order to craft a solution that the stakeholders can implement. For a mystery novel, what all this means is that the sleuth who investigates the crime is doing so alongside the affected community using that community's particular cultural lens with the goal of advancing their objectives. Though this model of detection is popular today, and often associated wrongly with the earlier work of Arthur Conan Doyle (Rushing, 2007), it was actually Agatha Christie who popularized it. Unlike her predecessor, who promoted empirical scientism (Bayard, 2008), and the hegemonic values imbued therein (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987), Christie modeled social science methods in her writing, and in the Miss Marple novels these methods take on a critical qualitative form that aims to emancipate victims of marginalization.

By making emancipatory methods of critical inquiry the focus of her novels Christie's work does more than just provide readers with an alternative scientific lesson to the positivist one that some scholars ascribe to the genre as a whole (Rowland, 2001). Christie's novels challenge the conservative ideological subtext pervading the detective fiction produced by other, primarily male, mystery novelists that is rightly criticized for reinforcing the integrity of capitalist hegemonies (MacDonald, 1953; Cawelti, 1976; Rowland, 2001). The presence of critical qualitative methods, like PAR, in some of the genre's most widely read books indicates that mystery novels do contain liberating discourses that align with the social justice mandates found in the critical sphere of the social sciences, and which directly aim to contradict traditional patriarchal values and upset the capitalist hegemony from which they emanate.

## Mystery and/as Science

The notion of mystery fiction as a purveyor of social science research methods is not surprising considering that some of cultural studies' most prominent scholars have identified the value of mystery novels as promoting scientism, with Christie's novels specifically suggested as a site of future research (MacDonald, 1953; McLuhan, 1964). However, this research thread was neglected until the end of the last century when the media emphasis on forensics made it popular again (Schweitzer and Saks, 2007). Tellingly, these recent studies neglect Christie and focus again on the character of Sherlock Holmes, probably because his empirical methods of rational scientific inquiry (Thomas, 1994; Thomas, 1999; Wainwright, 2012; Waddell & Rybolt, 2011) align with the forensic methods now commonly cited as superior by both scholars (Thomas, 1999; Frank, 2003; Van Dover, 2005) and jurors (Meyer, 1999; Schweitzer & Saks, 2007) for their claims to what Reason and Torbert (2001) call positivist empiricism.

While early cultural studies scholars may have been mistaken to group Christie's work along with preceding texts that were structured differently, and promoted an empirical branch of scientism, none of the scholars who considered her work later redressed the error. Instead, those who study Christie's work generally use themes of scientism to distinguish Poirot from Miss Marple as characters along gender lines. Scholars fit Poirot, who is more akin to the great detective archetype (Bargainnier, 1980), into the mold of an empiricist by emphasizing his predilection for order and method (Rowland, 2001; Mann, 1981; Maida & Spornick, 1982). By comparison, Miss Marple's sleuthing is said to be improvised based on intuition and experiential knowledge (York, 2007; Kungl, 2006; Bloom, 1990; Craig & Cadogan, 1981). Poirot's constant references to his 'little grey cells' justify claims that his approach is distinctly rationalist (Mann, 1981) so that Christie's work can be read as extending the long tradition of rhetorically gendering science as a masculine endeavor that affirms patriarchal values (Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1988; Cockburn, 1985). Though Poirot's methods lean towards social sciences, which have been characterized as a feminine counterpart to the natural sciences (Haraway, 1988), the Freudian psychology he employs is predicated on deeply rooted sexist beliefs (Shaw and Vanacker, 1991; Rowland, 2001) that cast him by association as a supporter of patriarchy. Some do credit Miss Marple with being an adherent to method in her sleuthing (Shaw and Vanacker, 1991; York, 2007), even by identifying it as "analogical reasoning" (Bargainnier, 1980), p. 74), but it is never linked to a deliberate practice of social scientific inquiry as such.

In part, this binary view of Christie's sleuths speaks not only to the still prevalent bias toward the empirical sciences as a hegemonic model of knowledge production, but also to the way in which the mystery genre has established gendered sub-genres. The detective fiction that has been attended to by cultural studies scholars is largely the domain of male characters, male authors, and cultures of masculinity that revolve around toughness and survival. The genres of mystery novels now known as "classic" or "golden age" novels have become the domain of the female (Plain, 2001). Just as empirical sciences are frequently treated as male domains (Haraway, 1988), and credited for their place in the male-dominated detective fiction sub-genre (Bloom, 1990), the social sciences, which are sometimes seen as feminine (Coltrane, 1994), are found being promoted in the female sub-genre of classic detective fiction. In this light, scholarship on Christie's work reflects the broader tendency of mystery scholarship to, as Plain (2001) suggests, code logic as masculine in one genre of mystery and feminine in another, in a manner that reinforces gendered biases about the supremacy of male detectives.

## **What is PAR anyway?**

Action Research is thought by many to have emanated from the sociologist Kurt Lewin (Adelman, 1993), who in 1946 called for a critical qualitative methodology that extended the traditional ethnographic approach (Whyte, 1991). Since then, different forms of action research have developed so that the term “action research” refers to a base notion, practiced largely by educators, that is extended in sociological research to more critically imagined forms, including PAR (Whyte, 1995). Where action research mandates that research be performed within communities using their intrinsic values, customs and culture to craft solutions to the community’s problems (Chandler & Torbert, 2003), PAR takes the critical bent of this model further by calling on the research group to work together with the community stakeholders in order to address only those problems defined by the community as such, and to similarly conceive of only solutions that meet the community’s standards (Whyte, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 2003). In contrast to action researchers, who don’t adopt a collaborative approach, participatory action researchers seek to establish greater validity in their outcomes by consciously working with, rather than on, the community stakeholders in the research process as they enjoin collaboration to establish a model for problem solving that may outlast the researcher’s presence (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). To do this requires full immersion in the community, which reinforces the notion that PAR is a collective tactic of social improvement for, and by, the underprivileged or disenfranchised (Rahman, 1983; Wicks, Reason & Bradbury, 2005).

A significant difference between the classical model of ethnographic research and any action research is the stated objective of altering the social circumstances of the group or individual under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Where traditional ethnography avers culturally relative decisions about the use of the research, PAR has a very specific and deliberate intention from the outset. Namely, participatory action researchers are seeking to provide greater social equity with their work (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Kemmis & McTaggart (2003), Berg & Lune (2012), and Denzin (2008) all highlight the importance that PAR places on efforts to not only benefit, but emancipate marginalized communities and individuals. The action in PAR is one that emanates from the community in order to strengthen it against institutional strictures, or extrinsic platforms that threaten its members (Rahman, 1983).

## **Methods**

This study takes the form of a diachronic literary discourse analysis, which, in contrast to the foundationalist approach to scholarly work, sets out to address social inequity through the discursive examination of a literary text. It does this in part through traditional textual analysis that considers the given dialogue, and a reading of it, at the linguistic level (Fairclough, 1995), but also by examining the narrative discourses using semiotic analysis (van Dijk, 1985). Where discourse analysis allows for the interpretation of a text’s meaning in socio-cultural terms (Fairclough, 1995), literary discourse analysis brings key elements of literary analysis to the fore, specifically the understanding of the literary text as artifact (de Beaugrande, 2006). As Maingueneau (2010) explains, literary discourse analysis is sometimes overused, but is ideal as an approach toward texts that exhibit properties requiring interdisciplinary interpretations; i.e., those that cross between the humanities and the social sciences, as Christie’s do.

I study the works of Agatha Christie as components of a larger body of work that routinely depends on similar narrative structures, and thematic elements. In this case, the texts in question are those that best characterize the author’s reputation across cultures, specifically those that

feature one of her most prominent sleuths: Miss Marple. Miss Marple appeared in twelve novels as well as twenty short stories (Curran, 2011). For the purposes of this study only the full novels will be examined as some of the short stories featured other sleuths from Christie's cannon that complicate a study of static methodological patterns.

The discourses I am seeking to explore within Christie's novels are much more specific than those usually employed during discourse analysis. Because the focus of my book is to compare how a specific academic method is illustrated by the investigatory methods of a specific character, I will restrict my analysis to the presence of PAR discourses within Christie's texts, calling on secondary material only in instances where it is useful as an affirmation of accepted literary patterns, or cultural interpretation evidenced by the author.

### **Participants and Emancipation**

Agatha Christie conjured many notable sleuths in the course of her long career, but chief among them is Miss Jane Marple, an unmarried older woman who first appeared in Christie's 1930 whodunit *The Murder at the Vicarage* when she helps to solve the murder of a neighbor in her small village of St. Mary Mead. Miss Marple appeared as the main character in twelve of Christie's books, with her last case published in 1976, the year of Christie's death. Though Miss Marple's age becomes a subject of confusion as she survives fifty years of dotage, two key character traits remain consistent in her novels. First of all, Miss Marple, unlike other famous literary detectives, holds no official status in the cases she solves. Miss Marple can only be described as a sleuth, not a detective. She is therefore always operating in an amateur capacity, despite running up an impressive record as a sleuth during her golden years (Bargainnier, 1980). Secondly, Miss Marple has a penchant for comparing people she meets with others she has known in her village, and by so doing makes associations about personality, motives, and cultural life that aid her in her sleuthing (Gray, 1990).

Using the taxonomy of practice Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) establish in their review of PAR literature that one can categorize Miss Marple as a reflexive practitioner of critical reasoning. This mode of practice places emancipation front of central as it "...aims to comprehend how a situation has come about as a result of human choices... and to consider how things might be re-constructed so they could be different in the future" (p. 363). Doing so calls for reflection by the collaborators as they practice in order to allow them to re-imagine the world around them through new perspectives that will help them to assess, and change, the situation in which they practice. By re-structuring these settings, institutional practices can be reformed "...so that actors may have different choices from the ones forced upon them by 'the way things are currently'" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 363-364). In the following pages I will explore how Miss Marple constitutes a model participatory action researcher. I will focus first on documenting how Christie positions her as an active participant in the communities where she sleuths, and then how the insider status she is ascribed in the novels affords her the ability to emancipate others through collaborative research.

### **Participation**

Miss Marple is positioned in varying ways as a participant in the cultures where she investigates. In Miss Marple's debut novel, *Murder at the Vicarage*, the murder takes place next door to her, automatically casting her as a cultural insider. In *The Body in the Library* and *The Mirror Crack'd*, which also take place in St. Mary Mead, her familiarity with Gossington Hall, where the crimes are discovered, and her acquaintance with the suspects, afford her community member status. At other times Miss Marple's credentials as a lifelong villager

distinguish her as a cultural insider capable of interpreting the clues of the case in their proper social context. Miss Marple's life in the village of St. Mary Mead is frequently mentioned in Christie's books as the source of her expertise in the study of human nature (Bargainnier, 1980). As Miss Marple sees it, "...in St. Mary Mead there was always something going on... so many interesting human problems – giving rise to endless pleasurable hours of speculation" (Christie, 1965, p. 5).

Miss Marple occupies a uniquely marginal status herself. She is a spinster, and an elderly one at that, but through the exposition provided by her large network of wealthy and well-born friends Christie suggests that Miss Marple was raised in affluence, and has only become accustomed to her reduced circumstances by virtue of having never married. Miss Marple notes that, "but for the kindness, the really great kindness of [her] nephew Raymond" she would be destitute (Christie, 1952, p. 9). It is because of Miss Marple's marginal status that she is sometimes enlisted by police seeking to borrow from her insight into the cultures where crimes have been committed (Bargainnier, 1980). Investigators have remarked on Miss Marple's ability to interact on equal ground with country squires and shop clerks (Maida & Spornick, 1982, p. 183), as well as her familiarity with the "details of social behavior" of both housemaids and noblewomen (Craig & Cadogan, 1981, p. 167-168). Thus, she represents the "interlocking oppressions" that are manifest within most communities where PAR is practiced (Reason & Brabdry, 2001). The fortunate consequence of her interlocking oppressions is that they suit her disposition for the fieldwork of solving crimes. Miss Marple, like the action researcher, embraces marginality as a means of engaging the community. Marginal zones are prime settings for the work of participatory action researchers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003), as marginality is incumbent on those who work in those settings. Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz (1980) argue that "if there is one especially well-suited adjective that describes the social experience of fieldwork, it is marginality" (p. 18).

Miss Marple straddles her marginal place in England's class structure to her own purposes just as she exploits the paradoxical views of elderly women as both harmless and cynical. On his first encounter with her, Inspector Craddock notes that, "She was far more benignant than he had imagined and a good deal older..." (Christie, 1950, p. 69). Yet despite this benignity, Miss Marple is also described by her neighbor as "...the worst cat in the village...and she always knows every single thing that happens – and draws the worst inferences from it" (Christie, 1930, p. 5). The perception of elderly spinsters as malicious gossips is a pronounced stereotype in western culture (Caputi, 1993), and one that Miss Marple uses to great effect. By engaging in gossip with other marginalized characters, and by allowing her interest in the affairs of others to be dismissed by those around her as a penchant for gossip, Miss Marple collects valuable clues about the people, places, and things surrounding the mysteries she aims to solve (Shaw & Vanacker, 1991). In this way she exploits her intersectionality by allowing the marginality ascribed to her age and gender to act as a cover under which she can insinuate herself into the investigation and gather the clues needed to solve the mystery.

In practice, gossip is often the form Miss Marple's sleuthing takes, and practice is crucial to PAR. In her village her practicum serves her sleuthing well, but when she travels, Miss Marple adapts her style of gossip to accommodate the subjective viewpoints of the practice settings that she visits where she establishes the first-person social relationships that legitimize her presence in the community, and afford her the insider status she needs to investigate (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 373). During her stay *At Bertram's Hotel* for example, Miss Marple draws on information and access provided to her by the hotel maids by seeking them out in their own quarters where the dynamic of social exchange is more equitable, and therefore more

conducive to revelation. Similarly, in *Sleeping Murder* she realizes that the local female shopkeepers she calls upon won't be comfortable sharing private recollections in the market place, so Miss Marple joins them in a knitting circle where she collects crucial information as they "gab" with her in confidence. Her understanding of these women, and their practice settings, makes it easy for her to induce them to participate in her sleuthing because she demonstrates solidarity with them by performing their customs in the same way PAR advocates (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). The result of trusting the practical knowledge of those engaged in the act of doing, also leads to more effective and expeditious decision-making that is needed in order for action research teams to proceed with the action of resolving a crisis (Reason & Torbert, 2001).

When the information she evinces through these methods prove useful Miss Marple proves that Walton & Gaffney (1990) are correct "that fact finding and theorizing that tap the wisdom and knowledge of those who work in the system under consideration produce knowledge that is more relevant to practice, and, therefore, in certain respects of greater validity" (Walton & Gaffney, 1990, p. 101). The validity of the information Miss Marple collects is stronger in large part because she understands that communities and their participants act according to "discourses, social relationships, and the histories of the settings they inhabit" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 365). As Gray notes, her tendency to compare people she encounters to the inhabitants of her own village "does not cast crime out of her world but situates it in the center of it" so that the crime becomes just one aspect of the culture where it takes place (Gray, 1990, p. 84). Her approach therefore depends on a distinction in her mind between knowledge and knowing, where knowledge is constituted by one's acceptance of facts as presented, but knowing comes only from the instincts that are honed through practice and experience (Gray, 1990). This quality of "experiential knowing" in the most intuitive and practical sense is specifically what Reason (2002) argues distinguishes action research data. Knowledge is a product of experience, and experience is predicated on action. The knowledge of community members is thusly based on prior active experiences that should be acknowledged, rather than discounted (Reason & Torbert, 2001). In doing so researchers are also affirming the value of community members by highlighting the fact that their longstanding experience privileges them in the research dynamic over researchers and practitioners who have entered the community more recently (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993).

Miss Marple often uses knitting as a way of insinuating herself into the activities of those around her as an unobtrusive presence. In so doing she uses her knitting as a clever form of what fieldworkers call "deflection," a common tactic since "it sometimes proves useful to camouflage the real research questions to deflect attention from the targets of study" (Shaffir, Stebbins & Turowetz, 1980, p. 51). But her knitting is more than just deflection. It also serves her "process of critical reflection" so that she can gather her thoughts and understand "where [the stakeholders] are now, how things came to be that way, and from these starting points, how in practice things might be changed" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 346). For Miss Marple, "what begins as a harmless spinster habit becomes a motif not merely for her gossipy, feminine kind of sleuthing but also for her role as a figure of fate..." capable of "making a pattern of the homely strands of evidence" (Shaw & Vanacker, 1991, p. 80). Her knitting is symbolic of her methods, and of her tendency toward what Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.6) call the "bricolage" of qualitative inquiry, wherein the researcher quilts together the necessary methods, information, and theories needed to solve the problem at hand.

## Emancipation

Given her compromised social status as a poor, elderly spinster, (Makinen, 2006) Miss Marple seems an unlikely candidate to practice the emancipating mode of PAR. Surprisingly though, Miss Marple is frequently called upon for emancipatory action in indirect, but socially inscribed ways (Bargainnier, 1980). Lacking formal authority, Miss Marple's emancipatory work typically comes in the form of voluntary aid to female acquaintances that find themselves embroiled by association with a murder (Bargainnier, 1980). In these cases, Miss Marple fleshes out the crime not to exonerate her associates, but to liberate them from marginalization using the type of humanistic approach to ethnography that is so central to the PAR paradigm (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

For Miss Marple, sleuthing has a practical application. It is not performed for social control, but rather as a means of better understanding the world around her, and, having done so, to be better prepared to "...assist practitioners in identifying and making explicit fundamental problems by first raising their collective consciousness" (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993, p. 302). She does this firstly by enjoining her discredited friends to help her with her investigations. These collaborations in and of themselves afford her friends with a sense of their value, and a lesson in how to contend with disenfranchisement. As Miss Marple's collaborators aid her in collecting and analyzing evidence, using their own intrinsic understanding of the cultures at hand, they ultimately find that "because only the insider has access to 'inside knowledge' and can thusly counter pose inside knowledge with the external view" they are in fact better suited to the work of sleuthing than the formal authorities whose opinion of them held so much power at the outset (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 373).

Such is the case in *They Do It With Mirrors*. There, the murders and embezzlement that arise in the story are of concern to Miss Marple only in as much they relate to the concerns about Miss Marple's old friend, Carrie Louise. Carrie Louise's sister, Ruth, is the first character to feel that something malevolent is afoot in Carrie Louise's household after a mysterious fire occurs. Acting on this instinct Ruth asks Miss Marple, as an old family friend, to visit Carrie Louise at her home, Stoneygates, to suss out the situation using Miss Marple's well known talent for investigation. Characteristically, the proceeding web of murders, attacks, and poisonings is only finally disentangled out once Miss Marple remembers that Carrie Louise was already unsettled before these things occurred, and that with each malicious occurrence Carrie Louise is further marginalized in the eyes of her family, who portray her as fragile and disoriented. Miss Marple is almost led into this line of thinking herself before she acknowledges a previously dismissed refrain by Carrie Louise that, "*This doesn't seem real*" (Christie, 1952, p. 183). Reality becomes the key focus of Miss Marple's work in this book. In line with the thinking of Fals Borda (1979) she is "investigating reality in order to transform it." Notably, she does this not in terms of the broad society, or the metaphor of reality that concerns philosophers, but, as PAR demands, in terms of "the day to day lived realities" of those around her (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 377). In so doing Miss Marple uncovers a scheme of embezzlement, murder and deceit all of which hinged on isolating and discrediting Carrie Louise so that her family would unwittingly enable her to be exploited without interference. Had Miss Marple failed to rely on her own intuition, or that of her friend, Carrie Louise might ultimately have been killed. Instead, the book ends with a revised opinion among the family; a more enlightened view of their present circumstances, which affords Carrie Louise the agency and admiration that she had previously been denied.

While disabusing gendered marginalization is a prime motive for Miss Marple's sleuthing (York, 2007; Bargainnier, 1980), it is also a fundamental element of the PAR approach. PAR



prescribes the necessity of providing voice to disenfranchised community members (Reason & Bradbury, 2004). Miss Marple does this by recognizing the power of the marginalized voice, particularly among women. In some cases, the claims she seeks to justify are speculative, as in *The Moving Finger*, where Miss Marple redeems Aimee Griffith's reputation by revealing that Mr. Symington, not Aimee, had ingeniously flooded the town with poison pen letters. Miss Marple even notes that Symington's scheme to murder his wife was based on the assumption that "the police were certain to suspect a woman" once the crime was linked with the sending of vicious letters (Christie, 1942, p. 201-208). Other times the claims Miss Marple sets out to prove are in fact eye witness testimony that formal authorities ignore because of the age, gender, or class of the witness. Such is the case in *4:50 From Paddington*, where Miss Marple is called to action after her friend, Mrs. McGillicuddy, witnesses a murder on a passing train. When no body is found Mrs. McGillicuddy is dismissed as a crank and humiliated. As Miss Marple sets about helping her friend it is clear to the reader that her primary agenda is less about finding the killer than it is about proving that a murder has taken place at all. This agenda typifies an oft-illustrated pattern wherein Miss Marple liberates victims of marginalization by proving their truth claims and dispelling sexist, ageist, classist stereotypes that cast them to social reprobation.

Miss Marple's last case *Sleeping Murder* exemplifies her capacity for empowering others. By chance Miss Marple encounters a young newlywed named Gwenda who fears she is losing her mind because of recurring images she sees in her new marital home. Miss Marple proposes that the images Gwenda considers hallucinations are actually just repressed memories of a toddlerhood in England she had been deliberately kept from knowing about. When this turns out to be the case, Gwenda, aided by Miss Marple, undertakes to unravel why she was brainwashed to forget this period of her childhood. As they wend through the twists of the mystery several women, including Gwenda, learn to value their own accounts, and experiences as meaningful in the face of incredulity. Miss Marple aids these women by encouraging them to engage in what Winter (1996) terms the "reflexive critique" of action research (Winter, 1996, p. 13-14). The reflexive critique demands that collaborators in action research challenge their biases, in this case the biases that the female characters in *Sleeping Murder* had built up against their own sex. For Gwenda, who had originally assumed that her stirring visions of a murder in her new home were hallucinations brought on by a feminine tendency to hysteria, the acceptance of those visions as memories dispelled gendered biases about women's mental frailty, and provided her with a means of accessing her own personal history.

Similarly, Lily, a housemaid who worked in Gwenda's home when Gwenda was a child, has clear recollections of the night the crime occurred, but has kept them secret for years out of concern that what she knows will only be discounted as servant gossip, and that sharing the information would open her up to derogation from authorities, and her chauvinistic husband. Only when Lily shares her life experiences with Gwenda can either one engage in the dialectic critique that Winter (1996) says allows action researchers to make sense of the world, and the dynamics that shape their circumstances. These endeavors are rewarded when they lead to the capture of a sadistic misogynist who murdered his own sister out of jealousy. In the process the two women disabused themselves of the belief that women should subordinate their own "knowing" of truth based on life experience to the "knowledge" of truth assigned by the men in their lives. As in *Sleeping Murder*, where the combined efforts of Gwenda, Lily, and Miss Marple re-shape the present by accurately accounting for the past, Winter says that action research draws on collaboration to create plural structures, based on multiple historical accounts that risk disturbing the status quo, and allow collaborators to internalize the complimentary nature of theory and practice (Winter, 1996, pp. 23-24).

That Miss Marple routinely gathers crucial information from unexpected sources in the aid of emancipating others attests to the validity of PAR's mandate to interview all participants in a community, no matter how marginalized. Rahman (1993) notes the impact of this technique on the newly enfranchised community members in his research following up with past participants in PAR projects. He finds that the "semi educated" community members, like the unnoticed servants of the Christie novel, realize their own potential through the process of being heard and documented. Effectively, Rahman's book echoes the narrative of *Sleeping Murder* in that, true to the action research goals, the process of giving voice to marginalized populations helps people within a community to produce their own "systematically collective knowledge" (Rahman, 1993). In addition to *4:50 from Paddington*, *The Moving Finger*, *Sleeping Murder* and *They Do It With Mirrors*, Miss Marple also unravels the mystery in *A Murder Is Announced* by crediting the seemingly mistaken utterances of the aging Dora Bunner with legitimacy. While Dora is dismissed by those around her as "rather stupid" Miss Marple eventually identifies the killer by noting Dora's tendency to mistakenly refer to Letitia Blacklock as Lotty, Letitia's presumably deceased sister (Christie, 1950). By giving weight to Dora's words, and proving the value of doing so Miss Marple adheres to the feminist research disposition by teaching those around her how significant it is to give voice to the women in our communities that so often go unheard (Powell, 1996), a concept that Denzin and Lincoln (2000) espouse as the bedrock of meaningful qualitative research. Obviously, Miss Marple's lesson to the characters of the book is also a lesson from Christie to her readers; a lesson recurring so often that it can be read as a primary unifying theme in the Miss Marple novels.

## Conclusion

All this documenting of PAR methods is not just about revising opinions of a fictional character, or her author. As my research evidences, Miss Marple solves crimes using practiced methods of social science research that justify the importance of qualitative approaches that are often dismissed today in favor of forensic research that valorizes misperceptions about the validity of deductive, positivist empirical approaches to inquiry. Through Miss Marple Christie provided a useful counter to the overriding presumption toward modes of scientific inquiry that are too often prized for their identification with masculinity (Harding, 1987), and hegemony (Whyte, 1995) and it is in this context that we should interpret these findings.

Contrary to positivist empiricist methods, such as deductive reasoning (Winter, 1996), which is popularly associated with mystery fiction (Bayard, 2008), Miss Marple's approach to crime solving benefits equally from inductive reasoning. Miss Marple does not seek to reduce the evidence in the case, or the suspects in the case to a simple taxonomy that can be generally applied. Her method seeks to be site specific, to account for multiple perceptions of reality, and to allow the multiplicity of meanings within a given community to be understood through that particular community frame. The frequency with which she is able to discern inconsistencies between the reported facts of a case, and the practical realities of those facts is owed to the attention she places on the practices and purposes of the specific communities where the crimes occur. This inductive process then helps her to make sense of the evidence in the crime, rather than letting the evidence of the crime dictate a logical solution. As Miss Marple routinely demonstrates with her analogies, a logical conclusion depends greatly on whose logic is being applied. To deduce which suspect meets the criteria of the culprit, as established by the evidence, first requires that one interpret the evidence in the context of the community where the murder occurred. Over and over Miss Marple proves that to make sense of the empirical evidence in a crime requires qualitative research, but that evidence alone can often be

misleading. In this way the Miss Marple novels highlight the fact that like qualitative and quantitative methods, deductive and inductive methods rely greatly on one another, calling into question the substance of such a dichotomy, and by extension the gendering of methods that a dichotomous view affords.

Not only do Agatha Christie's novels regularly challenge reader's assumptions about valid forms of social and scientific inquiry she also challenges the hegemonic practices that governed England, and its colonial territories, during the twentieth century as well as the patriarchy that was manifestly tied to the empire and its culture of class and gender divisions. In her sleuthing, Miss Marple undermines the logic of patriarchal control simply by proving that women, and elderly unattached women at that, are capable of besting trained criminological experts by drawing on life experiences that many dismiss. Miss Marple's methods illustrate an even more interesting form of upsetting capitalist patriarchy because they not only depend on, but also model, collective community action in the face of social injustice being carried out by the state through its agents, and its adherents. Contrary to those who argue that mystery novels in general serve to reify existing systems of power (Cawelti, 1976), Christie makes a point of positioning both her sleuth, and those she allies with, outside the dominant power structure of the times, most often casting as her villain powerful community authority figures. The repetition of this narrative format indicates that the message of the Miss Marple novels cannot be read as sustaining hegemony, as some suggest is true of the genre as a whole (Cawelti, 1976).

In the Miss Marple novels, method is met with a community minded ethos that inspires her to work in a collaborative, rather than competitive mode. Miss Marple embraces the police officers around her as partners in the same way that she shares her sleuthing with other amateurs she encounters. Though this is usually the case with Poirot, Holmes prefers the gamesmanship of competing against his rival on the police force, Lestrade (Fahlander, 2013), just as the gumshoe private detectives of noir fiction perpetually conflict with the cops that despise them (Plain, 2001). This difference in Christie's narrative model not only aligns with the motives behind PAR, but more broadly with the critical sphere of the social sciences that reject the exploitative nature of traditional ethnographic research methods, just as they reject the white, western, androcentric viewpoints that have too often influenced ethnographic findings. Miss Marple's sleuthing accounts for all viewpoints, and most particularly those that lack established credibility. As a result, she champions the marginalized characters around her in the same way that participatory action researchers seek to emancipate the marginalized communities they work with. This is only possible because in true PAR form, Miss Marple is focused on inducing a solution to community's crisis not just to her own satisfaction, or to the standards of a justice system established to reify hegemonic patriarchy, but rather to the standards of those she tries to help.

When Miss Marple turns her critically minded model of sleuthing into a practicum for her readers she provides an even more salient illustration of the power of community action as a means of resolving community conflict. Despite contemporary critics, who disliked Christie's emphasis on characters over clues (Bloom, 1997), this model better serves the readers' interests by allowing them a chance to guess the culprit themselves. Whereas Sherlock Holmes produces conclusions in a miraculous fashion, that in fact pre-dated forensics research (Frank, 2003; Thomas, 1999), Miss Marple shared her process, her clues, and her methods of interpretation with her collaborators. When she does this, her process is made known to the readers as well, in a manner unlike other detective fiction where the sleuth only reveals their process of deduction after the fact. Consequently, Miss Marple novels teach readers how to, as Shaw and Vanacker (1991, p. 84) say, "read our own world in the novel." As they follow Miss Marple's

process step by step, Christie's readers are not just cataloging clues, they are learning how to interpret them as meaningful artifacts in the cultural studies tradition (Hall, 1997). That Christie's novels were structured in this way suggests that, as an author, Christie herself functioned in a collaborative manner by proffering her readers the chance to join in on the process of sleuthing in the same way that Miss Marple enjoined community members in the narratives. That Christie produced so many novels and stories in her lifetime makes it possible for her readers to not only learn these methods but also practice them when they read her other work.

Though this paper deliberately limits its focus to Miss Marple and her methods, future scholarship may consider re-examining Poirot's approach to detection. In particular, I wonder whether the social science methods Poirot employs, and that have been tenuously equated with the androcentric methods of other detectives, really lack the critical qualitative components documented here in the Miss Marple novels. Just as Holmes laid claim to forensic methods that at the time were no more than science fiction in the mind of Doyle, it is equally likely that for all Poirot's bluster about his dependence on psychology, Christie was merely improvising. Already we can see that as sleuths Miss Marple and Poirot have more in common than previously believed. Perhaps further study will find that Christie positioned all of her fictional sleuths as practitioners of critical, qualitative, and emancipatory methods.

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