

FEMINIST READINGS

TRACKING THE BODY: DOROTHY PORTER'S *THE MONKEY'S MASK*

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Mortal, corporeal, material, marked with a variety of biological and coded differences, the body is the haunt, that old familiar place from which we set out, each time in search of something, looking for something we feel we've lost, finding so often that what we're tracking is our own point of departure, the haunted house of embodiment. A faint signal that beams us to the site of significance, to the abandoned home. A nostalgia for what we have always had, for what we have put aside as vexed, inhibitory, illegitimate.

Emerging from dualistic notions of the past, bravely sloughing off the hierarchical idea of transient, mortal husk and superior, enduring mind or spirit, the body now returns to ghost the critical endeavour. In the context of feminist analyses in particular, the body demands complex attention. What are the implications of bodily differences—between men and women, between people on a continuum of biological specificity? Is meaning and identity formed purely through the imposition of learned codes of behaviour? Is the body no more than a cue for which set of behaviours are to be applied to it, and/or to what extent does the body itself register its own significances? Or, as Judith Butler argues, is it even possible to speak of such a body that somehow precedes socialisation? As she and theorists such as Moira Gatens discuss, the sex/gender distinction, so long a crucial index of differentiation within the feminist project, is itself highly problematic, in its postulation of the trope of the blank body, an essentialised *tabula rasa* that exists *a priori* to cultural interpretation and upon which the prescriptions of gender are subsequently overlaid. Under such critical scrutiny, the neatness of the sex/gender categorisation begins to crumble; the borders between them leach and collapse as anatomy and destiny seem about to engage in yet another Herculean struggle.

Porter's text itself also operates at transition/transgression points between categories. Described recently in the *Age Good Weekend* magazine as a 'lesbian crime novel in verse' (28), *The Monkey's Mask* both joins the emergent genre of crime fiction by and about women, furthering its challenge to the genre conventions by the inclusion of the lesbian detective, and questions the seemingly impermeable literary categories of poetry and fiction. However, like all more broadly generic quest narratives, it is also implicitly a narrative of desire, where the desire is to detect, to piece together the vital clues, not only about who did what to whom, but more importantly, why they did it, and what the multilayered, splintering elements of that conglomerate motivation might be. Coiled at the heart of this narrative of

desire lies the spectre of the body: desired, desiring, eroticised, creative, mortal, putrescent, betraying, absent, elusive, present, it is the image and experience of corporeality which pushes the narrative forward, circling and forcing the limits of logic and explanation in order to enact a paradox: to both find and evade traces of itself.

The most evident aspect of the search in the text lies in the process of conventional detecting—the private investigator's business of locating the missing body, and then, once it has been unearthed, identifying the killer or killers, tracing and retracing the grisly path of the crime. However, for Jill Fitzpatrick, conventionally represented as an ex-cop and a lone operator, pitting her maverick professional skills against those of the establishment forces of the police and the law, this proves to be a limited aspect of the quest, a single thread of a twinned trajectory of desire. At first, looking for the missing Mickey, seeking out clues from her family, friends, books, the poems she's left behind, seems just like another routine job to keep the bills paid. There must be a myriad of explicable reasons for why a young girl might 'disappear', leaving her privileged North Shore home in search of sex and adventure—reasons which can be worked out like a puzzle, solved, resolved, case closed. However, the discovery of Mickey's body in a shallow grave, 'chunks out of her arms and legs/from the pack of dogs that found her/barefoot, her shirt round her neck/no pants, her face swollen with rot' (52), not only makes it a nastier and more difficult case for Jill to unravel, but also signals her more complex personal involvement. Jill does not remain the objective investigator of someone else's problems, someone else's loss or motivation. Rather, distracted from the details of that professional quest by her desire for another body—Mickey's poetry lecturer, the almost equally elusive Dr Diana Maitland—Jill becomes, like Mickey, part of an obscure and entangled interaction in which she is both the investigator and the investigated, the desirer and the desired one, the hunter and the quarry.

Although ostensibly structured around the narrative conventions of the crime fiction genre, *The Monkey's Mask* emerges as as much a narrative of love and the tortured labyrinths of sexual desire as it is one of the solving of a murder. Jill's desire for Diana is complex, exposing, leaving her reeling off balance, her professional commitments dangling:

Today
I should be working

I should be going through
the coroner's report

asking questions

was Mickey killed
where her body was found?

what do the bruises
on her buttocks mean?

Today
I'm not working

I'm seeing Diana. (65)

Distracted from her job, leaving the trail to Mickey's death scandalously unexamined, Jill's emotional vulnerability and loneliness lead her straight into the lure/allure of Diana whose manipulative, amorous snares she initially fails to recognise. In an engaging first-person voice, she is, however, able to acknowledge the compelling force of her own desire as she gravitates into the orbit of the cryptically named, 'lovely Doctor Di' (196):

In love I've got no style
 my heart is decked out
 in bright pink tracksuit pants
 it weaves its huge bummed way
 through the tables to Diana
 she's reading something
 with very fine print
 she doesn't need her glasses
 to see me. (35)

The connection of bodies between Jill and Diana is one of sensuality and increasing dependence on Jill's part. It also provides the opportunity for Porter's text to consider the chain of myriad significances and effects which occur within the complexity of sexual interaction. What is it that occurs between lovers, Jill, Porter and the reader ponder; what is the nature of the connection that is generated, or seemingly generated, in the context of physical intimacy: 'Is it a wall/or a pit/or a poked wound/that grows between lovers?' Jill asks. What happens in such an experiment of physicality, what is cooked up through such a recipe of wanting?:

just shake up two skin jars
 of water and chemicals
 bump them hard
 together
 and watch their chains
 of strange molecules
 change and groan. (142)

The process of sexual intimacy is not only a stimulation of certain nerve endings, but is represented as ecstatic, an extreme pleasure that appears to dissociate or scramble aspects of the self and the differentiation between self and other. It is in this 'meltdown sex' (134) as Jill describes it, that seemingly stable categories are dissolved and corporeal bodies are both found and lost. It is in the extremities of sexual connection that life, as a state of embodiment, and death, as an uncanny, paradoxical state of both heightened embodiment and disembodiment, seem to come closest to each other, as epitomised by 'the squeeze/of Diana's fingers/shorting [Jill] out/like a smoking fuse-box!' (246) and the 'reckless, careless/sex [that] killed Mickey' (245).

This cocktail of bodies in sexual intimacy is certainly not all sweetness and tonic as Jill discovers; it's dangerous, violent, susceptible to invasion, it has no immunity to a hostile virus. 'Diana. Dracula. Her breast suck me' (69), Jill pants in excitement early in their interaction, able to eroticise such violence in the context of reciprocity and trust, but soon becoming hooked into Diana's pattern of love as a poisoned bait, sweetened with the sexualised body. In the despair and jealousy she subsequently experiences when she realises the extent of Diana's manipulation of her, Jill can only think to respond in kind, offering to her lover the same kind of spiked juices:

I wanted my body
 to be Diana's poison

I wanted someone to pass her
the bottle

love, love,
oh poisonous love. (218)

Within the poetic text, Porter playfully and self-reflexively suggests the interactive role which poetic language, as it functions both inside and outside of genre conventions, can take in this dangerous, seductive tango between desiring bodies. Tracing clues through Mickey's poetry leads Jill eventually not only to some kind of explanation of her death, but also brings her directly to Diana's office door. Searching for clues implicit within the poetic text highlights the metaphoric relation between criminal investigation and literary criticism as related quest narratives and modes of analysis; both are activities that strive to fit clusters of significance and receptivity into hermeneutic patterns that at least seem to promise the closure of truth claims, the solution of order. Porter's ironic use of the poetic text as part of the body of evidence, a body which both actively detects and passively awaits the inscriptions of detection, also signals Jill's transition from a defensive rejection of poetry as something to do with an elite intelligentsia to a sense of poetic language as an expression of the starkest, most raw, most unavoidable aspects of human interaction. For Jill, as well as for the reader of this cross-genre text, poetry is seen as the characteristic pulse of sex, the inscription of the myriad significances which mark the desiring, interacting body.

Poetry is literally unhoused from the academy in *The Monkey's Mask*, and recognised as a language of a desire which may be transported by, but is only ever tangentially related to, detail and linear narrative. Caught in the choking grasp of passion and betrayal, Jill self-consciously uses poetry to signal her pain and dependence:

Is this how poems start?

when every riff on the radio
hooks in your throat

is this how poems start?

when the vein under her skin
hooks in your throat

is this how poems start?

when insomnia pounds
like spooked black horses

when the day breaks
like car crash glass

tell me, Mickey,
you knew

tell me

does a poem start
with a hook in the throat? (144)

Indeed, as Jill discovers, 'Sex and poetry' function as the primary metaphoric lenses through which life is both considered and experienced. And, like the deceiving sweetness of Diana's gifts to her, the knowledge, sensation, language which they offer can be both alluring and suffocating, suggestive of both the passions and the mortality of the body:

I never knew poetry
was about
opening your legs
one minute

opening your grave
the next

I never knew poetry
could be
as sticky as sex. (139)

The trajectories of erotic desire and the desire to *know*, to detect the crucial subtext, to pin down with some kind of epistemological certainty, are repeatedly shown to be intertwined throughout *The Monkey's Mask*. This suggests not only narrative particularity, but can also be read as an insight into questions of a gendered subjectivity which currently resound in a range of feminist and critical theories. The genre of the crime narrative, perhaps best epitomised by the hard-boiled thriller of private eyes like Philip Marlowe or Cliff Hardy, are both psychologically and sociologically structured around an epistemology which offers points of uncontested fixity. There may be much that is rotten and corrupt in, say, Chandler's LA and Corris' Bondi, but the hard-living, hard-hitting, laconic detective will eventually come out on top. The problem will be resolved, punishments of sorts will be meted out and order restored. The reader, like the Private Eye, will be shaken by the potential for violence within their own community, but reassured by the formulaic patterns of the narrative which offer closure and an explanation that appears to distance the particular events, rendering them somehow anomalous. In the conventional form of the genre, there is usually some sense in which the detective-protagonist is compromised, most often through sexual encounter with a *femme fatale*, but finally this does not interfere with his capacity to solve the case, and to see behind her seductive decoy to the real, male villains behind.

The Monkey's Mask clearly situates itself firmly within many of these genre conventions, although arguably the use of poetry as a vehicle for this kind of suspenseful narrative implicitly challenges the assumptions underlying the genre. The body is found and some kind of explanation is proffered for what happened. This explanation is, however, all conjecture on Jill's part and, as speculation, or even as jealous invective, it never exceeds the realms of the personal to be judged by a wider society in the shape of the police or the law. Indeed, even if Diana and Nick are responsible for, or implicated in, Mickey's death and the disposal of her body, their designation as murderers or perpetrators of a legally-defined crime is obscured by Jill's sense of them as sexual predators and personal betrayers. Also, to reinforce the text's refusal of the kind of closure typical of the crime genre, the 'problem' which drives the poetic narrative and which thus might be resolved, is not necessarily confined to the external sphere of murderers and victims. Rather, the conundrum posed by the text is seen to be equally as much about patterns of loving, of sexuality, and of the violence of the desire which inheres in the body—in female as well as male bodies. The tracing of externalised violence which charts the path of the investigator inevitably loops back, finds and inscribes itself upon the body of the quester—the body, which, like that of the literary critic, would attempt to objectively map the trajectories of another's desires. While ultimately drawing back from the violent passions of Nick and Diana in grief and disgust, Jill also comes full-circle and recognises such propensities in herself—a similarly violent, vampiric impulse

inextricably and intimately associated with her corporeal body, her specifically female body. Poised above the grovelling, abject body of Bill MacDonald, one of Mickey's poet-lovers, Jill reflects:

at my crust
I'm violent

right down deep
I'm violent

at my finger tips
I'm violent

in the glands of my breast
I'm violent

in the shield of my cervix
I'm violent

in my feral womb
I'm violent

fear me fear me fear me

I'm female. (167)

Sexual difference, bodily specificity, sexual desire; all are here read as indistinguishable from the drive of the narrative, the break-neck pace of the impulse to identify and locate the insistent presence of a body that keeps slipping, resurfacing, seductive in the relentless investigation of the poetic text.

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Works Cited

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