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#### **'Flash-floods': genre subversion and the abject erotic in Dorothy Porter's *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado***

##### Abstract:

When discussing her verse novels, Dorothy Porter explicitly stated that she loved to 'write bad'. This paper will argue that it was Porter's engagement with the verse novel form and genre subversion, most notably seen with her detective and crime thriller verse novels *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado*, that allows for a destabilisation of traditionally established genre conventions, which in turn provide a narrative foundation for Porter's use of abject erotic imagery.

In both *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* there are several types of 'bodies' to be examined: the body of the verse narrative, the bodies of the characters subjected to crime, the body of poetry that is referred to as evidence, and the abject eroticised body. Extending upon the studies of Rose Lucas (1997) and Fleur Diamond (1999), this paper contends that it is Porter's engagement with the abject erotic, as informed by Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of the abject and Johanna Blakley's (1995) discussion of the abject in relation to eroticism, that allows Porter to subvert the phallogocentric limitations upheld through the crime fiction genre and offer an alternative representation for lesbian sexuality and desire.

##### Biographical note:

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##### Keywords:

Abject Erotic – Dorothy Porter – Genre subversion – Lesbian writing – Verse novel

## Introduction

When discussing her verse novels, Dorothy Porter explicitly stated that she loved to ‘write bad’ (Porter 2000). It was Porter’s fearless exploration of this ‘badness’ (Porter 2000) that allowed her to revitalise the form of the verse novel. Porter recognised the power of subversion, composing her verse novels with concise lyrics full of abject erotic imagery. Porter’s engagement with genre subversion has also allowed her verse novels to ignite discussion not only about the relationship between poetry and sexuality, but also about the perception and consumption of poetry, particularly in Australia. Porter’s poetic exploration of sexual and bodily taboos, as well as her subversion of genre, creates a space for comment on queer sexuality within Australian literature.

Porter has spoken openly about an era in her life where, in an attempt to gain a wider readership and more financial stability from her writing, she wrote the two young-adult novels *Rookwood* (1991) and *The witch number* (1993). As Porter has explained, despite her attempts to consciously write for a young-adult audience and stay ‘painstakingly clear of anything that hinted of sex or the slightest breath of bad language’ (Porter 2000), *The witch number* was still criticised for being too subversive. Porter believed that this was primarily due to her references to ‘[m]enstruation, periods, female bleeding’ (Porter 2000). Although Porter had explored the theme of bodily taboos in her previous poetry collections, it was this perceived response to *The witch number* that drove Porter to write against everything deemed ‘respectable’, to only write for herself. In Porter’s own words:

I wanted ingredients that stank to high heaven of badness. I wanted graphic sex. I wanted explicit perversion. I wanted putrid language. I wanted stenching murder. I wanted to pour out my heart. I wanted to take the piss. I wanted lesbians who weren't nice to other women. I wanted glamorous nasty men who even lesbians want to fuck. I wanted to say that far too much Australian poetry is a dramatic cure for insomnia. But I still wanted to write the book in poetry. (Porter 2000)

The ‘book’ to which Porter refers is the award-winning, best-selling *The monkey’s mask* published in 1994, two years after the publication of her first verse novel *Akhenaten* in 1992. Before her death in 2008, Porter had written numerous poetry collections, libretti and three more verse novels: *What a piece of work* (1999), *Wild surmise* (2002) and *El Dorado* (2007). In all of these verse novels, Porter offers a poetic examination and celebration of sexual and bodily taboos creating a narrative for lesbian and non-heteronormative sexuality.

Porter’s engagement with poetic verse and genre subversion, most notably seen in her detective and crime thriller verse novels *The monkey’s mask* and *El Dorado*, allows for a destabilisation of previously established genre conventions, which in turn provide a narrative foundation for Porter’s use of abject erotic imagery. In a statement that is applicable to all five of Porter’s verse novels, Felicity Plunkett asserts that *The monkey’s mask* ‘floods the dams designed to contain genres’ (2010, 26).

Concentrating on Porter’s subversion of sex and gender categorisation, Rose Lucas states that Porter’s *The monkey’s mask* ‘foregrounds...issues of biology and bodies, sex and sexual difference, while itself also operating at a transition/transgression

points between established categories' (1997, 28). Porter's inherently feminist exploration of the 'body' throughout her verse novels cannot be discussed in isolation from the literary form, or the 'textual body', she elected to write in. Therefore this paper claims that in both *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* there are several types of 'bodies' to be examined: the body of the verse narrative, the bodies of the characters subjected to crime, the body of poetry that is referred to as evidence, and the abject eroticised body. This paper asserts that it is Porter's engagement with the abject erotic, as informed by Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of the abject and Johanna Blakley's (1995) discussion of the abject in relation to eroticism, that allow Porter to offer an alternative representation for lesbian sexuality and desire.

### Encountering the verse novel and genre subversion

In an introduction to the study of the verse novel, Catherine Addison observes that although the verse novel is not confined to a particular theme or country, 'Australia may seem a world leader in the form' (2009, 539). In addition to Porter, many other Australian poets such as Jordie Albiston, Geoff Page, Les Murray, John Tranter, and Alan Wearne have all written works that may be categorised as verse novels or novellas. A large number of young-adult verse novels have also been published in recent years. Despite these publications, a lack of academic scholarship, particularly in Australia, has been devoted entirely to the verse novel, especially with regards to its formal elements of literary classification and sub-genre categories. As David McCooey suggests, poetry often 'attracts such anxiety when it moves beyond the 'high' and 'lyrical' modes' (2001, 31). Lars Ole Sauerberg offers an explanation for this apprehension by suggesting that due to the 'epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical conventions reflected by the novel as the norm, anything different from the normative implications of the novel will seem deviation' (2004, 441). However, Dino Felluga reminds us that before the popularity of the novel, 'poetry had for centuries...valued various forms of fictional narrative, from the epic and the romance to the pastoral and the ballad' (2002, 172). Although the verse novel may be contextualised within literary history as a form of narrative poetry akin to the epic and the ballad, for the purpose of discussing an engagement with genre, Porter's verse novels may be more fruitfully linked with the contemporary novel, since *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* manifestly employ, and consequently subvert, the detective and crime-thriller genres.

Engaging with popular genre conventions for the purposes of subversion is a literary technique commonly employed by writers who identify as feminist and/or lesbian writers. In a study of how feminist authors engage with genre fiction, Anne Cranny-Francis argues that by employing popular genre conventions, feminist writers are able to use their work as 'an attempt to subvert the patriarchal discourse by challenging its control of one semiotic system, writing, and specifically genre writing' (1990, 17). With reference to Cranny-Francis's research on genre, Lidia Curti suggests that by viewing genre as a 'terrain of contestation and resistance', lesbian writers have 'challenged pre-existing boundaries and demarcations in writing modes and voices' (1998, 35). In a critical study of American and British feminist crime novels, Sally

Munt establishes that the 1980s was an era in which lesbian crime fiction, specifically lesbian crime fiction featuring lesbian criminal investigators, began to establish itself as a recognisable sub-genre within the crime-narrative genre (1994, 120). In her study of Porter's *The monkey's mask*, Fleur Diamond states that 'lesbian investigators have a recognisable niche within the broader area of feminist crime fiction' (1999). Among others, Diamond cites the textual examples of Val McDermid's *Blue genes* (1996), Patricia Cornwell's *Post mortem* (1990) and Sandra Scoppettone's *I'll be leaving you always* (1994) to substantiate this claim.

One of the most apparent ways in which Porter engages with a subversion of the crime-fiction genre is through her lesbian criminal investigators and the sexual desires that they express. Critics such as Munt and Paulina Palmer have suggested that one of the main reasons the crime narrative is an attractive genre for lesbian writers to subvert is because the genre conventions provide specific opportunities for an alternative expression of sexual desire. As Palmer explains, a literary subversion of the crime genre provides an 'opportunity to combine the representation of lesbian romance, which makes reference to relationships and sexual encounters between women, with the exploration of themes of a specifically feminist kind' (1991, 10). Palmer later states that lesbian writers also engage with the thriller genre 'as a vehicle for treating sex and the erotic' (1993, 107). Munt suggests that since many lesbian crime novels have 'evolved primarily out of lesbian, rather than crime fiction' the lesbian crime narrative is therefore 'preoccupied with issues of sexuality and identity' (1994, 121). Munt argues that by reappropriating the archetypal male detective, the lesbian crime narrative is therefore able to situate 'the lesbian at the centre of meaning and dissemination' (1994, 140). This literary strategy allows for an exploration, not only of the representation of female bodies, but that of female desire. This emphasis directs us to the discussion of how feminist and lesbian writers, such as Porter, may engage with genre fiction to subvert traditional abjection of female bodies and offer alternative representations.

### Porter's abject-ive

For Julia Kristeva the abject can be defined as '[n]either subject nor object' (1982, 1), a material or experience that 'disturbs identity, system, order' and does not consider 'borders, positions, rules (1982, 4). The abject transgression of boundaries is a central point of discussion for feminist critics such as Blakley's, Creed and Palmer with regards to the literary representation of lesbian bodies and desire. Creed explains that because Kristeva considers the female body to be 'quintessentially the abject body because of its procreative functions' (1995, 87), the lesbian body therefore represents an abjection that is especially abhorrent. However, Palmer suggests that an awareness and acknowledgement of female abjection allows feminist writers to 'challenge the lesbian's abject role with the aim of contributing to the process of her resignification' (2007, 50). With this view in mind, it is Porter's destabilisation of the boundaries between poetry, prose and genre that allow for an alternative view of abjection aligned with lesbian desire and eroticism.

Kristeva's discussion of the abject as '[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the

composite' (1982, 4), suggests the transgressive qualities of the erotic. Kristeva identifies that there is a '*lapse of the Other*' (1982, 15) whereby there is a 'breakdown of objects of desire' and the 'abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgements' (1982, 15). This rupture may be viewed as the connection between the abject and eroticism. As Blakley explains, '[t]he subject is not only abjected, repulsed by her own boundaries, but attracted to them, in part, because they no longer seem to be her own' (1995, 232–33). Kristeva's theorising of the abject reverberates through the opening lines of *The monkey's mask* as Jill Fitzpatrick, the text's lesbian private investigator, confronts herself in a mirror: 'how much guts have you got?' (3). Jill's questioning of herself situates her abject female body both metaphorically and literally at the centre of the narrative. Jill's challenge of her reflection alludes to the symbolic order that her abject female body threatens. As Blakley's explains, '[a]bjection is an inevitable experience for anyone who has entered the symbolic order where the difference between subject and object is crucial to identity' (1995, 228). Jill is Porter's version of the hardboiled detective, a seemingly rough ex-cop who runs with the philosophy '[n]ever tell them / where their kid is / until ya get paid' (15). However, unlike the traditional detective figure, existing to uphold conservative ideology, Jill's presence in this narrative is to disrupt this phallogentric system.

By allowing Jill to express the contradictory and ambiguous traits of her character, Porter is able to avoid a 'butch' or 'femme' stereotype of Jill's lesbianism. No matter how much Jill craves the thrill of 'trouble / to spark [her] engine / and pay [her] mortgage' (3) her character is also vulnerable, as demonstrated in the poem 'I'm female':

I'm not tough  
droll or stoical.

I droop  
after wine, sex  
or intense conversation.

The streets coil around me  
when they empty

I'm female

I get scared. (1994, 4)

It is Jill's acknowledgment of her femaleness, rather than a repression of it, which provides her with a form of sexual empowerment. As Diamond observes, 'Jill's declaration of her femaleness is a front-line destabilisation of the inherited traditions of the crime genre' (1999). This admission also highlights the ambiguity that Jill's character represents as a criminal investigator, which brings into question the legitimacy of the detective character upheld by traditional conventions. In feminist uses of genre, Cranny-Francis suggests that the disruption to hegemonic generic functions not only allow for a retelling of a plot, but also for a narrative of alternative representations, including that of desire (1990, 14). Jill's identification with her abject

femaleness and lesbian identity is amplified and further complicated once she meets Porter's literary representation of the femme fatale.

Porter aligns the activities of detecting, searching, investigating with that of body and sexual desire. Jill's craving for 'trouble, / on the rocks' (3) is alleviated with the missing-persons case of university student and aspiring poet Mickey Norris. Mickey's case sends Jill, 'all muscle / street smart / no education' (17), into the institution of the university where she meets the 'honey-blond' (26) femme fatale, Dr Diana Maitland. Jill's relationship with Diana represents what Kristeva describes as the prohibited object of 'intercourse between same and same' (1982, 103). Porter is able to undermine this limiting description with her explicit descriptions of the erotic nature of Jill and Diana's relationship. Immediately after their first sexual encounter the ecstatic Jill draws attention to the Kristevan object of 'flow, drain, discharge' (Kristeva 1982, 103) when she asks 'what jellies my legs? / what flash-floods my cunt?' (42). As Lucas suggests, 'Jill's desire for Diana disrupts delineations between personal and private bodies' which pushes Jill 'off balance, her own body exposed, her professional commitments dangling' (1997, 29). Jill's sexual interaction with Diana is central to the narrative as it provides an abject eroticism that allows the text to destabilise the detective genre convention of solving the crime and ensuring legal justice.

As in *The monkey's mask*, Porter employs abject erotic imagery in *El Dorado* to develop tension with, and eventually undermine, the conservative ideologies of the crime thriller. *El Dorado* opens with Detective Inspector Bill Buchanan, who is struggling to find 'El Dorado', a child serial killer who leaves a 'gold thumb print' (4) on the forehead of each victim. The crime is made even more disturbing as each child is found 'smothered, unmolested, / ritually, even gently, buried / in a shallow grave' (5). This is a case of extremes and Bill realises that he will be unable to solve this mystery without the 'hypnotic imagination' (29) of his childhood friend Cath, who works in Hollywood as an 'imaginary worlds specialist director' (35). Cath's occupation alludes not only to the constructed nature of film, but also of childhood, text and sexuality. Throughout the narrative, Bill's expression of his unrequited love for Cath corresponds with Cath's lesbian relationship with the character Lily. Although Bill sees his love for Cath as 'his sanctuary' and his 'sweetest blessing' (54) he describes his desire for Cath as 'a clean wound' (34) and ultimately ineffective, just like the phallogocentric system that his heterosexuality represents. In the poem 'Mixed bathing', Bill questions the notion of childhood innocence, recalling his communal bathing with Cath as 'memorable / but utterly unerotic' (53). The closest thing Bill has to a sexual fantasy is when he 'thinks briefly / about sex / but as usual' his penis 'is much sleepier than he is' (19). By not consummating Bill's heterosexual desire for Cath, not even in an imaginary form, Porter is able to disrupt the heterosexual power traditionally upheld in thriller and crime genres and place emphasis on the abject erotic relationship between *El Dorado's* lesbian characters.

Through the abject association of animals and sex Porter is able to represent the sexual relationship shared between the characters of Cath and Lily. Porter signifies Cath's sexual relationship with Lily through the mythical animal of the snake, which may also be viewed as a reappropriation of the phallic symbol. Lily, already presented

as abject by Cath's initial desire for her, is also a 'herpetologist' (75). Lily's occupation alludes to the traditional abject stereotype that Creed identifies as the 'animalistic lesbian body' (1995, 88) and, just like the relationship between Jill and Diana, Porter consistently places emphasis on this abject element. Cath and Lily sleep 'entwined like tree snakes' (133), Lily touches Cath's hand 'as if handling a spooked snake' (157) and Lily's desire for Cath is carnal and animalistic as she 'engulfs [Cath] on the street / like a hungry anaconda' (197). Porter's use of snake symbolism to present and explore this lesbian relationship breaks the borders between human and animal, carnal and cultural. What was traditionally considered monstrous and disgusting in the tradition of the abject is now erotically charged, offering extreme pleasure and arousal. Porter positions the abject in an affirmative position for the lesbian relationship Cath and Lily share.

Just as Jill craves the 'wild wild risk' (30) of crime in *The monkey's mask*, Cath is also attracted to the extreme nature of crime. Both women align thoughts of the murders they are investigating with their sexual encounters. As Cath contemplates her desire for Lily, her thoughts gravitate to the El Dorado serial killer. Cath admits her morbid fascination: 'I can't control / my disgust. / Or my own appalled / fascination' (216). As Cath's relationship with Lily becomes more intimate and complicated, so does Cath's involvement with the serial killer El Dorado and she is eventually drugged and detained by him, yet admits that she had 'a terrifying / good time' (252). In *The monkey's mask*, Jill fantasises about Mickey and asks '[i]s it easier / lusting after Mickey's legs / than looking at her face?' (79). It is also through Jill's erotic encounters with Diana that allow Jill, rather than the police, to understand how Mickey was murdered:

...the cops  
will never know

reckless, careless  
sex killed Mickey

I know  
because

reckless, careless sex  
nearly killed me. (245)

It is through their identification with the abject that both Jill and Cath are able to gain an awareness of their sexuality and the complex crimes they are investigating.

Despite privileging lesbianism over heterosexuality, Porter positions these lesbian relationships in an ambiguous manner. In *El Dorado*, Cath describes her desire for Lily as a 'fatal mistake' (302), but Cath's admission is immediately contradicted with her declaration that 'every drought is broke / with a fatal mistake' (302). Immediately after Bill gives Cath his 'blessing' (305) on her commitment to Lily, someone that makes her 'disgustingly happy' (119), Cath's 'mood crashes / and cracks / like a doom-clapped / mirror' (305). It may be argued that Cath's character resists a conventional relationship with Lily, as this would represent a phallogocentric

conservatism that she does not subscribe to. In a more extreme example, despite learning of the ‘poison’ (218) that Diana’s body represents, Jill still craves Diana’s ‘love, love, / oh poisonous love’ (218). In reference to Porter’s representation of Diana’s body as venomous, Lucas suggests that:

The motif of the body as poison, as toxic fluidity, highlights the text’s exploration of the intoxicating slippage between inside and outside, between the body which feeds and the body which is fed upon. (1997, 31)

No matter the outcome of the murder investigation, Jill remains adamant that she is indebted to Diana for teaching her the pleasures of ‘[w]hat girls know / what girls do’ (252). Both relationships presented in *The monkey’s mask* and in *El Dorado* run parallel with the crimes being investigated and, like the crimes, the relationships explored are not provided with any resolutions. The abject desires experienced by Cath and Jill will not be arrested or solved, as this would follow the tradition of the conservative logic upheld by detective and crime fiction.

### Reading the poetic body

Porter’s detective protagonists are both unsuspecting readers of poetry, yet it is their examination of poetry that provides an alternative resolution, both to their criminal investigations and their ability to express their sexual desires. In *El Dorado*, Porter provides Bill with the opportunity to forensically examine the body of a victim with ‘his gloved / hand’ (3). However, it is not the scientific evidence that offers clues to the criminal, but rather poetry sent by El Dorado to the *Age* newspaper. In what may be read in a darkly humorous moment, Bill contemplates the criminal’s choice of the ‘distinctive word / *pristine*’ (163) which alludes to the antithesis of abjection. In *El Dorado* the threat to the social order is not associated with an abjection, but rather with a criminal who is a ‘germ-free / moral crusader’ (163). In *The monkey’s mask*, Jill’s lack of scientific evidence encourages her to turn to the ‘smell / of sex and violence. / And pages of Mickey’s words’ (178). It is Jill’s discovery of Mickey’s ‘fucking poems’ (195), and a close reading of them, that provide Jill with a medium to express her own erotic experiences of abjection as revealed in the poem ‘Sex and Poetry’:

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)



As Diamond observes, it is Porter's continuous linkage of poetry with the abject body that allow Porter to comment that '[p]oetic language is viscous, "sticky", flowing beyond the borders of genre, gender, and legalistic detection' (1999).

Porter's parody of '[v]ictim poetry' (107) in *The monkey's mask* also provides Mickey's character with the capacity to haunt the text with the abject positions of victim, corpse and ghost. As Diamond suggests, Mickey's character was murdered because of the 'threat she represents to key male characters in her capacity to speak her experience of violent heterosexual sex' (1999). However, by occupying the ultimate form of abjection Mickey is also able to haunt the symbolic order that she was expelled from. This is demonstrated in the eponymous and concluding poem of *The monkey's mask* as Jill expresses her observations on Mickey's metaphoric presence:

Mickey's ghost walks  
in this tropical rain  
  
she swings in the fig trees  
  
her voice  
glistens green and wet  
  
she's growing dark  
she's wearing a monkey's mask. (256)

Porter allows the murdered character of Mickey to occupy an abject yet powerful position throughout the verse novel. This is achieved through the body of Mickey's poetry and Jill's reading of this poetic body. But Mickey is also 'masked' and as such, Porter is able to show that Mickey's abject body is a construction, a literary technique that can be subverted to empower female bodies and offer a resignification of lesbian sexuality and desire.

## Conclusion

Unlike a traditional crime narrative, the crimes being investigated in *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* remain unresolved and the investigators are left with personal and professional uncertainties. However, Porter's investigators have now been provided with a greater understanding of the fluidity of their bodies and their sexuality. *El Dorado* concludes with Bill commenting on the abject and corporeal conditions that he and Cath both share: '[o]ne day / I'll weep over Cath's body / or, more bloody likely, / she'll weep over mine' (369). While in *The monkey's mask*, Jill abandons her murder investigation and is still enthralled by her femme fatale: 'oh Diana, Diana, / my heart palpitates / like a pop song' (255). The open-ended conclusions of both verse novels are significant in upholding Porter's quest to subvert the phallogocentric conventions of the traditional crime genre, where the male criminal investigator restores social order, and '[w]omen, if appearing at all, do not act, they react' (Munt 1994, 3). It was Porter's determination to 'write bad' (Porter 2000) that has allowed *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* to demonstrate the potentialities of

the verse novel form and of genre reappropriation. By offering a reading of the textual and metaphorical bodies presented throughout *The monkey's mask* and *El Dorado* this paper has claimed that it is Porter's poetic exploration of the abject erotic that allows for an alternative representation, and textual celebration of lesbian sexuality and desire.

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