

# Speaking Bodies

## The 'Black Novel' and Women as Borderland Identities

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### ABSTRACT

Analysing the main female characters in two contemporary novels (Derek Raymond's *I Was Dora Suarez* 1990 and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* 2006), I would propose a reflection on the female violated body showing how it is posited at the intersection between two combined influences: the consideration of the female body as a commodity undergoing the dynamics of economic exchange quite typical of a consumer society and the exploitation of this very body as a tool to communicate when any other language is made unavailable. It is my position that these influences are interlaced and often function together in some contemporary narratives. Though profoundly different and far apart in several respects, *I Was Dora Suarez* and *Becoming Abigail* provide two effective examples of how the female body may work as a hieroglyph handed to the reader so as to develop new cognitive paths for the interpretation of the woman's role in the community.

*Keywords:* alien body, commodity, female body, semiosis.

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### 1. SHADES, OR THE FEMALE BODY ON THE CROSSOVER

In 2000, Eric Gans writes an essay basically devoted to punk aesthetics and the practice of piercing and explains how a ritual born as a highly provocative rebellion against ordinary ethics soon becomes an "exemplary case of the post-modern market society's drive to generate significance" (Gans 2000, 164). In my work here, I would like to relate Gans's reflection – declined in several ways in Tobin Siebers's volume hosting the essay – to Grosz's very familiar position on the female body in Western society (1995, 30-35). More in particular, I'm interested in its definition

as a “surface for inscription” (Grosz 1995, 33), whose exploitation – I may add – is twofold: the body marked either by others to be easily marketable or by the woman herself, to pass on a message that cannot be otherwise communicated (Bordo 1993; Vallorani 2012). The two possibilities, as I see them, are not alternatives but may easily coexist and reinforce each other, producing a complex and ambiguous text written on the woman’s skin and then variously decoded.

For many reasons, these dynamics tend to appear more evidently where female bodies are depicted in crime fiction<sup>1</sup>. Quite typically, there, female characters are presented as objects easily (and legitimately) violated, often entering the market and the economic processes of a consumer society as prostitutes (Deandrea 2015). Even more typically, the female character is a victim, particularly likely to become a corpse. When dead, her body is ‘read’ as a text, a Rosetta stone providing the code of postmortem semiotics. It is of course to be kept in mind that, in recent times, the definition itself of ‘crime’ or ‘noir’ fiction has considerably expanded, and this has made a certain impact on the ways in which the formulae of genre are applied. For the sake of clarity, I would therefore favour a different label, the one suggested by Derek Raymond. In his autobiography, *The Hidden Files* (1992), the novelist introduces a new definition for his fiction, proposing to replace some more traditional labels with the shady but very effective name of “black novel” (see Raymond 1992, 97-98). This definition seems to put the tradition of the crime novel slightly to one side emphasizing the notion of social or sociological fiction, and reflection on the great themes of life and death at a sort of “dark crossroad” (1992, 144) where good and evil play their final game.

Within this theoretical frame, I want to concentrate on two novels in particular, both focussing on the body of a prostitute, though only one of them (*I was Dora Suarez*, by Derek Raymond) is normally included in the mainstream tradition of crime fiction (implying an investigation, a detective and a killer), while the other (*Becoming Abigail*, by Chris Abani) more clearly relates to the broader notion of “black novel” as stated by Raymond himself. What the two novels share is primarily a reflection on

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<sup>1</sup> If it is true that this tends to be a recurring feature in hard boiled fiction, it is also quite obvious that some authors exploit this possibile implication of the ravaged, female body more than others. Apart from James Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia* (1987) – in many respects a model not to be eluded – it may be relevant to remember that the semiosis of the female corpse as a canvas for the killer actually started with Jack-the-Ripper mythology (see Vallorani 2014, 220-238).

the figure of the prostitute as a social entity suffering a violation that is culturally 'authorized' in any patriarchal society and very much connected to the need for the man to state and make his power visible. This need, together with the tendency of women to be "pliable" (Grosz 1995, 32), may be exploited to produce economic advantage and it is the epistemological root of prostitution as a kind of business: violating women is something men need and it is *profitable*, it produces an economic outcome, it is an operation efficiently located within the frame of consumer culture.

Part of this process depends on women being considered as objects (or empty bodies), and, as Sassatelli explains, "In all societies objects accompany human beings throughout their existence, offering them support and inspiration and, at the same time, imposing limits and difficulties" (2007, 1). Therefore, once the female body is marked as a certain kind of object (as happens to both Dora and Abigail), it *must* be used as a status symbol and a mark of power. It consequently enters a process that can be described as "the interaction of two distinct and different *modes of relation* with the material world – consumption and production – and this distinction, in itself value laden, is overlain with an ascription of primary value to production. The characterization of life as a continuous merry-go-round of production and consumption becomes dominant, with consumption typically in an ancillary position, at least morally" (*ibid.*, 37).

This sociological pattern proves perfectly congruent with Bordo's reflection that the female body is a socially defined territory that has been historically colonized (Bordo 1993), and this is extremely clear in the two main female characters in the novel under discussion here. In both cases, the body of the prostitute, when alive, is sold for money and serves the symbolic purpose of providing the hierarchy between the two sexes, enacting "a disturbing negotiation of female fears and male fantasies" (Walton and Jones 1999, 233)<sup>2</sup>. Since the man is stronger and in a normally acknowledged position of power, the negotiation ends up with the woman being hurt, violated and possibly killed, after which her body – in

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<sup>2</sup> By the way, any narrative implying violation against the body of a woman, is still perceived, and always will be, as appealing and fascinating: consider the enormous market success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels, both as novels and as film narrative. If compared to the text we analyse here – far from neutral and much more disturbing – E.L. James's unbelievable popularity is probably also due to the fact that it depicts a violation that has no consequence on the female body in itself. It is grounded in violence that is deliberately agreed upon and almost desired by the female protagonist (which of course reverses a whole, very long history of women's struggle).

the end an object in all respects – is to be “read” in order to decode death and give it a reason.

I would also like to point out that the violated female body, once made into a corpse (which is the case of Dora Suarez), is also, for the (patriarchal) community, an object of desire and fascination to be hidden and, at the same time, studied to discover the nature of the torture that the dead female body underwent before dying. As we are speaking of women and sex, that nature – writes Gill Plain in his *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction. Gender, Sexuality and the Body* – results from gender, not vice versa: “A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers” (2001, 225).

This is true for both the characters I analyse here.

## 2. EPIPHANIES: “I WAS ...”

*I Was Dora Suarez* begins with a ravaged, female corpse, that “tells the story” of a terrible death. The body, cruelly violated and axed to pieces, is found in the house of a murdered 86-year-old widow and is examined by the nameless detective, the protagonist of all the novels belonging to Raymond’s *Factory Series*<sup>3</sup>. Later on, the autopsy shows that Dora was dying of AIDS, and the story of how she became HIV-positive will gradually bring further horrors to the surface. The detective soon becomes obsessed with Dora, and his frantic search for the killer follows two different, though related, semiotic paths, one of them directly linked to the marks on the corpse and the other resulting from the finding of the victim’s ‘notebook’, a sort of diary that the detective *reads* in a more traditional way, developing a familiarity and even an intense emotional involvement with Dora.

The story is openly based on a dual semiosis grounded, on the one hand on the traditional perception of the prostitute in a patriarchal, western society, and on the other on a highly individual feeling gradually developed by the nameless detective towards Dora. As a member of the community, the prostitute is normally – and so to speak, institutionally –

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<sup>3</sup> The *Factory Series* includes 5 novels: *He Died with His Eyes Open* (1984), *The Devil’s Home on Leave* (1985), *How the Dead Live* (1986), *I Was Dora Suarez* (1990), *Dead Man Upright* (1993). The leading figure and serial character is an unnamed Detective Sergeant working for the Unsolved Deaths Division, dubbed “The Factory” by criminals and policemen alike.

perceived as a repulsive subject, whose gendered performance is openly sanctioned, though secretly encouraged and even required. She must be considered within the frame of that “de-moralization of luxury” that Sas-satelli identifies as a very important legacy in the processes of consumption today (2007, 37).

As a living woman, Dora was targeted as an object of desire, possibly a luxury item, to be bought and consumed, in several socially sanctioned but widely tolerated ways. When murdered, the body becomes a sign, and it triggers what we may define our first semiosis, decoded and explained by the unnamed detective to his colleague:

I think Suarez was a whore. I think she was in love with someone on a one-way basis. What I know by reading her was that she had had enough. What I saw in the flat with Bowman was that she was dressed to kill or die. [...] She was also, going by her notebook, physically a very sick girl, and the whole thing stinks to me. (Raymond 1990, 51)

It is undeniable that Dora Suarez *speaks* to the nameless detective through her ravaged body. As happens in any investigation, fictional as well as real, the corpse is in fact studied to find, in it and/or on its surface, faint traces revealing the history of the crime.

Precisely at this juncture, Dora's body becomes a text, passing into what Peter Brooks defines “the realm of the letter” (Brooks 1993, 22) and becoming “legible” and coherent with a specific code, based, at least at the beginning, on the semiotics of crime scenes in police investigations.

At the same time, something unusual happens: communicative interaction is established between the nameless detective, who's not supposed to become involved with Dora but does (in his imagination, of course), and the corpse, which goes on “speaking” well beyond the conclusions of the forensic examination. Right from the beginning – that is from the finding of the body – the reader realizes that the halo enveloping the story, the characters and the places is peculiar, more emotionally loaded, anticipating a revelation that will come, as ever, precisely from the victim's body, though developing along a brand-new path of investigation.

The unnamed detective appears unable to maintain standard behaviour and govern his intensely empathic participation in Dora's suffering and his consequent desire to find the man responsible for this awful murder. The unnamed detective gets involved in Dora Suarez's fate, and this personal involvement transforms the status of her body again: no longer an impersonal text to be read for investigative purposes, but a human being, ominously violated, secluded, forgotten and very lonely.

The nameless detective finds himself mirrored in her condition in more ways than one.

And this is my link to what I would like to call a second semiosis. Precisely when the detective is starting to suspect that what he sees in Dora is himself, he also finds her diary, and starts reading it in search of more secrets.

I knew I would find Dora's things in the end if I looked long enough, and I did, in the fortieth box I opened in the kitchen. There were just a few papers in it – the National Health Insurance card and a black – and-white photograph, with its corners bent, of her dancing with a man in a club somewhere with his back to the camera, a dark-haired man, and an exercise book. I opened the book; it was about three quarters filled with her handwriting. (Raymond 1990, 57)

Through this document, in fact, Dora Suarez finds a way of speaking, from her grave, personally and in her own words, to the first person to consider her as a human being, though after her death<sup>4</sup>. The profile emerging from the written pages is a totally different one. While in life Dora's internal identity had been mystified and rewritten by the performance of established, gendered norms, so often replicated as to be mistaken for the enactment of true identity (Butler 1990; 1993), after her death and through the idiosyncratic words of a diary she gets her identity back.

Once I was Dora Suarez, but even if I die I am not her any more; I have just become something appalling. Looking at myself naked in the mirror, I see I have lost the right to call myself a person; what's left of me now is barely human. (Raymond 1990, 68)

In the fertile imagination of the nameless detective, words on paper combine with the marks on Dora's skin and in the inside parts of her body, to produce the profile of a real woman: no longer an icon or an object, but a person. As she writes, "I don't want to be parted from my body – what has happened to it is not my fault, But it says it wants to go" (*ibid.*, 64).

There is a game of mirrors between Dora's diary and Dora's body. While providing the explanation for the systematic ravaging of her body by her clients at the Parallel Club, the words on paper also re-invent a possible, imaginative space for freedom, eventually separating the dying body from her soul. I feel that Rushdie's notion of imaginary homeland may also be implied here. Raymond imagines Dora as the daughter of

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<sup>4</sup> See Pasolini 2014.

a violent, Spanish father and a Jewish mother of Polish origins, both of them refugees. She is therefore not only a crossbred but also, technically, a second-generation migrant. Briefly, she belongs to the endless diaspora of travellers “flooding” and “tainting” Europe in recent years<sup>5</sup>. The definition of Dora as a stranger – not fully English, though almost<sup>6</sup> – is a key aspect of her being a prostitute and of her body being exploitable also and mostly for economic purposes. Though not explicitly posited as a foreigner, or may be precisely due to this lack of prevalence of her ethnic origins over her gender identity (and gender exploitation), Dora is very effective in pointing out how strongly the notion of being a stranger combines with female sexual abuse, and an abuse that is felt to be somehow more legal when the violated woman is ethnically “different”. And this effectively introduces my second case study.

### 3. BECOMING, OR ON A THRESHOLD

The very first pages of *Becoming Abigail* show a young, Nigerian woman, smoking on a bridge in London and planning her own suicide after a life of endless violation (Abani 2006, 26 ff.). Abigail is named after her mother who died in childbirth and she spends the first part of her short life in the small village where she was born, in the unprotective company of a permanently drunk, though meek father and of a number of relatives who actually force her into a kind of home-based prostitution. She does not resist and is not surprised: simply, she takes all this for granted, as a vital and shared step of her education for coming of age. As she thinks when travelling to London with her cousin Peter, “She had felt caught in the sheath of men’s plans” (*ibid.*, 75)<sup>7</sup>. Once in England, after her father’s suicide, she slowly understands why she had been suspicious of Peter’s

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<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Yosefa Loshitzky’s seminal work on the dominating atmosphere marking Europe in recent years well explains the twin notions of invasion and infection often coupled with recent migrations (2010, 1-13).

<sup>6</sup> Meaningfully, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published in 1990, the same year as *I Was Dora Suarez*. Both are set in London, and in both cases the protagonist is a second-generation migrant. Therefore, the social context the two novelists are referring to, though with dramatically different stories, is probably the same.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Abani is very effective in describing the lack of surprise of Nigerian children when suffering experiences that are trauma in other parts of the world. In this respect, also see his *GraceLand* (2004). Abani’s most recent work is very much connected to the grotesque body and its visual depiction. About this, see Oboe 2014.

behaviour right from the beginning, thinking that he looked “as if he hadn’t learned to occupy his body properly” (*ibid.*, 77). Peter expects her to earn her living (and produce money for him) by selling her body, by becoming part of the economic demand-offer-consumption chain of prostitution. What Peter has in mind is, very simply, an effective business relation between himself as the seller and a number of mostly white men buying an object – Abigail’s body – that is his property. Just like Dora, Abigail is not supposed to be seen as “a person”:

None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her. That she wore bronze lipstick, or had a beautiful smile that was punctuated perfectly by dimples. That she plaited her hair herself, into tight cornrows. That her light complexion was a throwback from that time a Portuguese sailor had mistaken her great-grandmother’s cries. (Abani 2006, 26)

This is why Peter is honestly amazed when Abigail reacts by trying (unsuccessfully) to protect herself and eventually looking for a way out. This has never happened and will never happen; therefore Abigail’s rebellion is to be punished, so that she can learn what her place in the world is.

In this case again, it is quite possible to distinguish between two phases, and two different kinds of semiosis of the body. In the first part of her story, Abigail is a canvas, passive and receptive as paper, undergoing any kind of rewriting on her body, literally in the name of her dead mother (whom she worships just like her father does), and following the silent obligations spelt out by her patriarchal culture and her family genealogy. The experience she has as a daughter and an early victim of sexual abuse by the members of her family leaves marks on her body, signs that she is passively suffering, at the beginning with no real awareness of what is being done to her and through her as a female member of the species. Even when still in Nigeria, she starts being educated for the function that Yosefa Loshitzky acutely identifies as typical of migrant women in Fortress Europe: they tend to be used as “the catalyst of domestication” (Loshitzky 2010, 44) and they enter demand/offer/consumption relations as dispensable bodies, that can be used up more easily and effectively than corresponding male bodies. As I said of Dora, this use of the female body is felt to be almost legal and in any case authorized by the feeling that the woman is not a sentient being at all.

A possible objection to this line of thought is that what happens to Abigail when moving to England is quite typical of any migrant, asylum seeker, refugee of any gender, when getting to a country where he or she is illegal and therefore unprotected. As Loshitzky shows in her analysis

of contemporary, European cinema, the migrants' exploitation tends to be prevalently physical and in some cases even cannibalistic when it feeds the extremely lucrative human organs industry encouraging the migrants to sell their organs in order to get a passport and documents (Loshitzky 2010, 35)<sup>8</sup>. Even though this 'business' is patently against the law, it is also obvious that the migrants are often put in a position where they cannot refuse to 'donate' their internal organs to European people (or white Westerners in general) to survive and – as Loshitzky puts it – “to become part of the national body, the body of the nation” (*ibid.*, 73). And it is quite true that, in London as in many contemporary metropolises, “the heart of the migrants [...] is the engine of the city. The city [...] is like a toilet that needs to be flushed, cleaned, and purified by the migrants” (*ibid.*, 71).

At the same time, Abigail's story also shows what makes the female body, and therefore the female condition, peculiar: the possibility (which easily becomes probability and eventually certainty) of rape, sexual abuse, infection, impregnation, all acts whose main characteristic consists in their positing male power through violent events that may be repeated a relevant number of times before the victim dies (and in dying, she escapes and resists the pain inflicted).

Within this frame, Abigail's decision to kill herself *becomes* and *is* a revolutionary act. Death as a choice appears to her as the only possible way to rescue herself by giving up her spent, wasted body and at the same time exploiting her own physical death to rewrite the meaning of her own existence<sup>9</sup>. This existence is recounted in fact by Abigail herself, when she is on the verge of taking her final decision. Suspended between the 'Now' of London and the 'Then' of a rural village in Nigeria, she makes herself visible standing on the threshold between life and death. And showing the marks on her body, the same marks she has carved upon her skin.

Later, as Derek dozed on the sex rank sofa, stained with their smeared secretion, she stole into the kitchen and finding the needle Derek's wife used to sew all her love into the turkey at Christmas, she held it over the naked flame of the gas range. And in the cold reflection of the microwave's window, she burned two points onto her breasts, one on each. Each one. One on one. The none in the middle, the hard of her sternum pressing back

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<sup>8</sup> Loshitzky's analysis of Stephen Frears's film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) is seminal, in this respect (Loshitzky 2010, 61-76).

<sup>9</sup> Here as in *Becoming Abigail* and the protagonist's decision to commit suicide, the character is proposing a reconsideration of her life in the light of death, a far echo of what Pier Paolo Pasolini writes about a certain kind of death as a light retrospectively illuminating life and providing a sense to it (Pasolini 1972).

against the needle. One on her stomach. On each thigh. Each knee. Several round each ankle until they were wearing a garland. Then in the blindness of faith, dots on the back of her thighs, running desperately up to the rise of her buttocks. Then one on her pudenda. [...] And in the tears running down her face she tasted herself for the first time. (Abani 2006, 52)

Then she helps her lover to read her text:

He ran his hand over her, stopping as his fingers encountered the bubbles of Braille [...].

“This one”, she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. “This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here”, and she was down on her stomach, “is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother’s. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don’t you see?” and she showed him the words branded in her skin. How had he missed them when they made love? But he had. “This is my mother”, she was saying, This is my mother. Words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail. (Abani 2006, 53)

At this juncture, Abigail’s body passes from the first to the second semiosis, and at the same time the character switches from having a body to being one, also acquiring the awareness that she can use her skin as a canvas and write her story there: a practice inaugurated when she feels she is crossing the threshold towards adulthood:

Sitting in her room, the darkness softened by a tired moon straining through the dirty windows, she had rolled her growing breasts between her palms like dough being shaped for a lover’s bread. This wasn’t an erotic exercise, though it became that, inevitably. At first it was a curiosity, a genuine wonder at the burgeoning of a self a self that was still Abigail, yet still her. With the tip of a wax crayon she would write “me”, over and over on the brown rise of them. And when she washed in the shower the next day, the colour would bleed, but the wax left a sheen, the memory of night and her reclamation. (Abani 2006, 27)

It could be said that, for Abigail, her skin marking goes in the direction of recovering her body as a “chimerical whole” (Huxley 1977, 29): though endowed with an integrity and coherence that is only imaginary, it tends to be perceived as the only unarguable reality, something that exists. And what is written on it is the final message.

It is at this point that Abigail becomes an embodied subject. Meaningfully, this process is triggered by moving away from Nigeria and arriving in a foreign, Western country, where she is supposed to find a better life and where her tragic fate is instead fulfilled. The journey of hope/delusion taking Abigail to London results in a number of markings on

her body, basically of two diverging kinds: the ones caused by the violation she undergoes by her torturers and the wounds she carves on her own body in order to remember. The latter, openly, epitomize her refusal to be totally passive and the wish to become the 'author' of herself.

In Loshitzky's words, "The journey in the foreign landscape is also a journey of forgetting, a passage where identity is lost yet where the prospects for gaining new identity are dubious" (Loshitzky 2010, 18). Now the point is that Abigail starts marking her body – also beginning the second semiosis we are speaking of – precisely because she does not want to forget, and the only way of remembering she knows is through physical suffering. Somehow, the process is reminiscent of what practitioners of 'body sculpture' and 'body painting' do when they forcefully modify their bodies, often with intense suffering, in order to transform it into a work of art (Gans 2000, 160).

Abigail goes through a process that is very similar, though for a different purpose. She marks her body not in the name of art, but because this appears to be the only possible way to resist her fate. She switches from being passive to active when she starts writing on her skin, in the same way as Dora does when she begins taking notes on her situation: instead of writing a diary, a novel, words on paper, Abigail writes directly on her own skin, reclaiming possession of a surface that has been stolen from her since she was born.

In conclusion, I hope it is clear, by now, how the female body, especially when violated, can become a sign, thus entering a semiotic process that compensates for the imposed silence of a patriarchal context. This silence, determined by reasons that are both cultural and economic, can only be reacted by resorting to unusual means of communication, able to open up a space for epiphany and revelation. Though declined in different ways, the two novels under consideration here replicate the same communicative pattern, introducing a language that makes the body "legible" in words that are not to be misunderstood.

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