

Book Review

Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity

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I have to admit: I'm a newbie when it comes to detective fiction, Chicano/a, or otherwise. Up until five years ago, I didn't read detective fiction, much less write it, which is why my decision to write a mystery novel about the murdered women of the El Paso/Juárez border was, at first, such a daunting proposition. Of course, I had read Lucha Corpi, Manuel Ramos, and Rolando Hinojosa Smith, but I didn't think of these as mystery novels, *per se*. To me, their books classified as Chicano/a literature with a detective protagonist. What did I know? Obviously, I had some homework to do. Good researcher that I am, I bought as many books as my credit cards could afford on the mystery-writing genre, as well as stacks and stacks of paperbacks by famous names like Cornwell, Muller, Grafton, Burke, Paretsky, Anaya, and Nava. Anaya and Nava? Wait a minute, two Chicano detectives in the popular mystery section of the bookstore instead of on the dusty bookshelf devoted to "Hispanic Authors"? One, a shamanic private investigator tackling issues like nuclear waste and black magic in New Mexico; the other, a gay Chicano lawyer whose adventures included commentaries on AIDS, gay identity, and familia. Need I say I was hooked? Need I say I saw in the mystery genre a venue for social

critique that prevailed in all of the books I was reading and that gave me precisely the vehicle I needed to comment on the social ills of NAFTA and femicide on the border?

Somewhere in the back of my cultural critic brain, I was thinking what a good academic study detective fiction would make, particularly the study of what I now realized was a new genre of Chicano/a literature: Chicano/a detective fiction. I flirted with the idea of engaging in this research for about five seconds, and then returned to my own primary attempt at a Chicana detective novel. Two years later, I met Ralph Rodriguez at an American Studies Association meeting in Washington DC, and learned that he was writing a manuscript on Chicano detective fiction. I have been eagerly anticipating his book ever since.

Not only does *Brown Gumshoes* break new ground by looking at a little-studied and relatively new subject of Chicano/a letters, it also posits an interesting argument: that through the detective genre, Chicano/a authors can explore the Chicano/a subject in what Rodriguez calls "the post-nationalist moment", a historically specific ontological space in which Chicana/o identity has been attempting to redefine itself outside of the cultural logic of "el Movimiento" and its rhetoric of nationalism, essentialism, and carnalismo (or brotherhood). By studying the work of our pioneering Chicano/a detective fiction writers – Rolando Hinojosa, Manuel Ramos, Lucha Corpi, Rudolfo Anaya, and Michael Nava – Ralph Rodriguez



demonstrates that the mystery genre is much more than just formulaic writing or pulp entertainment; it is an extended analysis of the “alienated outsider,” as represented by the Chicana/o detective, who not only is still at odds with the dominant culture of whiteness, but now is also estranged from the cultural, linguistic, political, and sexual discourses that structured Chicano and Chicana identity at the time of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement.

... detective novels are about discerning the mysteries of identity. At the heart of their narrative, after all, is the quest to reveal who the criminal is. ... time and again the detective also unravels a mystery about him- or herself. The novel is as much his or her story as it is the story of the crime (Rodriguez, 8).

For Rodriguez, then, the act of solving a crime is analogous to unraveling the riddles of identity (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology).

The opening chapter of *Brown Gumshoes* provides a succinct discussion of “the shifting post-nationalist order, that is the movement away from a solidarity of sameness and toward a dynamics of difference” (Rodriguez, 5) in Chicano/a identity politics, and also counters the charge that working in a popular genre like a mystery novel automatically guarantees a large audience and a large royalty check for the authors. Although the “promise” of a mass audience is inherent in a popular genre, the fact that Chicano/a novels are either published by much less lucrative independent presses or marketed to a Latino audience curtails that promise substantially. It is for the rest of the book to show how the Chicano/a detective novel interrogates Chicana/o identity outside of the discourses of cultural nationalism that in-

clude machismo, indigenismo, la familia, and nostalgia for the homeland of Aztlán.

Structured chronologically, by order of first publication, the chapters that follow focus, respectively, on Rolando Hinojosa-Smith’s Klail City Death Trip series (1985, 1998), Michael Nava’s Henry Rios’ series (1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996), Lucha Corpi’s Gloria Damasco series (1992, 1995, 1999), Manuel Ramos’ Luis Montez series (1993, 1994, 1996, 1997), and Rudolfo Anaya’s Sonny Baca series (1995, 1996, 1999).

Brown Gumshoes ends with a brief look at two Latina detectives, the Cuban American private investigator, Lupe Solano, created by Carolina Garcia-Aguilera and the Salvadoran detective, Romilia Chacón, invented by Marcos McPeck Villatoro. Like the Chicano/a gumshoes examined in the text, these two Latina investigators represent the issues of their respective communities – the politics of diaspora, the increased Latinization of the United States, and the push and pull of language, as well as their own individually raced, classed, and gendered notions of identity in white mainstream America – and in so doing, adeptly embody the “alienated outsider” of Latino/a detective fiction.

Of course, I have a few quibbles with the text, but they are, I repeat, quibbles. The lack of Cherrie Moraga’s ruminations of “Chicano queer tribe” in the Henry Rios chapter (in fact, she’s mentioned briefly in the Gloria Damasco chapter); the overuse of the verb “aver”; misnaming the Chicano Movement as the Chicana/o Movement, which it most definitely was not (even some of the Movimiento women called themselves Chicano rather than Chicana); and the weak transitions between chapters. A more significant weakness in the book was the organization of the chapters. Although there

is nothing wrong with chronological order as a way of organizing a study of a literary genre, beginning with the most radical post-nationalist Chicano identity and ending with a representation of veterano proto-nationalism undercut the author's premise that "the detective novels studied in this project serve as significant registers of the multiply informed ways Chicana/os identify in the contemporary moment" (Rodriguez, 140). For the argument's sake, it would have been more effective to begin with Anaya (old-school macho warrior identity), followed by Hinojosa-Smith (the effect of capitalism on Chicano identity politics), Ramos (issues of masculinity), and Corpi (feminism and the Movement), and to end with Nava (queer Chicanismo).

Structural issues aside, this is what I most like about Ralph Rodriguez's scholarship: that he challenges some of the more

venerated sacred cows of Chicano cultural politics, namely the sanctity of the traditional heteronormative and misogynistic family structure, the nostalgia for a mythic past rooted either in a romanticized pre-Columbian or revolutionary time, the false consciousness of cultural nationalism, and the unquestioned performance of masculinity that typified Chicano Movement patriarchs. Through all of this, he gives us the first full-fledged analysis of a growing new genre of Chicana/o letters: Chicana/o detective fiction. My only question is: where was *Brown Gumshoes* when I most needed to learn how to write a Chicana lesbian mystery?

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