

# CHICANO GEOGRAPHY

## IN DETECTIVE FICTION

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In this paper I want to consider whether Chicana/o literature will follow the path of ethnic literature and move from being an addition to US national literature ("American" literature) to rewriting itself as part of mainstream national literature. In the early decades of the twentieth century many different voices found articulation in US novels, and though many of these books (such as Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Abraham Cahan's *Yekl*, and John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*) quickly went out of print, they were reprinted and found new critical life as part of the renewed interest in US Ethnic literature in the 1980s. In the years between their original publication and their renaissance in the eighties, US discourse about immigration and ethnicity was deeply affected by both world wars, the cold war, the Bracero Program, the Civil Rights movement in the sixties, and an increasing paranoia regarding the border with Mexico and Latin America. With the exception of such profitable cultural presentations/productions as, for example, The *Godfather* movies and Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion",<sup>1</sup> ethnicity

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1 "Prairie Home Companion" is a weekly radio show usually broadcast on National Public Radio affiliates. The popularity of the show in the 1980's

based on European immigration has been replaced by ethnicity based on language and confusions of race; in other words, the US is so consumed by worries about Latinidad that Irish, Italians, and Germans are now part of the majority rather than additions to it. The once identifiable literature associated with these immigrant groups fused into the mainstream of American literature, unless it was specifically identified as ethnic for marketing purposes. Part of this gradual movement of ethnic literatures into the mainstream was a result of assimilation efforts in the US by Euro-ethnic peoples distancing themselves from the world wars in Europe. At the same time, though, many authors in the thirties and forties were writing in and for Hollywood, and the near total disappearance of Fante's books is as attributable to the decline of articulation and interest in ethnicity as it is to the style in which Fante wrote. While the first "ethnic" novels in the US focused on the pressures and dilemmas of integration and assimilation, and tended toward *bildungsroman*, later "ethnic" authors began writing into much more popular or commercial genres such as Hollywood scripts and detective fiction. In this manner, ethnic literature gradually disappeared as distinctly other from "American" literature.

As we move into the twenty-first century, we find that Latina/o and Chicana/o literature is not only a large field of literature, but it is also a literature that has expanded from novels of cultural and ethnic difference into a literature that has found expression in most literary genres we would categorize as "American," such as detective novels. While Rudy Anaya's first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, was and is one of the most important Chicano novels

led to various books, one of which is *Lake Wobegon Days*, by Garrison Keillor. The show is about a fictional town, Lake Wobegon, in Minnesota populated by descendants of Norwegian and Scandinavian immigrants.

in terms of history and identity of the historical presence of Mexicans in New Mexico, his later novels have been detective/crime novels that sell well, but lack the “epiphanies of landscape” (Anaya’s phrase) that so distinguished *Bless Me, Ultima*. With so much literature in print, such a well-recognized academic field surrounding it, and so many authors ranging into popular genres such as detective fiction and trying to break into Hollywood, we must consider if we are again witnessing the process that absorbed European immigrant literature.

In *Chicano Narrative*, Ramon Saldivar addresses the process of literary history in which various literatures are combined or incorporated into the category “American” (215-16). Citing late 1980’s literary historical efforts by Sacvan Bercovitch and Werner Sollors to reconstruct an American canon that is inclusive, Saldivar problematizes Chicano literature’s place in such a process. Specifically addressing Sollors’ attempt to move “Beyond Ethnicity,” Saldivar points out the obvious: to acknowledge that European immigrant literature has disappeared within the American canon justifies Sollors’s assertion that immigrants found here in the US many patterns and cultural values which were familiar because they preceded the waves of nineteenth century immigrants. In other words, much as the Pilgrims found Squanto greeting them in English at Plymouth Rock, so too did European immigrants find an American culture created out of “diverse pre-American pasts” (Sollors 6). As Saldivar points out, however, problems arise when one figures in issues of race, sexuality, etc., and any move to integrate smaller literatures within the larger canon valorizes or fails to undo the prior structures of dominance. From this perspective, Saldivar argues that Chicano literature is fundamentally counter hegemonic and must remain in such a position vis-a-vis American literature. Saldivar’s 1990 book was fundamental in shaping

critical debate about and around Chicano literature this past decade, and to a large extent Saldivar eloquently summed up twenty years of struggle to define Chicano literature that began in the 70's with scholars such as Vernon Lattin and Luis Leal.

Ten years later, however, Chicano literature has moved well beyond the counter hegemonic, or at least well beyond novels that so deliberately narrated cultural difference that John Rechy was once thought as much an interloper in Chicano literature as John Nichols. In fact, after the critical success of *Bless Me, Ultima* and the largely unrecognized lyricism of *Tortuga*, Rudy Anaya turned to much more mainstream fiction, first with *Albuquerque*, and then with a series of novels that many readers interpret as detective stories. Ditto with many other authors in the nineties. And yet, when we look at detective novels such as Michael Nava's *The Burning Plain*, Guy Garcia's *Skin Deep*, Manuel Ramos's *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*, and Lucha Corpi's first Gloria Damasco novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, we find that all these texts explicitly refer to the Civil Rights struggle in the sixties and the pivotal strikes, brownouts, and blowouts organized by Chicanos. One could not ask for a better demonstration of the political unconscious of Chicanismo, even though these various texts concern very different aspects and issues within both the Chicano community and the larger US community as well.

In this essay, I will examine two recent detective novels, Rolando Hinojosa's *Ask a Policeman* and Lucha Corpi's *Cactus Blood*. I will argue that in these two novels we can distinguish a regional distinction, difference, (specifically Texas vs. California) that is familiar in Chicana/o literature in general. Given the different colonial histories of the various states that were carved out of northern Mexico, only in New Mexico can we find communities with the long history necessary for a novel

such as *Bless Me, Ultima*. Similarly, only in the Lower Valley of Texas can we find small towns with such rigid and yet amorphous ethnic and cultural boundaries that Klail City can be feasible. Each state has a particular history in terms of colonization, Mexicanization, and Americanization, and each state has produced remarkably different Chicana/o literature. In most of the works that heavily identify with one particular region or state (as opposed to thoroughly urban novels), the geography and history of Latinidad in the region is visible. This is true in both the novels I will address. However, because both of these novels are ostensibly detective novels, the manner in which the regions differ is dominated by the demands of the genre. In other words, besides making the point that these two novels detail Chicano communities with vastly different histories, I will argue that the manner in which each novelist reveals the mystery and solves the crime depends on that historical difference.

To begin with Hinojosa, *Ask a Policeman* is a detective or crime novel written by one of the most prolific Chicano authors. In fact, *Ask a Policeman* is the second of Hinojosa's crime novels that focus on Rafe Buenrostro as the Chief Inspector of the Belken County Homicide Squad. Often labeled the Chicano Faulkner, Hinojosa locates all his novels in his fictional Belken County, and he peoples his novels with the same residents of the county. *Ask a Policeman* is Hinojosa's fourteenth novel, and it is remarkably different than his earlier works. Now Hinojosa is no Agatha Christie. In fact, in my Fall, 1999 Latina/o literature class I taught *Ask a Policeman*, and the students really seemed transfixed by the fact that the Chief Inspector was constantly sending his detectives to buy beer to put in the office fridge. Besides the beer issue, however, the novel is not so much a discovery of clues and a gradual revelation of the crime. Instead, the novel narrates the various actions of the characters, and the

main points of the mystery, the places where the overall plot advances, are narrated by secondary characters in the novel. As my students said, the Chief Inspector was pretty lucky that someone could tell him what was going on since he wasn't discovering too many clues on his own.

In many ways, Lucha Corpi is no Agatha Christie either. Her detective, Gloria Damasco, is unwilling at best, a woman pulled into a decades-long mystery in her first novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*. In that novel, Gloria does indeed look for clues and try to imagine the crime, motives, etc. But she is aided through her adventure by her psychic senses, by visions that reveal much of the mystery. Additionally, Corpi's first mystery ends in the death of Gloria's close friend Luisa, and that death is the driving force behind Gloria's involvement in the second mystery novel, *Cactus Blood*. Only in the third and latest of Corpi's Gloria Damasco novels, *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, does the protagonist have an office and a professional career as detective. In *Cactus Blood*, as in *Ask a Policeman*, much of the mystery is revealed in the narratives of secondary characters.

I focus on the shared feature that both novels narrate or resolve the mystery through narratives of secondary characters for a specific reason. Clearly, it is a major problem. In the case of Hinojosa, much of the mystery is revealed by two Mexican hit men who are questioned quite sternly by a female Director of Public Order. In other words, the novel moves back and forth across the Rio Grande in the lower valley of Texas, and the biggest break in the case occurs when two dangerous criminals are apprehended in Mexico and questioned there, and they both spill their guts and cough up details of the story our detectives were clearly not about to discover if left to their own devices. Lucha Corpi employs a similar strategy in *Cactus Blood*; specifically, at the end of the novel when the primary criminal

is disarmed and facing arrest, she, the criminal, fills in all the missing details of the mystery, which clearly the gang of detectives in the novel had little chance of discovering (though they had a better chance than the Belken county cops). Obviously, some could interpret this as a serious flaw in both novels, and many of my students were quick to jump to such a conclusion.

Rather than fault the novels, however, it is precisely in these oddities of the texts that we can begin to locate the geographies of the novels and the Chicanos who populate them. Hinojosa's novel is about the drug-trade and its influence in a community where Mexicans and Anglos have lived together in varying states of cooperation, antagonism, and marital relationship for almost two hundred years. As in all his previous novels, the characters in Belken county are truly characters, people well known to Hinojosa's readers, and well known to each other through family ties and a community memory in which crossings over national and other borders are better documented and cataloged than in the records of the INS. As one would expect, the local INS officials are part of the community, but when the Washington officials appear, regionalisms quickly arise that demonstrate the incompetence of the national bureaucracy when compared to the Belken county community. In fact, by focusing on the drug trade, Hinojosa changes one of his major motifs. In his previous novels, Hinojosa contrasted Belken county to larger, national issues to sharpen his imaginary community and the ties that bind the people there. It is a very southwestern attitude, a combination of western independence and community arrogance that those of us born in New Mexico and Texas know all too well. But in his previous novels, Hinojosa used the Korean conflict and Rafe Buenrostro's participation in that war as a way to contrast the smaller community to larger issues. In *Ask a Policeman*, however, Hinojosa replaces Korea with the drug trade. Not surprisingly,

as he invokes the drug trade, he simultaneously invokes the issue of illegal immigration, and through this association he illustrates that the national perspective is blind when compared to the local.

In terms of a geography of the novel, it is the presence of the border with Mexico in the novel that makes it so distinctly Lower Valley. The novel begins with a jailbreak and radar-evading flight across the US border. When the Belken cops finally enter the novel, they too cross the border to collaborate with their good friend, a woman who went to school with the Chief Inspector and who is now the Director of Public Order in the community that mirrors Klail City across the Rio Grande. And, obviously, she mirrors the Chief Inspector. Her ability to work across the national boundary, as well as the main bad-guy's ability to similarly work across the border, is a result of trans-border schooling, which, again, is a very regional, specific issue. This pattern of cooperation, communication, and collaboration across the Rio Grande is as old as non-Indian residents of the Lower Valley. When Mexico first invited German, Czech, and Southerners such as the Austin family into Nuevo Santander to settle a wild land, a pattern emerged of a people who lived between two nations, a people who lived far from the prevailing national interests and discussions of both the US and Mexico. As Texas became, well, itself, various incidents occurred which reinforced the independence of the region for both Anglos and Tejanos. Among the Tejano or Texas-Mexican community, there were various "heros" whose acts were recorded in Corridos, from Gregorio Cortez, who evaded a posse of over one hundred Rangers, to Catarino Garza, who marshaled a small force and rode across the border into Mexico in an attempt to overthrow the Diaz regime.<sup>2</sup> Clearly the notion of a porous border was not

2 There were many uprisings against the Mexican government that began

invented by the advocates of globalization, and such a “new” concept when presented in the Lower Valley is simply redundant.

What Hinojosa has managed in *Ask a Policeman* is to translate a national issue into a Belken county story. Currently the flip

along the lower Rio Grande. In 1838, Ant3nio Canales, a Monterrey lawyer, led an uprising in an attempt to form a Republic of the Rio Grande, and Santa Anna's troops battled local rancheros until 1840 (Paredes 133). In 1851, Jos3 M. Carvajal led a revolt that sought to declare Tamaulipas the Sierra Madre Republic. The “announced a plan of constitutional reforms, the reduction of import duties, and demanded the withdrawal of the Federal army from the north” (Schwartz 133). They received support from residents on both sides of the Rio Grande, and the revolution lasted until 1853.

On the northern side of the Rio Grande, corridos tell the stories of various “heroes” who also rebelled, although in these cases against both US law and central Mexican authority. Juan Cortina briefly occupied Brownsville, Texas, in 1859 and won a few engagements with US troops before he fled across the border. But Cortina was not safe across that border. When Porfirio D3az came to power in 1877, he was committed to co-operation with the United States, from whose southern borders would come any successful uprising against his power. He was, therefore, eager to help pacify the Border. He withdrew Cortina to Mexico City and kept him a prisoner for the rest of Cortina's life (Paredes 135).

The D3az regime changed the nature of the Rio Grande as a border and the sanctuary offered by Mexican soil. Paredes explains that D3az began his career from Brownsville, so he was very conscious of the border and the instability it could create for his government. In 1877, to Tejanos who were charged with murder were broken out of jail and disappeared across the border. The Rangers demanded the extradition of both the prisoners and the others who assisted their escape. Paredes writes that Tamaulipas Governor Servando Canales, a staunch D3az supporter but a Border man, refused to obey D3az's order to comply with the demand for extradition. Three of the men were somehow turned over to the Rangers, and Border sentiment against D3az grew bitter. D3az sent regular troops against Canales, but these joined Canales's forces when they reached the Border. For a while, D3az's months-old dictatorship was in danger (136). And finally, in 1890 a newspaper editor from Eagle Pass, Corpus Christi,

side of NAFTA's open economic borders is the militarization of the border, and the paranoia surrounding our "national language" and illegal immigration is usually conflated with very real concerns about the drug trade and its attendant violence. When we localize these national discourses into a story which is set in a community that has been living astraddle the border for more than a century, we should expect changes in how the story is told. For example, a good part of the end of the novel focuses on a pair of twins whose parentage and history as youths are central to the resolution of the mystery. To obtain this information, the Chief Inspector asks his aunt, clearly a source of information that is not available outside the community, or even the immediate family. The geography of the novel, then, is very local and very centered on the trans-border communities of the Lower Valley in Texas. Was this mystery resolved by good detective/police work, logic, and sources of information not based in the community, this novel could have occurred anywhere.

The geography of *Cactus Blood* is quite different. Set in California, this story does not cross national borders, nor does it focus on long community memories and bonds of obligation and friendship established through generations. Rather, this novel is much like *Califas*, an urban odyssey that collects various people with varying degrees of shared interests and familiarity, and it pools them together in an attempt to solve the murder of one of their own. This is not to say that Gloria Damasco's partners in this story are strangers; rather, they are all old acquaintances

and Palito Blanco named Catarino Garza marshalled a group of men and set out across the border to overthrow the Diaz regime. Defeated by Mexican army troops, they returned to Texas to resupply, and were met at the border by Texas Rangers and US troops, sent there by the US government at the request of the Mexican government (DeLeon 93).

from the civil rights struggle of the sixties, after which they went their separate ways. One of their members is murdered, and Gloria and the others pool resources, cooperate to varying degrees, and all manage to converge at the moment and place that allows them to both catch the killer and listen to the narrated resolution of the mystery. There are episodes in the novel that remind the reader that the characters are Latino, such as when seeking information they approach wealthy older residents of a house and are immediately perceived to be domestic help seeking employment.

Clearly, a major aspect of this novel is that issues stemming from the civil rights struggle by Chicanos in the sixties must be resolved by Chicanos in the nineties. The police are simply not interested in working through the details of the mystery in the book. And this mirrors the general cultural trend to immortalize the sixties as a civil rights struggle of African Americans and forget and exclude the Chicano and other peoples' participation. It also very much mirrors the development of California and the Chicano experience there. The mystery which must be solved is dependent on the strikes in the Delano vineyards; at the scene of the first murder our sleuths discover a video of the Delano strike, and the video contains both the clue to motive and suspect, and it reminds them of their past associations and obligations and thus becomes the glue that binds them in their current endeavor. In other words, the novel brings together Californians in the nineties who had all put the sixties and seventies behind them, and then the novel reminds them of their shared history and forces them to work through those old obligations in the face of overwhelming neglect and reassurance by both the broader culture and a local, Chicano culture intent on urbanization and cultural commodification.

The geography of *Cactus Blood*, then, is not so much spatial

as chronological. The characters are still in the same physical spaces, spaces created not through centuries of history and borderland status between the US and Mexico. But the physical spaces have nevertheless been deeply affected by cultural memory and signification. To the generation of Chicanos from the sixties and seventies, Delano was a name synonymous with brilliant success in the face of overwhelming odds; the strikes and César Chávez and the anonymous workers all represented the history of Chicanos in California, and while the students were marching out of schools and the Los Angeles police were going postal on families picnicking in parks, Delano represented a moment where simple human dignity was achieved without the blare of media and the National Guard. Today, Delano tends to mean nothing to young Chicanos, and in fact it represents a historical perspective that is either slipping away or is one of the chief arguments for implementing Chicano studies in high school curricula. Either way, when at the end of the novel Corpi has her villain narrate the mystery to the sleuths as a reminder of everything that went wrong since Delano, she is also lecturing the reader about that slippage of memory, about that loss of signification. At that moment both Gloria Damasco novels then come together as a recovery of those memories and their importance in the world of California in the nineties.

In conclusion, it is evident that in recent detective fiction such as the novels above, we find mainstream Chicana/o authors (i.e. authors frequently taught in the academy) attempting to articulate cultural difference in an unfamiliar genre. The detective novel is a demanding genre in that there have been and are many outstanding mystery writers and a very enthusiastic amateur and critical readership. When an author cannot quite resolve the mystery within the body of the investigation, the novel seems to go awry of the genre. But to argue that Hinojosa and Corpi

are simply poor mystery writers is to argue that they are attempting to write or assimilate their work into a popular genre, and this is too simplistic a reading of their work. On the other hand, I would not argue that this is a case of Chicano authors trying to appropriate a genre and change the genre to tell or illustrate Chicana/o issues. Rather, that Chicanos return to the defining community geographies and the Civil Right struggle as fundamental to identity indicates that one mystery provokes another, that in trying to solve a contemporary mystery, Chicanos must simultaneously encounter the mystery of their own articulation within the US community, and that mysterious articulation is historically and geographically specific. From this perspective, Sollors' assertion looms large: Chicanos have found a popular genre that allows them to encounter the multiple layers of mystery and dissimulation that surround their identity in the US, and much as the European immigrants found their arrival already foreshadowed in the US, Chicano authors moving into other genres of writing found their identity crises already foreshadowed in detective fiction. What we see is the familiarity these authors find in a popular genre. What these authors find is that the story of Chicanismo/o has always been a detective story.

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