



*Private (Brown) Eyes: Ethnicity, Genre and
Gender in Crime Fiction
in the Gloria Damasco novels and the
Chicanos Comic Series.*

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While one could argue that the genre of detective fiction in the US has always been multicultural, populated by a cast of characters from very different ethnic backgrounds, it remains a fact that ethnic minorities have been restricted to a specific space in its traditional canon. Minorities were firmly placed on the side of crime, i.e., either as the people directly connected to and/or committing those crimes, or as part of the often compliant community where those crimes had been committed. The association of these ethnic individuals or entire ethnic communities with violence and crime also foregrounded the role of the white, male private eye as an enforcer of moral laws, a restorer of order from outside the community, and a guardian of superior moral values. Similarly, the role of women in noir fiction has often been restricted to limited and limiting stereotypes: the femme fatale, the damsel in distress, and the secretary or assistant to the investigator.



As is the case with most genre fiction, the formulaic quality of detective fiction has been recently amended to include developments both intra-literary such as in post-modern revisions of the genre, and extra-literary, insisting on literature as the product of a cultural and social time which must respond to changes in society if it wants to stay representative of and meaningful to its readership, a quality ever desirable in the case of genre fiction, subjected as it is to the forces of the economic market. Developments in the last sixty years that foreground the role of ethnic minorities and women as protagonists could not be ignored by detective fiction. Early ethnic revisions include Chester Himes's "portrayals of African Americans, the poor and dispossessed presented in street-wise narratives set in black Harlem in the 1950s" (Steblyk 2003: 4), and writings in the 1990s by Walter Mosley in his Easy Rawlins series, where he "explores issues related to race, police brutality, violence, crime, and oppression from the perspective of [...] a black male detective" (Malooof 2006: 15). These days, as Fischer-Hornung and Mueller claim, "ethnic detectives seem to be everywhere" (2003: 11), but this has not always been the case, and not all ethnicities took to the genre at the same time or in the same measure. While, as Rodriguez argues, the African American detective novel thrived in the 1980s and the 1990s, coincidentally a time where women's detective fiction boomed (2005: 17), it took longer for Chicanas/os to start writing detective texts where their communities were the home of the protagonist, not just derelict places where the crimes took place and where the criminals could hide.

The proliferation of works in the genre by Chicana/o writers and the readers' interest in them could be a result of the "growing credibility and cultural capital of detective fiction" (Rodriguez 2005: 4), or just the ineludible incorporation of large ethnic groups to both authorship and readership. The traditional setting of American detective fiction (the urban jungle, a place of both perdition and glamour, of violence and money) would also speak to the growingly urban experience of Chicanas/os. Just as the inner city was being claimed by the Chicano community, the genre was being claimed by new authors and readers, as Chicana/o characters moved from their forced entrenchment on the side of crime to more meaningful and less negative roles. The genre started to appeal to writers who began to question and amend its original solidified formula, and soon detective fiction started to be seen as a form in which writers could be "taken seriously and [...] even gain popular appeal and critical currency" (Rodriguez 2005: 5), overcoming a certain anxiety "over the form itself" (16). In this sense, Chicana/o detective stories could be considered to be part of a literary endeavor or "social ritual" whereby "minority groups [...] would claim a meaningful place in the larger social context" (Rosell 2009: 1).

One of the most interesting developments of the ethnic appropriation of the genre may be the displacement from the solitary, outcast detective into the community that the new ethnic detective both knows and represents. Specifically, in Chicana/o writing, these Raza sleuths "represent a community view" (Lomelí, Márquez,



and Herrera-Sobek 2000: 301), and also reach out “to a wider readership, that includes Chicanos and other people of color” (Maloof 2006: 5). Multicultural detective fiction as a genre has been referred to as “murder with a message”, written by authors “whose cultural communities are not those of the traditional Euro-American male hero, whose cultural experiences have been excluded from the traditional detective formula, and whose cultural aesthetic alters the formula itself” (Gosselin 1999: xi-xxi). Rodriguez estimates that in 2002 there were “some twenty-odd Chicana/o volumes” within the detective novel corpus, a result of both writers and readers having “taken to the genre with great energy” (2002: 139). Recent, not necessarily ethnic developments of the genre, have equated the investigation of the crime with an investigation into the identity of the detective, where

for the detective to interpret the traces left by the criminal is to engage simultaneously in a process of self exegesis [...] [as] the detective’s interaction with the criminal text reveals fragments of his or her identity and shows that identity is always in process. (Rodriguez 2005: 22)

In accordance not only with the story of the genre itself, but also with its critical history, Steblyk detects a movement “from an emphasis placed on objective realism to structuralism, to the dichotomous structures of post-structuralism and deconstructionism, and finally to the incommensurability of postmodern play and parody” (2003: 4). The complications and ramifications of hyphenated identities offer intensified opportunities into this enquiry. Pepper ponders on how “crime novels written by, and about, individuals [...] who do not easily fit into categories like black or white [...] offer a more complex, flexible, and satisfactory model for identity construction” (1999: 252). While Pepper mentions Cubans or Jamaicans, as Rodriguez expounds, these comments on categories could be “appropriately extended to Chicana/os, who [...] do not fit easily within the US black/white racial binary” (2002: 146).

It would be beyond the scope of these pages to trace the development of female detective fiction: to begin with, one could argue that the genre (as formulated for example by Agatha Christie) has had females as protagonists, and women writing them, from its onset. It is, however, also true that as the genre moved to America and metamorphosed into noir territory, women were displaced into accessory roles, since it did not seem adequate for the fair sex to display neither the toughness and world-weariness that private eyes required, nor the menacing violence that they were forced to exude and often display. As we mentioned previously, the reclamation of the genre by ethnic groups was almost coincidental with its rewriting by women (Covey 2005: 239-240). These female characters, deemed by Mizejewski to be proto-feminists (2005), often cannot be read as realistic portrayals of women, but rather represent female fantasies of the kind of agency and power that male detectives have traditionally enjoyed, and did raise important questions that were not unique to



detective work, but to society at large. The growing number of professional women in the workplace, in roles traditionally considered to be masculine, made the female investigator “doubly suspect as a woman in the man’s place, female authority in a male legal/police world” (Mizejewski 2005: 40). The female noir detective is not the apparently meek and feeble Miss Marple, but rather has to exert her toughness to be seen as an equal. Mizejewski detects what she refers to as an “antifeminist” implication that the stereotypical police woman in fiction “gained her authority [...] with the help of an excellent gym, wardrobe, and stylist”, while at the same time acknowledging that these characters could, in fact, be furthering the case of feminism, as specific narratives about women portrayed as exceptional “are more accessible than the history and discourses of feminism” (2005: 125). However, women claiming their space in detective fiction have often followed the same course that historical, real-life reclamation of spaces by women have: white, solvent, straight women would usually lead the way, but often consider women from outside their group (in class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) not to be companions in their journey. *Publishers Weekly* considered in 1990 that “the single most striking development in the detective novel in the past decade” had been “the woman as tough professional investigator [...] a tough new breed of detective [...] reforming the American mystery novel: smart, self-sufficient, principled, stubborn, funny – and female” (quoted in Walton and Jones 1999: 10). While the names that *Publishers Weekly* jokingly offers, Samantha Spade and Philippa Marlow, clearly subvert gender, they do not overturn stereotypes about the ethnicity of the private eye.

Detective novels by Chicana writers could be seen as an answer to the need for a multi-cultural revision of the genre. While Lucha Corpi states that the genre’s readership is not historically dominated by Chicanas (Aldama 2006: 113), enough Chicana practitioners of the genre exist in recent years for us to consider it to be a development independent from both detective novels by Chicano men and by detective novels by non-Chicana women. Corpi herself (ibid.) identifies Marcia Muller as the creator of the first Mexican-American detective, Elena Oliveres. Other Chicana detectives would be Ronnie Ventana, created by Gloria White, or Ivon Villa in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*. Similarly, Michele Martinez has her sleuth Melanie Vargas embark on the kind of cases that her author was involved with as a former NY Federal prosecutor.

Corpi ponders on how her character, Gloria Damasco, is usually referred to “as the first Chicana detective in American fiction because she is so deeply grounded in Chicano culture and politics” (Aldama 2006: 101). We will focus our analysis on the Damasco series because and briefly compare it to the *Chicanos* comic series because the former so eloquently demonstrates how a formulaic genre such as detective fiction can give voice to both contemporary and historical concerns of the Chicano community. The novels function at two different levels – the obvious one is that of the “whodunit”, but there is also a second level that strives to uncover historical social



injustice, a quest not only for the felon of the specific crime being investigated, but also for historical inequalities that have criminalized and marginalized the entire community. Also, Damasco's investigations lead her to study abuse not only directed to the community at large, but specifically addressed to women, tortured or killed precisely because of their standing as unprotected members of the community. Most interestingly, she cannot (and will not) dissociate her femaleness (and femininity) from her investigation of these crimes, even if this may hold in store the same fate for her as that of the female victims that she is investigating (Russell and Caputi 1992: 15).

Thematically, the novels included in the series (*Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, 1992; *Cactus Blood*, 1995; *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, 1999 and *Death at Solstice*, 2009) are complexly multi-layered, deconstructing and re-constructing dichotomies such as "male/female, public/private, intellect/emotion, physical strength/weakness" (Rosell 2009: 2). Overtly a woman and overtly a feminist, Damasco also possesses first-hand knowledge both of the present and of the past of her community, and of the historical ebb and flow of the Chicano movement. Her investigations straddle the line between individual injustice (the specific murders) and social injustice (abuses against the community), while also "displacing the importance of the individual crime to what she identifies as the larger source of criminality: the social structure itself" (Libretti 2005: 94-95). Damasco is not only profoundly rooted in her ethnic community, but also feels immediate responsibility towards her family and her milieu, and will not separate her personal beliefs and her commitment to her community from her sleuthing. In the Gloria Damasco series, Steblyk identifies crimes connected to "the Chicano civil rights movement, the 1970's riots, environmental poisonings, Mexican slave labor, racial tensions, mental disorders, poisonous medications, rape, spousal abuse, shamanism, and Mexican mythology" (2003: 4). While recognizing the tradition in the genre that her texts inhabit, and making references to classic detectives such as Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, or Hercule Poirot, Corpi's texts also question their inheritance by underlining "threads of non-patriarchal, noncapitalist, and non-dominant history" (Steblyk 2003: 6). Maloof sees Corpi's writing as "politically grounded and ideologically radical", something she finds "in contrast to the conservative nature of most detective fiction" (2006: 5). To Rodriguez, Corpi is part of a group of Chicana/o writers who aspired to be taken seriously both as intellectuals and as cultural workers, and who desired to "write in such a way as to effect political change and bring about social justice" (2005: 139). When writing in a popular form, therefore, these authors would attempt to subvert stereotypes and values wrongly associated with Chicano communities and/or with Chicana/o individuals. Corpi does comply with much of the formulaic structure and tropes of the genre: the process whereby clues are analyzed and the evidence is gathered, familiar themes such as "murder, family intrigue, and danger" (Pearson 2002: 43), and Damasco shares with previous counterparts her personal moral commitment when accepting a case. But, unlike most hard-boiled detectives, Damasco is often self-doubting and appears to be extremely dependent on



the support of those around her, or even downright accommodating such as when she abandons the profession for several years at her husband's request. This apparent vulnerability is not, however, a factor of her gender, but the result of her awareness of the existence of a strong community around her, one that she can use both to her own advantage and to that of the community itself, and whose value is foregrounded "as an alternative to individualism" (Flys Junquera 2001: 345) that often dominates traditional private eye fiction. Strong communal ties allow Damasco to be "privy to much information and understanding of cultural mores" (Flys Junquera 2001: 345), as her individual growth is never separated from that of the collective she both belongs to and represents, and her chicanismo is an integral part of the successful solution of the mystery.

The inscription of the detective in her own community and the foregrounding of social responsibility also destabilizes traditional formulae that located guilt and responsibility on one individual or small group, thus displacing blame onto a wider society that acts as an accomplice and perpetuator of discriminating practices and structures that work against women and minorities. Corpi does not completely exonerate minorities, however, and acknowledges that her culture is "simultaneously under siege and yet being built from both within and without the Chicano community" (Steblyk 2003: 4). Interestingly enough, the novels seem intent on overcoming historical misunderstandings between men and women in the Chicano movement, by creating an atmosphere of solidarity in the community at large in which both genders can work as partners, not as rivals. While recognizing the ever-present difficulties "when marginalized groups attempt to work in coalition" (Bickford 2005: 92), Damasco emphasizes how the entire community, and not just its representatives or the police, is responsible for coexistence as its "movement for racial equality and self-determination [...] [makes us accept] as our right and responsibility the function of making sure that justice was dealt equally to everyone" (Corpi 1992: 65). Also, as Bickford notes, Corpi voices the community's ambivalence towards the criminal justice system, which often "acts in racist ways or embodies racist beliefs and practices", i.e. the community is ultimately responsible for administering justice, as

none of the criminals in Corpi's novels are ever put on trial; they are either killed prior to apprehension [...] or they commit suicide [...] Justice is served – in that the guilty parties are dead – but it is not the criminal justice system that has accomplished this result (Bickford 2005: 92).

Damasco's rootedness in her community spans her present, but also her past and therefore also the communal past and history. In the novels, events from the present such as demonstrations, contemporary politics, the (mis)treatment of Vietnam veterans, pesticides, and sexual abuse of immigrant domestic workers (Steblyk 2003: 4, Bickford 2005: 89) are entwined with historical events from the 60s and the 70s. In *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, the case brings Gloria back to "August 29, 1970, a warm,



sunny Saturday that would be remembered as the National Chicano Moratorium, one of the most violent days in the history of California" (Corpi 1992: 17). In *Cactus Blood*, she watches a documentary portraying footage from the United Farm Workers' Strike, with "César Chávez [...] [heading] a picket line of men and women – farm workers and strike sympathizers, carrying the black-eagle-on-red United Farm Workers' flag and banners bearing the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe" (Corpi 1995: 17). In *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, a Day of the Dead celebration takes a dark turn as the murderer claims to be "La Malinche's reincarnation", and to avoid her murder, a spiritualist advises Damasco "to find out who had stabbed [the historical] Malinche" (Corpi 1999: 115). Murders in the present often stand in the wings while the stage is taken by ruminations on Chicano history. Corpi's connection of past and present, of historical events and fiction, does serve one of the main staples of the genre: the resolution of the mystery, of the whodunit, even if the crime investigation itself can turn into a red herring, since "what is important in the narrative [...] is not so much the crime or even its solution as the process of detection itself and the exploration and interpretation of clues" (Libretti 2005: 77). However, the interlacing of past and present also foregrounds how "only by reconstructing the past, in other words, solving the crimes of history, can the crimes of the present be solved" (Flys Junquera 2001: 347).

Damasco, an important player in the Chicano movement, therefore investigates specific murders in the present, but also the history of the movement itself, cultural myths (as La Malinche), and injustice by the police and by other forces of the State (Rosell 2009: 4). While apparently siding with conservative conventions of the genre, namely the restoration of the social status-quo, Corpi does not indulge in a mere reiteration of history, but rather re-tells and re-imagines it while providing "the victims of racially (or economically or ethnically-) linked crimes" with a sense of justice, a narrative process that uses "metaphors of detection that allow for holes in the generic epistemological armor" (Steblyk 2003: 5).

Her commitment to her community and her deep sense of the importance of Chicano history are not the only characteristics that set Corpi's detective apart from traditional sleuths. There is still one more peculiarity to Damasco that separates her from other private eyes created by other Chicana/o detective fiction writers. Described as "a unique contribution to the genre of detective fiction" (Maloof 2006: 9), Damasco's "dark gift" (Corpi 1992: 123) of clairvoyance, in the shape of visions, bouts of intuition, and dreams, clearly departs from the traditionally intellectual investigative process of other detectives of the genre. Hers is a gift that often works to her advantage during her investigations, but one that she also has problems accepting and controlling. Deeply connected to her family's cultural inheritance and to Chicana *curanderas*, this supernatural ability complements the process of criminal investigation, and as readers we are "privileged witnesses to her inner turmoil and self-doubt as well as her growing self-acceptance and feelings of empowerment" (Maloof 2006: 8). Damasco will learn to control and use her gift in connection to traditional detective job, and even if at first "I



felt embarrassed since I had always sought rational explanations”, she will end up “using intuition to support reason” (Corpi 1992: 30). Damasco’s “extra-sensory awareness” (Corpi 2009: 3) is seen as a specifically feminine one, opposed to logical reasoning as the only valid way to attain knowledge and to crack the case. Bickford (2005: 96) emphasizes the questioning of “gendered societal hierarchies, where reason is associated with masculinity and then valued over intuition” that Corpi is questioning in Damasco’s use of clairvoyance. Also, contradicting the dictum of the hard-boiled detective, Damasco does not renounce to emotional connections with her clients, challenging “the more accepted technique of maintaining emotional distance as part of the investigative model (in both scientific and detective work)” (Bickford 2005: 96).

Damasco’s gift of intuition takes place in a cultural context where women have been constrained in their ability to talk and to occupy public spaces. At the same time, in Mexican tradition, women are responsible, through orality, of the handing down of history, myths, and cultural practices. Just as she subverts traditional detective roles, Damasco also destabilizes cultural gendered limitations, by using her agency as a Chicana woman to occupy public spaces and the professional sphere while at the same time interpreting, understanding, and passing down history. In a context where women are often seen as “‘Malinches’, or traitors, as vendidas, sellouts” (Pearson 2002: 41), Damasco is outspoken, and specifically an ally to women in her community. As Dilley points out, often in women’s detective stories there is a certain ambivalence “toward law and the establishment”, connected to a perception of law as created and applied by men and thus benefitting them over women while controlling the latter’s behavior (1998: 59).

There is yet another way in which Damasco’s approach to solving cases questions and subverts male/female simplifications and interrogates fixed identities: by characterizing the Chicana/o subject as a “subject in formation” and foregrounding “the provisionality of Chicana/o identity” (Rodriguez 2005: 71). As Alarcón states, while the Chicano movement in its early phases in the 1960s was bent on finding a defined identity for Chicanas/os, this initial quest finally “gave way to a realization that there is no fixed identity” (Alarcón 1990: 250). Damasco, defined as “an agent whose praxis involves incorporating approaches, skills, and ways of knowing that are too often seen as antithetical and opposing” (Bickford 2005: 93), walks, according to Maloof (2006: 2) in the steps of what Anzaldúa defined as “the New Mestiza”, characterized by her “consciousness of duality” ([1997] 2007: 59), her operating “in a pluralistic mode” beyond merely oppositional consciousness (101-102), and also reaching out to coalesce with men, sexual minorities, and other ethnicities (105-108), while acknowledging ambivalence and “overcoming [...] the Western binary logic” (Maloof 2006: 11).

The Gloria Damasco series also captures a certain nostalgia, starting in the 80s, for the possibilities of social activism in the 60s and 70s (both for women and for Chicanas/os) which “seemed to hold so much promise for changing both society as a



whole and individual lives" (Walton and Jones 1999: 34). This progression is codified in the novels both by reassessments of history, by a nurturing community, and by the individual growth of the protagonist towards tolerance for a complex, non-stable identity. The work we will briefly analyze next fails to give this sense of evolution and eventually disappoints as a narrative precisely because of its insistence on fixed identities, negative stereotyping, and a careless portrayal of the community and the complexities of ethnicity.

The comic series *Chicanos* (Trillo and Riso, 1997) follows the adventures of Chicana sleuth Alejandrina Yolanda "AY" Jalisco, as she tries to solve mysteries connected to her community and to make it as a private eye in the city. Originally published in Spanish in 1997, it was not released in English until 2006. From the point of view of the graphic novel as a genre, it is mostly interesting as a preparation for the successful neo-noir *100 Bullets* series, also illustrated by Riso, and inspired thematically and graphically by Frank Miller's *Sin City* series.

"Poor, Ugly, and a Detective" (Trillo and Riso [1997] 2006a) Jalisco reminds the reader of a gnome, both in size and in having exaggeratedly distorted physical features based on the ones a Chicana woman should possess. While this might seem a radical move away from the consistent representation of the over-sexualized allure of women in graphic novels towards the foregrounding of other non-physical qualities that a professional private eye might require, Jalisco's unusual appearance is never a benefit, and comments about her ugliness still remind us of the overt sexualization of other female characters in the series and in early representations of women in detective fiction. Jalisco admits that her looks do not comply with expectations: "No soy como los detectives de las series, yo" (Trillo and Riso [1997] 2006a), but it is not so much that she uses them to her advantage willingly; rather, society is not able to see past her unattractiveness. For example, her life is spared precisely because she is taken for a cleaning lady (Trillo and Riso [1997] 2006a), not for a detective – this is a comment on her invisibility as a woman and as a Chicana, not a testament to her abilities. As if to add insult to injury, Jalisco is endowed with an over-reactive sexual drive almost never to be satisfied in the series (Trillo and Riso [1997] 2006b). Apart from her looks, Jalisco is also handicapped by bad luck, and in an even more unfair treatment of her as a female detective, she does not solve her cases by the use of reason or her ability to create a chain of evidence leading to the solution, and even less so by using any kind of intuition or feminine empowerment, but rather by sheer serendipity.

The series places itself in the tradition of noir by using stereotypes (a corrupt police woman who looks like a femme fatale, the private eye's office, stereotypical mafia and Mexican and Colombian drug lords) that, one would expect at the beginning of the series, could be employed to precisely question formulas, in conjunction with placing a female ethnic detective as the protagonist. However, the problem with Jalisco seems to be that, as her creators state in the back cover, her main



quality is to be “la persona más recta y buena que habrás conocido en tu vida” (Trillo and Risso [1997] 2006a). Her redeeming attributes are rectitude and, most importantly, an innate goodness, which is in the text simplistically connected to femininity, something that seems to preconize (perhaps inadvertently) a naïve, fixed female identity. When compared to Damasco, Jalisco comes across as someone possessing little agency, discriminated against even by her own family and her own community beyond her very close friends, condemned to use crowded buses to sleuth, and so incompetent that when she finally gets to ride a cab to a case she leaves her gun behind. Where Corpi endowed her protagonist with a sense of individual responsibility based on “a rejection of passivity, an affirmation of empowerment, and an insistence on the possibility of change” (Bickford 2005: 93), Jalisco is constantly portrayed as weak, neurotic, and overwhelmed, never given a nurturing community or a chance for development in the shape of the kind of self-discovery that Damasco undergoes. The portrayal of this female detective (and the cases she deals with) are void of complexity and a sense of history, her ethnic community is stereotypical and aloof, and one could even say that she corresponds to male (revenge) fantasies of what a woman in a male world may (or rather, may not) be able to do and to her (many) limitations in a successful professional career.

The shortcomings of *Chicanos* as an articulate development of the genre are not connected to the medium itself, but rather to the intention and knowledge of its creators. While we would not like to enter an otherwise tired and fruitless discussion on the ability of men writers to create interesting women characters, in the specific case of *Chicanos*, both writer and illustrator fail to grasp the complexities of female identity and the subtle interplay of intelligence, societal notions of beauty, and discrimination that their protagonist would require. Also, Trillo and Risso try to extend their specific ethnic experience as Argentinians to the complicated nuances of the individual and communal identity of ethnic minorities in the United States. As a result, the denunciation that was an integral part of the work by Chicanas/os writers is substituted by gross generalizations about racism and an ignorance of the specific history of Chicanos in the United States. This is a far from negligible shortcoming, as Ramón Saldivar considers that in Chicano literature “history cannot be conceived as the mere ‘background’ or ‘context’ [...] rather history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content” (Saldivar 1990: 5), i.e. successful portrayals of Chicana/o identity and communities cannot ignore their history.

Even if *Chicanos* eventually fails where the Gloria Damasco series succeeds, both successful and unsuccessful developments in a genre are necessary for its evolution. Crime fiction has overcome its formulaic nature and steadily advanced towards inclusiveness, and has incorporated new voices and fluid identities precisely because of the many authors willing to question, subvert, and enrich the premises at its inception. The inclusion, as protagonists and as nurturing communities, of the so-called minorities (be these gender, ethnic or sexual), that are now salient elements of



the social composition of the United States, both enriches the specific genre of crime fiction and improves its representativeness, guaranteeing its continuation and actuality by having these important social groups in society be also represented in fiction and making them available to readers.

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