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**GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE RECOVERY OF
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GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE RECOVERY OF HISTORY IN LATINA DETECTIVE(SQUE) FICTION

LA PERFORMATIVIDAD DE GÉNERO Y LA RECUPERACIÓN DE LA HISTORIA EN LA FICCIÓN DETECTIVESCA LATINA

Vanessa de Veritch Woodside

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece un análisis de la manera en que autoras latinas se apropian de, y subvierten, elementos de la novela negra en sus obras de ficción policiaca o detectivesca. La cubanoamericana Carolina García-Aguilera y las chicanas Lucha Corpi, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas y Alicia Gaspar de Alba han creado figuras detectivescas femeninas que manipulan y desestabilizan nociones de género, según la conceptualización de la performatividad de género de Judith Butler. Además, a través de su incorporación de referencias culturales específicas e historias de sus comunidades, estas escritoras combaten un doble borrado textual por desafiar tanto la versión dominante de la historia que omite la de comunidades marginadas como las representaciones masculinas de la experiencia chicana o latina.

Palabras clave: latina, chicana, ficción detectivesca, novela negra, performatividad del género.

ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of the manner in which Latina authors appropriate and subvert elements of the hard-boiled model in their works of detective or detectivesque fiction. Cuban American Carolina García-Aguilera and Chicanas Lucha Corpi, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba have created female detective figures that manipulate and destabilize notions of gender, following Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity. Moreover, through their incorporation of specific cultural references and community histories, these writers combat a textual dual erasure by challenging the dominant version of history that overlooks that of marginalized communities and also the masculine representations of the Chicano or Latino experience.

Key Words: Latina; Chicana; detective fiction; hard-boiled; gender performativity.

Since the 1980s critics and readers alike have witnessed an explosion in the creation and marketing of detective fiction written by women and so-called "ethnic" writers, those writers that identify with an ethnic minority as their home community. This emergent subgenre, so reliant upon the dynamics of power, offers a novel venue from which to examine discourses of race and gender. In their appropriation of the mystery-fiction formula, Latina

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authors, in particular, have transgressed its conventions, thereby subverting and interrogating the dominant perceptions of race, ethnicity and gender that the traditional hard-boiled model of detective fiction sustains and even celebrates. In doing so, their texts capitalize upon the genre's inherent reconstruction of history as a component of the process of resolving crimes and posit a reverse discourse to question hegemonic ideals. This interrogation arises in part from the alternative worldviews presented through the Latina protagonists, whose perspectives correspond to the voice of alterity as doubly marginalized individuals and are juxtaposed with the underlying values of dominant ideology. Nonetheless, even within a particular ethnic group or position of marginalization, one must recognize a dynamic of difference. In particular, the Latina authors (like their Anglo counterparts) destabilize gender constructions, as understood in Judith Butler's terms of gender performativity, through affording their female protagonists agency, manifest in their female gaze. Consequently, their texts promote an amorphous conception of cultural identity that contests the homogenization of Latina identity.

1. Adaptations of the Hard-boiled Model

Arising largely within American and British literature, the classic formula of mystery fiction focuses upon the investigation and resolution of a particular unsolved crime considered a threat to the social order. As such, its resolution reinforces the restoration of order and the formula itself serves as "an allegorical representation of the stability and continuity of the status quo" (1990, p. 11), according to Amelia Simpson. In response to the emergence of organized crime and institutional corruption of the 1920s and 30s, the hard-boiled detective novel evolved within the U.S. literary tradition. Such a model offers a critical view of society in which the status quo must not be preserved, but changed in order to restore justice. In its demand for the re-construction of the history of the crime, and by extension, the broader circumstances surrounding it, the hard-boiled model questions, to a certain degree, a monologic truth or history. As Vera Alexander notes, "Even a successful investigation of crime, [...] by recovering disturbingly heterogeneous details, reveals grey areas of doubt and opens up insights into complex lines of causation, many of which elude closure" (2006, p. 146). Further, this constitutes, "a feature [that] crime fiction shares with reconstructions of historical developments, including colonial histories of suppression and dispossession" (Alexander, 2006, p. 146). Therefore, detective fiction is an effective vehicle by which ethnic writers may recuperate their communities' own histories, while simultaneously critiquing society from a position of alienation.

The traditional figure of the alienated and individualistic hard-boiled detective resonates well with marginalized groups, themselves being alienated by mainstream culture, and in particular, with Latinas, who must contend with alienation within their communities as well. Empowered as subjects with a double-consciousness as both "insider" and "outsider," the ethnic detectives force the reader into adopting their marginalized perspective. Ironically, the authors exercise certain power in their manipulation of a genre whose formula tends to repress their history and existence, and subvert the interpretation of the History created by the very forces typically legitimized by the traditional hard-boiled model. Through a focus on the community's past, authors often digress from the primary crime plot to re-write the history of their group. Therefore, ethnic writers of popular fiction must appropriate the genre's structure to question dominant ideas and to celebrate their community's history through its insertion in the text. This permits an awareness of issues of social injustice and identity, and

posits a Chicana or Latina worldview as an alternative to the mainstream perspective common to the genre. As Peter Freese suggests, when the detective belongs to “a community whose history, values, and way of life differ from those of the so-called mainstream, his or her story inadvertently turns into [...] a comment on the challenges of everyday life in a ‘multicultural’ society” (1992, pp. 9-10).

Perhaps following the lead of Anglo women writers whose work has been widely accepted within popular culture, Latina authors present a unique feminine voice of double oppression that subverts both the hard-boiled tradition and the notion of a unified nationalist discourse through attention to previously overlooked issues. To that effect, Ramón Saldívar comments:

The writings of Chicana authors advance the resistance to dominant ideologies initiated by male authors by adding both male/female and hetero/homosexual binarisms to the discussion of the social construction of a Chicano identity, insisting [...] that an “identity politics” that does not account for the social construction of gender and sexual orientation merely reproduces the hierarchies of oppression implicit in bourgeois Anglo-American society. Chicana writers are thus building an instructive alternative to the exclusively phallogocentric subject of contemporary Chicano narrative. (1990, p. 175)

This rings true within the context of detective fiction as well, in which Latina authors take up issues of gender and patriarchy, making their social critique even more pronounced. Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones note that generally, “[Women’s] writing [...] uses an established popular formula in order to investigate not just a particular crime [...] but the more general offenses in which the patriarchal power structure of contemporary society itself is potentially incriminated” (1999, p. 4). Nevertheless, some critics declare a problematic coexistence of feminism and detective fiction, essentially asserting that the constructs of detective fiction preclude any feminist message from being communicated. Kathleen Gregory-Klein, for example, argues:

What finally keeps feminism and the detection formula from meshing is the subsequent necessity of creating a female private eye who refuses to play games within a system which seems to support male hegemony. A feminist private eye who is both aware and committed could not be shown subscribing to any social paradigm which dishonestly pretends to uphold a system of values based on a disinterested ethic but actually is grounded in interested power structures, especially as those structures and systems deliberately exclude women. (1988, pp. 201-202)

Although Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones recognize that the genre of detective fiction has indeed “often demeaned, trivialized, and even demonized women” (1999, p. 94), lending credence to Gregory Klein’s assertion, they argue that women’s revisions of the traditional genre contest their model through its repetition with modifications, echoing Michel Foucault’s concept of the subversive powers of reverse discourse. Latina writers present an alternative discourse of power, appropriating the conventions of the genre of popular detective fiction only to subvert them by incorporating an alternative perspective colored by their ethnicity and femininity. As such, they revise not only the hard-boiled model, but also the model of canonical texts within Latina/o and Chicana/o literary traditions.

2. Feminine Agency: The Female as More than Victim or *Femme Fatale*

One component of this is the evolution of women’s representation and the development of feminine agency within their texts. “Thus, in a genre that made its home in the city streets, respectable women tended to be an occasional presence at best, often rendered invisible within the male-dominated urban landscape” (2004, p. 23), Amanda C. Seaman comments. Early

hard-boiled novels essentially excluded women from the public spaces in which the crime and its resolution occurred, occasionally incorporating them as victims. However, as a “literature of containment” that deals with “confronting and taming the monstrous” (Plain, 2001, p. 3), detective fiction began to include women empowered by their subjectivity and desire in the figure of the dangerous *femme fatale*, who threatens masculinity and, therefore, requires subjugation. Maureen Reddy identifies a dichotomous classification of women within the genre, noting the “intense masculinity of the hardboiled, its centralisation of an alienated male consciousness and its positioning of women as either dangerous, seductive villains or nurturing but essentially insignificant helpmates” (2003, p. 193). In creating a role for women other than victim, assistant or *femme fatale*, authors have afforded their female protagonists agency in their transition from object to subject. As Walton and Jones note, the empowered female figure typically narrates the story of the “‘private eye’ in the subjective voice of the private ‘I’” (1999, p. 151), utilizing the autobiographical form. Walton and Jones astutely note this position of subjectivity that the female private eye maintains:

In one sense, at the center of the female private eye novel is not the corpse but the living, speaking, and specifically *gendered* body of the detective. This body is not presented as object, as are the dead bodies of many mystery stories, or as the eroticized “to-be-looked-at” body of the *femme fatale*. Instead, readers are offered through the conventions of the private eye novel a position of subjectivity embodied in the feminine autobiographical voice. (1999, pp. 151-52)

These feminine figures not only trouble the traditional norms of gender and genre through their autobiographical voice, but also through their adoption of a female gaze, an adaptation of the more traditional male gaze that Laura Mulvey discusses.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey analyzes the manner in which cinematic codes create a male gaze that projects its fantasy on the passive female figure, who functions as a sexual object that signifies male desire. As the active observer or gazer, the male maintains the power. Likewise, traditional works of detective fiction have positioned the male as the detective figure (and also as the criminal), whereas the women have typically been assigned roles as victims or objects of men’s sexual desire, and accordingly, objects of the male gaze. However, when the female detective narrates her story, the authorial voice is re-gendered, as is the gaze, so that the woman now maintains the power associated with being an agent or subject, rather than an object. One must question whether the adoption of this feminine detective agency by Chicana and Latina writers inherently conflicts with socially-constructed gender norms within traditional detective fiction and the Chicana/o or Latina/o literary canons.

3. Butlerian Performativity in the *Latina Novela Negra*

In detective fiction written by women, “The play on/with/of gender that is manifested by a female character assuming a conventionally male position works to destabilize and denaturalize norms [...]. By shifting the signification of clothing and the bodies that clothing mediates, the feminist hard-boiled genre *performs* gender” (1999, p. 102), comment Walton and Jones. These authors adapt the hard-boiled texts with particular attention to gendered bodies:

The woman authors who appropriate the narrating “I” of the private eye novel modify it in ways that are necessarily *self-conscious*. They evince an awareness that the body in question in the detective story is a gendered body, whether it is the body of the detective narrator; the body of the victim; the generic corpus of texts, a body of stylistic, formal, and ideological practices that compose the hard-boiled detective novel; or the body of the reader. In each case, the private eye and what it sees are subject to re-vision, and in each case, the body performs. (Walton and Jones, 1999, p. 187)

Further exploration of Judith Butler's notions of gender performativity is particularly useful in understanding the manner in which the body performs and the destabilization of gender constructs. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler proposes that gender is a construction that is performed through a series of acts which repeat or reenact sets of meanings that are already socially or culturally established or legitimized. More specifically, Butler comments, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1999, pp. 43-44). She later clarifies that categories of gender are not fixed entities. In fact, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (1999, p. 179). The notion of a stable gender, therefore, is merely an illusion, and the performance of such opens up the possibility to perform said gender in a different manner.

Butler expands upon her theories of performativity within *Bodies That Matter*, in which she proposes, "'Sex' is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms. These productive reiterations can be read as a kind of performativity. Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make" (1993, p. 107). Nevertheless, one can only understand performativity within the context of "iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (1993, p. 95). The very repetition is that which implies that performance is "a ritualized production" (1993, p. 95) rather than a single act or event. "In this sense," Butler explains, "Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (1993, p. 33). Accordingly, gender is created through social performances and may be considered a social fiction. The construction and performance of gendered identities emerge particularly within those texts of detective fiction that place a woman in the role of the hero. Unfortunately, the scope of the present paper does not permit incorporation of extended textual analysis of the manner in which Latina protagonists of detective novels challenge conventional gender constructs, and consequently, shatter the notion of a unified or homogeneous Chicana/o or Latina/o identity. However, brief commentary with respect to the characterization of these protagonists may shed some light on the application of Butler's theory of gender performance.

4. Lupe Solano, Master Manipulator of Cuban Conceptualizations of Gender

In the series of mystery fiction by Cuban American Carolina García-Aguilera, for example, one detects an awareness of gender constructions with narrative comments and dialogue that disrupt uncomplicated renderings of masculinity versus femininity. The protagonist, Lupe Solano, explicitly identifies herself as working within an industry dominated by men, and recognizes the masculine characteristics that she displays. She comments, "I should have been born a man. I think like one, I act like one, I live my life like one. As a private investigator for the last eight years, I've worked in a field dominated by men [...]" (2000, p. 1). One may presume the adoption of certain characteristics of masculinity to be a natural result of her work environment, "an open pit of space shared with thirteen male investigators who smoked, drank, swore, farted, belched, and yelled instead of talking" (1996, p. 111). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that this tough female investigator utilizes foul language,

uncharacteristic of “ladylike” women, and further troubles notions of gender by destabilizing them, subverting preconceived notions about that which is appropriate for women.

Aside from making references to Solano’s discomfort with physicality with other women, García-Aguilera also develops her protagonist as a woman whose perspectives about food run contrary to that which society expects. “Tommy claimed he loved taking me out to dinner, though I’m certainly not a cheap date” (1997, p. 164), Solano explains. “He said I was a refreshing change from the skin-and-bones model types he was used to, the kind of women who ordered a lettuce leaf, with vinegar on the side, as their main course” (1997, p. 164). Furthermore, her attitudes regarding marriage and relationships challenge the typical notions assumed to be held by women at large. Solano rejects the institution of marriage, labeling herself a “confirmed single girl” (1996, p. 155); as such, she declares, “[I am] perfectly content to recycle my old boyfriends, rotating them as the mood hit[s] me” (1997, p. 35). Solano herself observes that her sexual behavior contrasts with the expectation for Cuban-American girls, which maintains, “Girls were considered forever chaste and virginal, even after they grew into women, married, and had babies” (1996, p. 95). All in all, Solano’s actions lead her colleague and off-and-on lover, Tommy, to ask, “You have *cojones*, don’t you, Lupe?” (1996, p. 263). After all, Solano herself identifies her behavioral transition toward closer adherence to the typical hard-boiled model of the detective throughout the series. She shoots and kills for the first time, albeit in self-defense, with seemingly no emotional reaction afterward. In a later book in the series, Tommy notes, “I’ve never seen you cry,” he said, “not even when you shot and killed that guy” (1999, p. 49). Upon reflecting on the shooting, she observes, “I had started the day a gun-averse investigator, and was ending it a female Rambo” (1997, p. 273). Nevertheless, one ought to take note that Solano specifies that she embodies a feminine version of this well-known hyper-masculine character.

Despite the acknowledgment of her masculine characteristics, Solano preserves some feminine qualities, particularly manifest in the sundry references to her designer clothes and purses, manicures and pedicures. Gender does not seem to be a static category; rather, the protagonist manipulates, or troubles, her gender depending on the situation. In many instances, Solano relies upon her femininity to manipulate men. She supposes, “He hadn’t shot me the second I walked in, which meant he didn’t really want to kill me [...]. For now, I had to keep the conversation going. Who would have thought that years of parties and dinners would come in handy in a situation like this?” (1996, p. 222). Utilizing strategies gleaned during typically feminine activities in the past, Solano protects herself. In other situations, she takes advantage of the manipulation of a male need for control to get what she wants. “I was rambling, but I knew that would appeal to him. He was a sexist and would grab onto any evidence that he was in control while I wasn’t. Stupid man” (1997, p. 102), she notes, mocking his ignorance that she is indeed the one in control. The protagonist openly manipulates her sexuality in order to make breaks in her investigations. “I kissed his cheek with a little more heat than I should have, but I was about to ask a huge favor” (1997, p. 124), she narrates at one moment, while at another, she recalls, “I gazed into his eyes so deeply I must have made him nervous, because he looked away” (1997, p. 161). This manipulation of her sexuality is perfectly clear as she notes, “Had Mother Superior been a monsignor I might have dispensed with the T-shirt and showed a touch of cleavage. Every good investigator knows that part of the job is understanding people, whether they be clients or marks” (1999, p. 5).

Solano manipulates her gender construct so as to reach her objectives, noting that the men in her life also come to understand that she is both feminine and masculine, depending

on the situation. “Eventually they all discover that I have two sides: a gentle, feminine veneer that I display when I need to, and the ruthless heart and soul of a man underneath” (2000, p. 1). Her determination of which behaviors or characteristics she will perform in a given context illustrate the manner in which gender may be performed and, consequently, considered a relatively unstable construct. Joan Riviere suggests that, in fact, many or all women maintain this sexual duality, choosing to hide their masculinity behind a façade of “womanliness” (2000, p. 73). More specifically, she proposes, “Womanliness [...] could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it [...]” (2000, p. 73). At what point may one draw the line between legitimate womanliness and a “masquerade” of such femininity? According to Riviere, they are one and the same (2000, p. 73).

5. Gloria Damasco and Petra/Pat, Vulnerable yet Powerful Voices of the Chicana Experience

One may suggest, then, that Lucha Corpi’s protagonist, Gloria Damasco, similarly possesses traits of masculinity and femininity. Nevertheless, Damasco’s masculinity seems to be limited to her occupation and continued quest for justice. Despite being a strong and intelligent Chicana, Damasco has been labeled “initially ‘soft-boiled,’ and conventional as far as her female priorities [go] [...]” (Flys-Junquera, 2006, p. 119). At her husband’s request, she initially gives up her detective work, serving instead as wife and mother and also working as a speech therapist. It is only when her husband passes away and her daughter leaves for college that Damasco finds the independence that permits her to pursue her investigations. As she becomes more involved in her practices of detection, however, she never quite embodies the entirely tough and masculinized figure of the detective. On the contrary, Corpi develops a character who maintains her humanity and vulnerability, as an individual who is reluctant to acquire and use a gun, sweats while nervous, suffers from tension, and needs time to recover after being shot (Martella, 2006, p. 208). The acknowledgment of Gloria Damasco’s fear in certain contexts reinforces the notion that female detectives, though countering typical ideas about gender constructions, still encounter menacing dangers that the corresponding male detectives do not. As Walton and Jones observe:

Because of women’s traditional position of vulnerability in patriarchal society, the figure of the female detective is often subject to threat in a way her male counterparts are not. In drawing out the potential parallel between victim and detective, novelists may evoke the larger social dynamic of subjection from which even the generic role of the tough guy detective does not make her immune. (1999, p. 170)

These “frailties” contrast with the characterization of Solano, and perhaps lead Damasco to fortify her network of support.

Recognizing the importance of her community, Damasco relies upon Chicana/o friends, family, and community members in her resolution of crimes. As Carol Pearson observes, the incorporation of Damasco’s mother and *comadre*, Mrs. Contreras, as her assistants in investigation reflects “an interesting development in the detective novel tradition, [in which] *dos abuelitas* appear in the role of the private investigator” (2002, p. 47). Through these women, and her community at large, Damasco comes to accept her clairvoyance, and agrees to seek the help of a curandera. However, she does not go as far as some of her friends and relatives when it comes to the use of Hispanic folk rituals. Through the presentation

of some elements of curanderismo and Hispanic folklore, Corpi introduces the reader to an alternative worldview that contrasts with dominant ideas regarding spirituality. Through Damasco's reflections on her experiences, Corpi also converts her mystery story into a didactic text that informs readers about Chicana/o history, broaching not only overarching social problems, but also feminist issues.

Despite the fact that Damasco does not exemplify a typical hard-boiled detective figure, Corpi questions the traditional formulas of both the hard-boiled model and texts of the Chicana/o literary canon through her references to issues of gender discrimination within the Chicano Movement, among other social injustices, which include racism (and the erasure of Chicana/o culture), illegal adoptions, drugs, domestic violence and issues particular to the Movement, like the grape boycott and use of pesticides. Corpi re-writes the hegemonic versions of socio-historical reality, prompting readers to consider whether one should automatically adopt those dominant versions as truth. In *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, for example, Corpi raises questions as to Marina's (la Malinche's) agency in the Spanish Conquest that, in turn, interrogate the official versions of history that have been told for centuries. Ralph E. Rodríguez notes that, in *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, in particular, "She wrestles with a history of asymmetrical gender relations and considers how past lives inform present selves, both individual and collective" (2005, p. 72). In her consideration of these matters, Corpi subverts the traditionally accepted ideas regarding Malinche's role, while also noting the manner in which discontinuities in the past contribute to the construction of present-day Chicana/o identity (or, more aptly, identities).

Perhaps a more elucidating application of gender performance within Corpi's works involves the analysis of Gloria Damasco's partner, Dora Saldaña, with whom she teams up in *Black Widow's Wardrobe* and *Crimson Moon*. When the two women first meet, they dislike one another. Gianna M. Martella succinctly captures the tension between the two opposing figures: "The young Chicana is an uncomfortable counterpart to Gloria's low-key, middle-aged personality; tall and abrasive, Dora is a fighter who is good with guns and not afraid of using them" (2006, p. 211). Although presented as being less manipulative than García-Aguilera's Solano, Saldaña is a more aggressive character than Damasco and shakes up traditional conceptualizations of gender constructions through her more masculine characterization as a detective figure. However, Damasco also challenges black and white notions of the dichotomy between masculine and feminine.

Much like Damasco, the protagonist of Margarita Cota-Cárdenas' *Puppet*, demonstrates her vulnerability through her expressions of fear. Nevertheless, she also challenges typical notions of both the hard-boiled model of detective fiction and also more canonical Chicana/o texts. The protagonist, Petra/Pat, exemplifies a detectivesque figure: although not a detective or private eye per se, she embarks upon an investigation and adopts a role as a "writer [...] as witness" (2000, p. 27) who exposes the injustices perpetrated against the titular character. In her investigation and revelation of the police's cover-up of Puppet's death, Petra experiences that which her psychiatrist identifies as "writer's paranoia" (2000, p. 86). Although the writing of Puppet's story "would be very risky" (2000, p. 19), Petra asks herself, "At what moment do you yourself overcome terror the fear of not being able to say what they have done to you/them... When do you stop being a blind/passive witness of the facts... [?]" (2000, p. 25). She accepts fear as a consequence of her participation in the investigation and suffers from paranoia. "I thought I saw a... Longoray's... his... because of what I wrote [...]" (2000, p. 39), she explains, reflecting in another moment, "One, someone had cut the gas line... two, the car caught fire... was there

any connection?" (2000, p. 127). The novel's linguistic style captures the protagonist's process of self-destruction in her experience of an utter lack of control, leaving the reader to wonder whether she is simply hallucinating or if foul play actually occurs. Although one may suggest that her writing could serve as a refuge from the chaos, it appears that her reconstruction and revision of the official truth about the crime further provokes her anxiety. This anxiety is heightened by the parallel sub-plot that involves the veil of silence around the massacre at Tlatelolco. As her colleague Medeiros explains, "[...] but some are already writing things, things that nobody will publish, because it wasn't seen neither on television, nor in the papers, nor on the radio nadie dijo nada nobody said nothing" (2000, p. 73). Just like these brave individuals, Petra seeks to shatter the silence surrounding the unjust murder of Puppet (and the subsequent cover-up), thereby subverting hegemonic versions of the socio-historical reality.

While characters like Petra or Gloria Damasco are perhaps less troubling to traditional constructs of gender through their explicit preservation of behavior associated with women, rather than the masculine role they play, others like Lupe Solano and Dora Saldaña upset typical notions of gender by adopting more masculine characteristics. Yet, they, too, maintain, and, in some cases, manipulate their female sexuality. One may posit the question, then, what happens in the case of a female detective who rejects the norms that regulate her sexual behavior as well? With respect to this, Gill Plain suggests, "It is the lesbian detective who has pushed the genre to its limits, and who has finally destabilized a formula that otherwise seemed capable of absorbing all" (2001, p. 247). A look at Alicia Gaspar de Alba's lesbian protagonist of *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* may offer further insight as to the deconstruction of categories of gender and genre.

6. The Latina Sapphic Sleuth

Like the protagonist of *Puppet*, the protagonist of *Desert Blood* may be considered a detectivesque figure rather than a full-fledged private investigator or detective. Yvon, who suggests her homosexuality within the initial pages of the novel, wonders in frustration, "What was it about straight guys who liked to pick up on butch women?" (2005, p. 6). If this question were to leave any doubt as to her sexuality, her response to the unwanted attention and inquiry about her being a model or in the movie industry from a fellow passenger on her flight leaves no confusion. "You lose. Not enough roles for lesbians in the business" (2005, p. 6), she curtly responds. She endures the remainder of the flight, absorbed in her reading of an article on the murdered and missing women of Juárez, particularly since Juárez is her ultimate destination. She and her lesbian partner have decided to go forward with an adoption of a *maquiladora* worker's baby across the border. Further strengthening the notion of Yvon's troubling gender, she has already determined that the baby will grow up to call her "Mapi, a combination of Mami and Papi, because Ivon was going to be a little of each" (2000, p. 20). Unfortunately, however, the *maquiladora* worker, Cecilia, fails to show when she is due to meet with Yvon. As one may presume, it turns out that, "She's dead, you all. Cecilia's dead" (2000, p. 41). At this moment, Yvon begins to don her detective cap, so to speak, embarking upon an unofficial investigation to unravel the mystery behind Cecilia's death, which she suspects to be related to the overarching tragedy of feminicide in the border city. Although this novel is written from a third-person narrative perspective, in contrast to the aforementioned works, Yvon's voice is the most resonant of the text, forcing the reader into adopting her interpretation of events and emotional reactions.

From the brief discussion of the protagonists of Latina detective(sque) fiction, one may identify the manner in which the range of characterizations of these women exemplifies the complexity of the detective(sque) figure. In the context of detective fiction, Gill Plain suggests, “A female protagonist effectively explodes the homosocial environment of the hard-boiled private detective, forcing a radical reconceptualisation of the investigator’s relationship to structures of family and community” (2001, p. 92). Not only must one reconceptualize the relationship between the investigator and her family and community, but also question the very construct of masculinity, particularly in a genre that is steeped in it. Plain notes further, “In the original paradigm of detection, the monstrous was woman—or, more specifically, the feminine. The lesbian, the gay man, the racial other, the criminal: all could be, and were, in some sense ‘feminised’ and defined in deviant opposition to the legitimate authority of patriarchal masculinity” (2001, p. 246). This monstrous presence, who epitomized the Other, was to be subjugated in order to restore a sense of social order and civilization. When traditional roles shift and this “Other” (whether s/he be a woman, gay man, member of an ethnic or racial minority or a criminal, following Plain’s line of thought) becomes the pursuer rather than the pursued, the above-mentioned “legitimate authority of patriarchal masculinity” is undermined. One may ask, then, which version of the Other poses the biggest threat to said patriarchal masculinity and the legitimization of such through texts of detective fiction.

7. Conclusion

Whatever the case may be, one must consider the consequences of female detective figures’ adoption of masculine characteristics within a traditional discourse that has been appropriated by Latina authors. Do these women detectives present a greater threat to the canon due to the manner in which they trouble their gender? Perhaps, but the root of this threat may actually be that the troubled gender is coupled with the authors’ revisions of traditional models to combat a textual dual erasure by challenging the dominant version of history that overlooks that of marginalized communities and also the masculine representations of the Chicano and Latino experience. Latina authors incorporate their communities’ histories in order to establish and preserve a collective memory that is essential to the perpetuation of the group’s identity, recognizing unique experiences within that collective identity. Therein lies the greatest threat—in speaking out against hegemonic perspectives about their communities and *also* the dominant masculine notions within these communities through their Latina protagonists.

Lucha Corpi’s works, in particular, clearly function as a didactic vehicle by which she communicates the discrimination that Chicanos have encountered, the history of the Chicano Movement, and the feminine (Chicana) experience within the Movement and beyond. Tim Libretti explains, “Through her detection, Damasco begins to refocus the investigation of the crime, understanding the crime less as the individual action [...] and more as a crime that is part of the larger crimes against people of color through the mechanisms of colonialism and internal colonialism” (1999, pp. 63-64). In utilizing events like the Chicano Moratorium as a narrative framing device around which the investigations revolve, Corpi educates a new generation of readers while she also counters the traditional notion of detective fiction that a resolution to the crime will inevitably restore order. In the course of Damasco’s investigations, more social contradictions rise to the surface, and the voice of the Chicana/o experience

enters into dialogue with the hegemonic texts that have preceded it, thereby further shattering whatever sense of order was thought to exist. In this sense, “Gloria [Damasco]’s memories challenge traditional understandings of U.S. history and shape-shift into her own construction of Chicana/o identity and community” (Rodríguez, 2005, p. 61).

Like Damasco, *Puppet*’s protagonist, Petra, similarly sheds light on injustices perpetrated against the Chicana/o community, again exposing the fallibility of the hegemonic vision of socio-historical reality. The Chicano Studies classes that Petra teaches become a forum for discussion of the issue of feminism within the Chicano Movement, in which Margarita Cota-Cárdenas may recuperate the experience of women who experienced oppression from fellow Chicanos. Alicia Gaspar de Alba broaches the issues of homosexuality and sexual violence that have often been silenced within Chicana/o literary tradition in her pan-Hispanic narrative, not just discussing the staggering number of disappearances and murders of women in Juárez, but providing more developed stories that correspond to feminicide. This contrasts with the official treatment of the issue, in which the public does not learn of the victims’ stories or even names, in many cases. Gaspar de Alba’s work of detectivesque fiction reveals yet another aspect of socio-historical reality that the hegemonic forces would prefer to hide, deny, or ignore within the annals of official History.

Just as dominant culture has attempted to erase the Chicana/o culture’s collective memory and history, forces of hegemony have similarly obscured the truths regarding the Cuban and Cuban-American experiences. Although a Cuban American, rather than a Chicana, Carolina García-Aguilera similarly introduces thematic content that draws attention to social ills within and beyond her ethnic community and also points to a stratification within her ethnic group. As Ralph E. Rodríguez astutely notes, “While the Cuban American and Chicana/o communities are typically thought to be dramatically different political entities, there are profitable points of comparison between the Chicana/o detective novels and García-Aguilera’s, such as this sense of exile from one’s homeland and the tie that still binds that homeland to one’s identity” (2005, p. 130). For that reason, the inclusion of her texts within this study is beneficial. Like Corpi, García-Aguilera often refers to the history of her community, recuperating the collective memory of the massive migrations to the United States when Fidel Castro took power. Although the protagonist of the Lupe Solano series was born in the United States, her identity is tied to the island and, yet, she identifies fully with neither other Cuban-Americans nor Cuban exiles. In her recognition of the stratification within her community, García-Aguilera draws attention to the dynamics of difference within a given identity, much like the Chicana authors do. In this manner, she, like the other women authors discussed here, combats notions of both stable gender constructs within detective fiction and a homogeneous and unified identity within Latina/o literary traditions.

How do these authors contest such notions? Given the context of this study of detective(sque) fiction, one may best understand the underpinnings of this contestation to coincide with the identification of the true crime under investigation in these texts. According to Cathy Steblyk, this is none other than the “‘theft’ of history” (2003, p. 1). She elaborates, “Particularly since the late 1980s, morally or ethically contestable sites of history have been given a postmortem by authors in order to re-examine previously accepted reports of past events” (2003, p. 1). As a result, authors revise standard historical or cultural narratives to remedy any misrepresentations, and in so doing, promote social change (Steblyk, 2003, p. 1). While Corpi and García-Aguilera have presented a series of mystery novels as conceived

of in a more traditional sense, Cota-Cárdenas and Gaspar de Alba are among the Chicana writers who incorporate a search for answers that involves a reconstruction of history or a condemnation of social phenomenon (be it police brutality and cover-ups or the mysterious crime of feminicide). Nevertheless, each of the novels illustrates the manner in which a Latina or Chicana perspective of history surfaces alongside the development of the more traditional detective plotline, challenging the versions of said history as proposed by the hegemony while also questioning constructs of gender and identity. As Manuel Ramos comments, “[T]hese writers have spiced up the [hard-boiled] mystery, added a bit of chile to the recipe, and created *huevos rancheros*” (2001, p. 167). In this manner, the women writers, in particular, remedy the historical misrepresentation of their communities through the recuperation of doubly marginalized voices, appropriating the dominant values and conventions of the genre to subvert hegemonic perspectives about crime and (in)justice while also exposing and celebrating the complexity of the Chicana/o and Latina/o experience.

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