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Transgressive Appropriations in Lucha Corpi's Detective Fiction

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Popular fiction is characterized by its formulaic nature and its tendency to portray the dominant value system of a culture. By following the formulas and conventions of the genre, readability is ensured and therefore, little strain is placed on the reader. The reader finds him/herself competent by recognizing the conventions and having his or her expectations fulfilled. Cawelti states that "formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes" (*Adventure* 35). This is true since the formula dictates how the writer manipulates the readers' response to the text. Detective fiction, as a popular genre follows this trend, having as its primary purpose that of producing pleasure, the pleasure of solving the crime, of undoing the puzzle. Thus, these genres, by definition, Porter argues, are a form of literature that do not offend the taste or values of the readers (5). It does not confuse or produce conflict in the reader and it achieves its purpose by embodying the ideological presuppositions that elicit recognition and approbation of the mass audience. It acknowledges a shared community of values.

However, on the other hand, any work of fiction can also portray both the ideological position of an artist, particularly in relation to the cultural traditions of his or her community as well as the imaginative strategies for resolving real conflicts and problems in that community. Particularly, in the case of ethnic writers, as Bonnie TuSmith states, "ethnic content is filtered through the author's imaginative and linguistic skills" (23) in the creation of a work of art. Therefore, in popular fiction written by ethnic writers we may find somewhat of a paradox: the genre expressing the dominant values while the writer may be trying to celebrate the repressed history and culture of minority groups. Many of these ethnic artistic productions may also reveal the creative syncretism of combining cultures and endowing old images with new meanings, subverting oppressive systems and creating new metaphors as part of the emancipatory cultural expression and struggles of a group. Therefore, it is only logical that Peter Freese, in his study of ethnic detective fiction, would claim that 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" (9–10). Precisely by choosing to use a popular genre, my contention is that many contemporary ethnic detective fiction writers use this aesthetic strategy to reach a large audience with the purpose of forcing a kind of "inadvertent learning" upon it and subverting the dominant

cultural ethos that the genre portrays. It is in this light that I wish to examine some of the ways in which Lucha Corpi appropriates the American hard-boiled detective tradition with the purpose of transgressing a number of its conventions as a deliberate aesthetic strategy to portray alternative worldviews to the dominant Anglo-American one.

Space does not permit a detailed description or analysis of the multiple subversive interventions used by different ethnic writers, nor even all of those used by Lucha Corpi. This article is part of a broader project in which I have been exploring different alterations of the genre in a number of writers, Chicano, African American and Native American. Among them we could discuss the many transgressions from the traditional hard-boiled formula that affect the character of the detective persona. We can note, for example, the manifest racial or ethnic pride which results in frequent denunciation of racism, discrimination, stereotyping or calling for ideological/political involvement; ecological awareness; the feminist point of view; the use of vernacular language and cultural customs, foods, music; the rewriting of history; the frequent appearance of alternative belief systems, especially folk beliefs, dream-visions, and so-called superstitions; the alteration of the narrative pace; the special use of retardation and digression to subvert the primacy of the criminal plot; the deliberate resistance to narrative expectations which produce readerly "incompetence"; the openness of the ending, resisting the conventional neat resolution and hinting that problems and injustice will continue; the subtle questioning of the comfortable detachment found in an isolated and ritualized murder and its legal solution, and so forth.[1] Therefore, in this article I will focus a number of aspects found in Lucha Corpi's series, particularly how she appropriates the genre to both question the dominant cultural ethos and to broaden any restrictive notions of an exclusive Chicano identity in order to make a common cause with the plight of the underclass.

The classical American private eye is mid-to-low class, a common man rather than one of privileged mental capacities, a restless loner, a "tough guy" of action, a survivor of the streets, and a womanizer. He says wisecracks and has a tendency to solve things through his fists rather than his head: in other words, a brother to Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. This hard-boiled detective gets involved in the action rather than remaining aloof, and takes a moral stance (Cawelti, *Adventure* 142). The reader knows very little about the private life of hard-boiled detectives and their characters do not evolve; their simple characterization makes them "bound" motifs such as those of most formulaic fiction. They are structural tools, essential to the action and readability of the genre. Knight argues that one reason for giving little information about the detective is that the reader assumes shared values with the hero and, therefore, it is not necessary (16).

Gloria Damasco is Lucha Corpi's detective in three novels: *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995) and *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999). Corpi's fourth detective novel, *Crimson Moon* (2004) focuses on Gloria's partner, Justin Escobar, rather than on Gloria, who is "away." Since this article deals largely with the detective persona of Gloria, this last novel is not included in the analysis. Gloria Damasco fits the

mold in many aspects, but Corpi introduces alterations. Since she does not share all the same values with the "mainstream" reader, much more information is provided. Gloria, by being a woman, does not follow some of the classic male attitudes; however, she is independent, restless, and apparently common. It would seem that many of the contemporary women detectives do come very close to the male version. According to Walton and Jones, women detectives surfaced in response to the demand from reading audiences who looked for "strong women characters" (51). However, for some, the "tough gal" went so far as to be seen as "Philip Marlowe in drag" (Geeson 116). Contrary to this trend, Gloria is initially "soft-boiled," and conventional as far as her female priorities, deciding to give up her detecting at the request of her husband, acting as a model wife and mother. Her independence only comes at her husband's death and her daughter's moving away to college. Eventually she becomes more self-reliant, but she never reaches the extreme of the "tough gal." Other differences are significant. She is clearly a Chicana and proud of her heritage. Gloria is politically active in the Chicano Movement and the first novel precisely starts at the Los Angeles Chicano Moratorium of 1979 with the police charge on the demonstrators. We learn much about her past: her marital experience, previous professions, her own mother figures prominently as well as other extended kin and friends from the barrio. She is well integrated in her community, clearly a Chicano community. She is not the marginal professional rebelling against respectability, as the typical detective (Cawelti, *Adventure* 144-45). Gloria shares a sense of communal and cultural identity and her character development is precisely one of strengthening connections to her traditions. Gloria is a rounded character, not a structural tool. Throughout the series of novels, she clearly evolves into autonomous, balanced person with a clear sense of identity.

The genre traditionally develops the heroic discourse in disguise (Porter 126), where the detective helps the victims of a community. In the hard-boiled school, the values celebrated are those of the dominant society: rational pragmatism, rugged individualism, heroic male action, a degree of misogynism and the need for policing, law and order. The discourse is one of the heroization of an agent of surveillance of the dominant societal values. Often, the genre, particularly the hard-boiled version, reveals widespread corruption, both of society, politicians and the police force, but the detective becomes the moral barometer, the individualistic vigilante who will restore the established societal order. Cawelti points out that the genre purports the view that justice lies in the individual, rather than in the law, which is portrayed as a helpless and inefficient bureaucracy (*Adventure* 35). Svoboda, in his study of the conventional American detective hero, states that both the detective and the cowboy act as redeemers "who can tip the balance between good and evil" (560). Thus, whether it is the cowboy in the western or the detective in the city, these popular heroes and genres reveal the myths and worldview of the dominant majority.

Yet Corpi, as others, disrupts this celebration of the traditional heroic values. Gloria is insecure and needs the moral support of her friends and family. Initially she bent to her husband's requests. She has continuous doubts about herself and is ashamed of her gift of clairvoyance. Later, her friend and poet Luisa accompanies her and ends up receiving a bullet meant for Gloria. Her mother, *comadre* [co-parent—a

Mexican fictive kinship term] and partner Justin help her as do other political activists of the Chicano Movement. Gloria is never perceived as a lone hero "riding out into the sunset." Corpi also introduces alternative belief systems. Gloria has a gift of clairvoyance which she fights against at first, but learns to accept and trust. Her family also believes in many of the traditional Chicano lore of *curanderas* [folk healers], altars and the appearance of healers is frequent in the novels. In the third novel, concepts such as the circularity of time and reincarnation become central to the detection process. Although Gloria is forced to collaborate with the "official" agents of the law, she is wary of them and the obvious corruption and discrimination within the system. Broad commentary on the latter aspects is found throughout the novels. Most of the official agents of surveillance are portrayed as weak persons, subject to many pressures, bribes, injustices, and greed. The few who are honest usually leave the system. Often, Gloria does not agree with the official or dominant justice and she withholds information or helps marginalized characters such as illegal immigrants, political activists, and so forth. The societal order is not one worth preserving or protecting but one that requires changing. Gloria's sense of morality is not an individual one such as the vigilante, but the moral values of her community. Like her classic counterparts, Gloria takes a moral stance, but her morality does not necessarily coincide with that of the dominant hierarchy, particularly when it means siding with the police, FBI, big business and their priorities. She is committed to the problems of her ethnic group and to those of the lower classes. Cultural heritage, history and socio-political problems do not constitute a mere backdrop. Corpi's subversive interventions address real problems and stress alternative values such as the value of community as an alternative to individualism. Folk beliefs are treated as respectable and essential in establishing the harmony of the person. They are never presented as superstition, as is the case in the traditional value system of the genre.

Gloria's *chicanismo* [Chicano focused ideology] is not accidental to the story, as would be the case in many novels which contain local figures for local color. In the hard-boiled version, the detective's "commonness" is essential as it serves to mask his heroic features but that mask is precisely what enables him to succeed (Cawelti, *Adventure* 145). This chicanismo is essential to the resolution of the crime. As in the case of African American detectives, Easy Rawlins, PaPa LaBas or Blanche White, or Native American detectives Joe Leaphorn, Jim Chee, Charlie Moon and Cole McCurtain, or Chicanos Mundo Morales and Sonny Baca,[2] their ethnic identity is an integral ingredient to the success of the investigation. It enables Gloria to enter the barrio in a way that the police cannot. That is why the police asks for help, albeit, reluctantly. She is part of the community and therefore privy to much information and understanding of cultural mores. It is interesting to note that Roland Barthes likens detective fiction to initiation rites (119). Gloria's detection activity initiates her into accepting her gift of clairvoyance and reminding her of the need to continue her political activism. The discovery of the solution to the crime is not solely due to individual work, but to a large degree to the effort of their friends and community and to their acceptance of the Chicano traditions and beliefs, which are radically different from the values and beliefs of the dominating system.

The second area where Corpi introduces her subversive interventions is in the realm of the rhetorical conventions of the genre. Porter defines detective fiction as "novels whose principal action concerns the attempt by a specialist investigator to solve a crime and to bring a criminal to justice" (5). As most formulaic fiction, the plot consists of several set phases, which Corpi follows. Suspense is created by the experience of suspension, of interrupting what is perceived as a sequence. In the process of telling one story, another, that of the crime, is progressively uncovered. All action is directed to the solution of the crime. Precisely, this end-oriented characteristic is what makes Barthes consider detective fiction, together with other popular fiction as a "texte de desir;" therefore, one to be dismissed from a literary point of view (Porter 53). The use of the Aristotelian device of *peripateia* occurs at all levels: plot, roles, character, content and form. The narrative pace is characterized both by a taut pace of one-thing-leads-to-another as well as by use of retardation, the continuous interruption with false clues, new crimes, mistaken suspects, descriptions, digressions and commentary. The hard-boiled school is also characterized by a fast tempo, the economy of expression, verosimilitud of action and an objective narrative technique.

The setting of most detective novels is usually an urban jungle where crime lives side by side with glamour and respectability. Cawelti sees this space as a world of lurking dangers, a chaotic wasteland which mirrors the corruption of society (*Adventure* 154). Frye considers detective fiction to be a kind of romance in reverse order, where the drama is ritualized and thereby the brutality of the crime is masked by the convention of the form (47). Detective fiction also presents binary oppositions of good and evil, detective and criminal, whereby simplifying the action and the moral implications. Knight affirms that detective fiction, like "...stories, myths, books, rituals are not so much an answer about the world, but a set of questions shaped to provide a consoling result for the anxieties of those who share in the cultural activity—the audience" (4). In this way "plot itself is a way of ordering events; its outcome distributes triumph and defeat, praise and blame to the character in a way that accords with the audience's belief in dominant cultural values," thus creating and justifying the cultural hegemony (4). Although the plot may reveal conflict, it is "artificially and consolingly resolved by the plotting and the structure of the novel" and therefore, while the plot may reveal the areas of central anxiety, it also assures the audience that all is normal (5). Cawelti, too, stresses that detective fiction presents the tensions and ambiguities resulting from conflicting interests of different groups in society, but moves towards a harmonization of these conflicts. Likewise, the genre allows audiences to experience the forbidden or deal with perceived threats without really overstepping the boundaries of the traditional moral values (*Adventure* 35-6). By convention, the detective will be right and justice will prevail: the reader needn't be worried or shocked, as the risk of upsetting the moral order is controlled and therefore, the reader can sit back and enjoy the aesthetic pleasure of solving the riddle.

Most of these conventions are respected by Corpi. Following the formula precisely ensures readability and pleasure. As Cawelti concludes, "literary formulas

assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs" (*Adventure* 36). However, Corpi subtly disrupts some of conventions to present alternatives. She makes use of the retardation device, but the interruptions, false clues and digressions clearly reveal ulterior motives. Through learning, an ethnic pride is instilled. Lucha Corpi's digressions approach different aspects of Chicano history and each novel is centered on a different issue. The first is based on the National Chicano Moratorium, street gangs and the heritage of prominent families. The second takes up the United Farm Workers' Grape boycott and illegal immigration while the third focuses on the preservation of Chicano myths, history and traditions. The digressions contain the background needed to understand the issue on hand and through them, Corpi "instructs" the reader.

The novels are full of comments on Chicano customs, foods and traditions. Problems of discrimination and misunderstandings come up continuously. The main action of the detective novel becomes secondary to the reconstruction of the Chicano heritage and the comment on Chicano history. Only by reconstructing the past, in other words, solving the crimes of history, can the crimes of the present be solved. In the case of Corpi, as Libretti points out, the crime investigation often becomes a red herring. In the first novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, the murder of a child leads Gloria to reassess the Chicano Moratorium and the political ideals it espoused. The solution to the crime, however, has nothing to do with the Chicano cause. In *Cactus Blood* when Gloria sets out to solve Sonny Mares' murder, the solution shows that there was no murder: it was indeed suicide. However, the novel explores the United Farm Workers grape boycott. In the third novel, *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, her detecting leads her to read, learn and revise the popular myth of "La Malinche." What is important is not so much the crime or its solution but the "process of detection itself and the exploration and interpretation of clues because of the psycho-historical therapeutic recovery and analysis to which the characters subject themselves" (Libretti 72). What Gloria learns and the increasing attention paid to the political and social awareness of her community is what matters. I feel that Corpi, as other Chicanos, would agree with Ramon Saldívar's analysis of Chicano literature where the latter states that "history cannot be conceived as the mere 'background' or 'context' of [Chicana/o] literature; rather history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature" (5).

However, one point where Corpi shifts away from other ethnic writers of detective fiction, is in her larger scope. Most ethnic writers focus exclusively on their own community, making little allowances for other ethnic groups or issues. For example, most African American detective writers deal only with black/white relations. Most Native American detective writers also focus on Indian/white relations, although Louis Owens does introduce Chicano Mundo Morales as a main character. James Doss shows Ute Indians and their prejudices, particularly against both whites and Hispanics. Rudolfo Anaya focuses exclusively on Chicanos. However, Lucha Corpi makes a common cause with other exploited people and her novels are not reduced to Chicano/Anglo relations. Her novels cut across geographical and national boundaries. Her antagonists range from the expected Anglo-Americans, to

Brazilians, Spaniards, Mexicans and Swedes: all people with economic or political power. Her concern is for social justice and her sense of community extends to the underclass in general. In this aspect, Corpi has much in common with Chicana writer Helena Maria Viramontes, whose dominant theme, which even overpowers her *chicanismo*, is social justice. Significant is her many times anthologized story "Cariboo Café" where the un-named Salvadoran refugee represents all the outcasts of society. Likewise, Gregory Navas in his film *My Family* which focuses on three generations of a Chicano family, makes a common cause with another Salvadoran refugee, Isabel. As we will see, Corpi's central concern is for social justice, particularly for women, regardless of ethnic or national origin.

The third disruption, and most important one, is the questioning of the cultural ethos of the genre. The detective genre, as all popular literature, reflects community values by reaffirming them (Porter 5). It projects the social order of the mainstream ideology, defending both conformism and being almost anathema to subverting ideologies (Porter 126). It tends to make policing not only acceptable but needed to maintain the social order and creates agents/heroes who conform to that cultural ideal. Kaemmel precisely denounces the genre as one that could only take place in capitalist societies where the possible subversive political action of the oppressed classes is substituted by the glorification of a romanticized individual. Nevertheless, the hard-boiled school did subvert the notion of social class of the British "armchair detective tradition," as Cawelti points out ("Canonization" 6) and many women detective writers are now subverting the anti-feminist values of the 30's and 40's. Walton and Jones claim that contemporary women writers use the detective formula in order to "investigate not just a particular crime but the general offenses in which the patriarchal power structure of contemporary society itself is potentially incriminated" (4). In like manner, Cawelti feels that ethnic detective fiction can reflect new social values of the minority groups who are claiming their place within the larger social context ("Canonization" 8). Soitos points out how African American detective writers, among them Rudolph Fisher, Chester Himes, Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major, question the basic values of the dominant society in their detectives' attitudes toward the law and how they challenge the legal code of what is morally right or wrong. Likewise, Tim Libretti, who studies Lucha Corpi's first novel, states that ethnic authors have "appropriated the popular genre of detective fiction in order to subject to critique dominant cultural and legalistic conceptions of crime and injustice and to forward new conceptions informed by an historical perspective of the racial experience in the U.S." (61).

Thus, the most important subversive intervention that Corpi makes is that of questioning the dominant cultural ethos. We have seen that precisely the use of retardation and digression serves this purpose. The reconstruction of Chicano history and heritage becomes more important than the solution of the crime. Chicano class consciousness and social justice become major issues. The Chicano worldview is set up as a contrast and possible alternative to the "mainstream Anglo" worldview, but so is that of other exploited peoples, particularly women. This worldview is clearly

involved with community values, the relationship with the land and nature, social justice and a more intuitive and non-linear way of accesses knowledge.

If most of the traditional hard-boiled genre takes place in the jungle of the city, here we have a major difference. Gloria lives in San Francisco, but she travels extensively around the landscape and vineyards of California. Although the urban jungle of Los Angeles is present in the first novel, the hills of San Francisco and Sonoma County dominate the second and San Francisco and Mexico the third. Although Corpi does not present nature as a mythic force, as for example Anaya, ecological concerns are very important, and central to her second novel. The binary opposition of good and evil is evident, but the crimes loose their ritualized status, becoming more real. The problems are current: racism and discrimination, illegal adoptions and drugs, battered women, hostile business takeovers, the grape boycott, pesticides and the theft of national archeology and art dominate Corpi's fiction. The threats are of real concern, but not too menacing as they remain controlled by the conventions of the genre. As Porter points out, one of the reasons for the popularity and longevity of the genre is due to the possibility of "grafting contemporary fears on to an endlessly repeated formula" (127).

Corpi's fiction has a political and social message. The use of a series, allows her to explore more fully different issues. Many current feminist and ethnic writers are turning to the series format. Fiske argues that the series format of formula fiction "engenders innovations because it encourages such readerly involvement" (108). Walton and Jones see this as a way of establishing a "contract" between reader and writer which allows writers to explore nuances and themes in extended ways, attaining in the reader both personal attachment and political engagement (54-55).[3] Feminist issues, the politics of the Chicano Movement together with issues of discrimination, social injustice and loss of the Chicano heritage, culture and rights are Corpi's driving force. These are not static values but evolving ones and Gloria is often forced to reassess her attitudes as things change: "Intellectually, I realized it was foolish to long for the most oppressive and repressive times we, as Chicanos, had experienced. But I had the feeling I didn't miss the activism as much as the innocence that had underscored our political zeal and the newness of our commitment" (*Cactus* 21).

The first novel presents the National Chicano Moratorium, the demonstrations and police brutality. Solving the crime leads Gloria to a prejudiced police force, international business takeovers and neo-Nazi brotherhoods. It also focuses on racial discrimination and feminist issues of gender roles and class issues. During the demonstration where journalist Ruben Salazar was killed by the police—a historical fact--Gloria finds a murdered and defiled child, but neither she nor the police find a motive nor the criminal. She experiences some visions which she cannot interpret and begins to trust Detective Kenyon, but as a key witness is killed and her life is endangered, Gloria abandons the detecting at the request of her husband and only returns to it 18 years later when Dario dies. During that time, however, she had been secretly collecting clippings together with the information that Detective Kenyon left her at his death. The plot involves an illegal adoption of a child of Mexican descent

into a wealthy American family of Swedish origins. Both the grandfather and brother are prejudiced against the adopted child who eventually comes to control the business. The now adult brother is responsible for the murder of his nephew, out of hatred for his brother. Racial discrimination becomes central to the plot, but Corpi's overriding concern with suffering women is stronger. As Corpi writes at the end of the novel, all the women involved, the natural mother, the adoptive mother, the wife, all

> seemed to be caught in a game where all the main players were men, and the losers were all women and their children. When this was over—as in time of war and subsequent peace—the women would have to swallow their grief and their shame. They would have to comfort and support each other, then begin the long and painful task of rebuilding their lives. (170-1)

Her second novel is centered on feminist, class and environmental issues. It deals with a young orphan Mexican girl who becomes an illegal immigrant and who is raped by her employer, an American medical doctor. In her flight, Carlota crosses a vineyard recently sprayed by pesticides and is subsequently poisoned. A Guatemalan *curandero* and ecological activist who partakes in an eco-terrorist action—for which he serves a jail term--helps her. The victim, Sonny, which provokes the initiation of the detecting activity, precisely commits suicide as a result of his increasing depression over the explosion of the tank of pesticides and his friend's jail sentence. This environmental issue is central to the novel, as all the characters, including the supposed victim, had been active supporters of the UFW and the grape boycott. Leo recalls, mimicking Sonny's—the victim--speech: "No, *cabrón*. Don't even think about it. Me and Art are probably the only *carnales* who have honored every grape boycott called by César" (24). The investigation follows its course, but foremost in it is the reason for the grape boycott: there is a moment when Gloria and Carlota are escaping, running through a restaurant and Carlota stops at a table,

> snatched the bunch of grapes from the woman's hand. She threw them on the floor and crushed them with her shoe. All the time she fired questions at the dumbfounded lady. "Don't you care that farm workers are poisoned and die of cancer every year? That babies are born with birth defects? That people go crazy from the pesticides used on those grapes? Don't you know that you should (...) boycott table grapes?" (177)

The ellipsis in this quote does not refer to missing words but is used by Corpi to indicate the lapses in Carlota's words, due to the brain damaged she suffered as a result of the poisoning. Carlota, when she is well, devotes most of her time to community action informing citizens about the effect of pesticides and therefore the novel is full of references to the issue. The reader learns much about this environmental poison and its effects as the novel unfolds. Carlota always carries with her a *nopalito*, her connection to *la tierra* and her identity. Again, it is the wealthy wine producers and the greed for money that are pitted against the undocumented immigrants, the sick and the unjustly convicted. The community of women also constitutes a central theme. The main victim is Carlota whose identity is

discovered by Gloria while editing a series of interviews that her deceased friend Luisa had made in order to establish a community of female voices and experiences. As in the previous novel, the women suffer the most and unite to support each other. Through the help of other women, she is able to find Carlota and solve the mystery. Nevertheless, at the end Gloria rejects legislated justice, siding with the downtrodden and allowing Carlota and Roman, the Guatemalan *curandero*, who are both being sought out by the police, to leave for Mexico so Carlota can die at home.

Her third novel deals with feminist issues and national archeological treasures as she uncovers the smuggling of pre-Columbian art pieces and drugs. One important thread to the plot is the attitude of the Spanish professor-archeologist—the colonizer—who demeans Chicanos because they are incapable of appreciating their cultural heritage, which he is stealing. The main thread, however, deals with feminist issues intertwined with Chicano cultural heritage. The protagonist, Lydia, was beaten by her husband and so she killed him, serving a prison sentence, during which she gave birth to twins, although she is told that the children were stillborn. Her wealthy brother-in-law, a renowned yet tyrannical Spanish archeologist, illegally adopts the children. When Lydia is released from jail, her life is threatened by her own son. Lydia believes herself to be the reincarnation of the mythical figure, "La Malinche." Here Corpi brings up again the symbol of the wronged mother who has lost her children. The myth of "La Malinche" is central to Mexico and Chicano culture. Malinche, as the interpreter for Hernán Cortés is viewed traditionally as a traitor to her people. As lover to Cortés, she had a son, yet Cortés refused to marry her. Chicanas have undertaken a revision of the figure, viewing Malinche as an abused woman—she was sold by her family to Mayan merchants—who became, not only the bridge between two cultures, but mother to the mestiza race, yet has been rejected by her "figurative children," the Mexicans. Corpi uses the plot to re-imagine this figure. Gloria must accept the belief in reincarnation and the circularity of time in order to protect Lydia and anticipate her movements. Gloria's visions reflect both the past and the present and she must learn to disentangle them. In all her novels, the main sufferers are women and Gloria is helped by her mother, daughter, comadre and friends to solve the mystery. Community action and support among all the women are central to Corpi's plots. Gloria helps people regardless of pay, as did her late husband and friends who gave medical attention to the poor. It is the wives, sisters, daughters and mothers who help Gloria, even against their husbands, brothers, sons or fathers. Corpi, in her plots, proves Kaemmel wrong as she uses her detective fiction to challenge the capitalist value system, and the patriarchal and colonial order, giving a voice to the oppressed and colonized peoples.

What also comes across clearly is Corpi's message of forcing the reader, like the woman at the table eating grapes, into awareness about whatever the issue at hand is. Carlota accuses Gloria, "Do you always have to be so non-committal? When did you abandon your political commitment? Next you'll be calling yourself *Hispanic*" (174). Gloria then realizes the truth of the accusation and knows she must re-arrange her priorities. She answers, "I myself have been thinking that I am growing politically apathetic and quite selfish...And when this is over, I know I have to do a lot of mental

and emotional housekeeping" (174). Like Gloria, the reader is compelled to reassess his/her position vis-à-vis environmental, social and political issues. The comfort of apathy and conformism, typical of the genre, is disrupted. When the novel is over, the reader, too, must clean house.

Therefore, we have seen firstly that through the alteration of the detective persona, Corpi disrupts the dominant hero mythology of individualism found in the American cowboy or gangster. Corpi often mentions the landed aristocracy of Spanish and Mexican descent who had once owned all of California, reminding the dominant US audience of a history long "forgotten." The rediscovery and reconstruction of Chicano history and culture, how it was suppressed, together with their increasing awareness of feminist, ecological and social problems, present a different worldview from the dominant Eurocentric one. But even more, Gloria's increasing ability to "see" and her acceptance of the possibility of reincarnation, suggest the viability of an alternative belief system different from the Western empirical and linear system of thought. In using the hermeneutic code rather than the semiotic one, as Stowe analyzes in a study on Chandler (375), Gloria is presented as Gadamerian interpreter, willing to open herself up to questions, listen and learn. Thus the detection becomes a process of self-definition, establishing a dialogical investigation rather than the monologic semiotic application of a method to decipher the signs found in most detective stories. Here the detection moves away from the methodological solution of the crime to a philosophical understanding of the mystery, which in this case refers to the Chicana worldview.

Secondly, in the digressions that Corpi uses for the retardation device, the theme is always a feminist one and the Chicano cultural ethos: whether it be history, its heritage, values, beliefs, social solidarity, customs or folklore. She is clearly trying to recover the Chicano history and both reaffirming these values for the inside community, the Chicanos, and teaching these values to the dominant outside community. The Chicana worldview, with its emphasis on community, familism, social justice and relationship with *la tierra* is presented as an alternative to the dominant ethos. Among these values is the Chicano syncretic belief system, where Catholicism lives side by side with *curanderos*, dream-visions and *limpiezas*. Access to power and knowledge not only is reached through rationalizing but also through intuition and faith. These beliefs lay side by side with the need to take action and be committed. Equally essential is the cry for social justice, regardless of gender, racial, ethnic or class origins. Although Corpi may focus on the Chicano heritage, her view, in contrast to other writers, is broader. With her trangressions of cultural and national boundaries, she takes sides with all the downtrodden people, particularly women. For the detective, the quest for self-definition and knowledge becomes more important than the quest for the criminal; the interpolations and the free motifs become more important than the solution of the mystery. Thus, the end-oriented objective of the genre shifts, perhaps creating, in Barthes' sense, a "text du plaisir," and a more meaningful literature.

By engaging in a reverse discourse, in the sense of Foucault (100-101), one which repeats and inverts the ideological imperatives of the dominant discourse in order to

authorize those marginalized by it, Corpi presents an alternative discourse of power. The effects of reverse discourse are based on the readers' recognition of the conventions of the genre but at the same time noting the subtle changes made by the writers. The ability to perceive the difference produces pleasure, engagement and learning. As a result, the audience expectations are jarred and in this deviation from the norm there is not only literary pleasure, but also, as Kaemmel would wish (59), Corpi transmits knowledge and other social values. As Slotkin points out, "myth is a narrative formulation of a culture's worldview and self-concept" (294) and popular genres reinforce cultural myths. But as we have seen, they can also be reversible. Many ethnic writers, Libretti claims, have turned to this genre not to bring it in the canon but rather to "discuss political issues raised within and by popular political movements. They choose this popular form of the detective novel in order to reach a broader audience, indeed to reach the public who actually participates in these movements" (62). As mentioned before, the series format encourages readerly participation and involvement. In this manner, the story provokes a kind of "inadvertent learning" for the audience who, in Stanley Ellin's words, is "drawn through the book by its story, but emerges at last with much more than the story in mind" (qtd in Gosselin 3). Despite Moretti's claim that "detective fiction owes its success to the fact that it teaches nothing" (138), much ethnic detective fiction sets out to subtly do quite the contrary. By doing so, ethnic writers are bringing literature closer to the concerns of everyday life and taking a stance against the elitism and ideological standards of the dominant culture. Through creative interpolations and disruptions, the genre is ideologically reversed. The genre can remain true to its formulaic essence, but adapt to changing values. As Pierre Macherey points out, writers exist to make their ideologies visible and do so through their fiction (137). The popular genre ensures a broad audience, precisely those who participate in the maintenance of the dominant value system. In such a manner, Corpi, as other ethnic writers, subverts this popular genre to expose fallacies in the dominant myths and create new ones. Borrowing Anaya's term, she becomes shaman story-teller, using her imaginative strategies for an emancipatory cultural expression and to provoke the readers into their own process of self-definition. Corpi asks her readers to reassess their values. Moreover, as Gloria's promise to "clean house," Corpi passes on the torch to the readers, inciting them to take action. Thus, Lucha Corpi writes murder mysteries, but with an ideological message. The message appropriates the dominant value system and the conventions of a literary genre in order to subvert it, to provide an alternative cultural ethos, one that transgresses narrow definitions of borders, respects and values the community, the environment and the underclass regardless of its origins.

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[1] Some aspects of these subversive interventions can be found in the study of Soitos on African American detective fiction, although he barely addresses that of the 90's; other aspects can be found in some articles included in Gosselin (ed), Fisher and Muller (eds.) or Klein (ed.); Knight, in his recent book *Crime Fiction*, makes an overview of detective fiction and includes a small chapter on ethnic detective fiction; feminist issues are explored in Walton and Jones; I have been working on ecological issues, community and family values, the use of the vernacular, folk beliefs and the re-writing of history (see Flys); however, to date, there is no systematic comparative study.

[2] These detectives appear in the series written by Walter Mosley, Ishmael Reed, Barbara Neely, Tony Hillerman, James Doss, Louis Owens and Rudolfo Anaya, respectively.

[3] It is perhaps premature now, pending the direction of future novels by Corpi, but the fact that her last novel, *Crimson Moon*, has the subtitle of "A Brown Angel Mystery" points to a series developing around the detective agency, with several protagonists (this novel focuses on Justin Escobar and Dora Saldaña—a minor character who had appeared in previous novels just in passing) working together, rather than on one detective as is the norm (as in series by Sue Grafton or Sara Paretsky). It is different from the classic Agatha Christie who features several detectives, but they do not work together. This could possibly be a reinforcement of the sense of community in contrast to the individualism typical of the genre.