

MURDER WITH AN ECOLOGICAL MESSAGE: RUDOLFO ANAYA AND LUCHA CORPI'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper, on the one hand, illustrates how Chicano writers Rudolfo Anaya and Lucha Corpi use a popular genre, detective fiction, to subvert the dominant cultural ethos of the United States. By subtly disrupting some of the formulaic conventions, such as the characteristics of the detective persona and the rhetorical strategies, these novels question the value system and present the Chicano worldview, in which both community and harmony with nature are central, as effective alternatives to the mainstream values. These subversive interventions jar the mainstream audience expectations and cause inadvertent learning. At the same time, the Chicano community is empowered. Thus, this choice of genre and aesthetic strategy constitute an emancipatory cultural expression. On the other hand, the paper points out the importance of nature and ecological awareness in Chicano literature with the hope of redressing the neglect that ecocritics have cast on Chicano literature.

KEY WORDS: Detective genre, subversion, hard-boiled genre, community values, ecological awareness, Chicano literature, cultural ethos, ecocriticism.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo ilustra cómo los escritores chicanos, Rudolfo Anaya y Lucha Corpi, utilizan el género popular de la novela de detectives para subvertir los valores culturales dominantes en los Estados Unidos. Al alterar sutilmente las fórmulas tradicionales del género, tales como la descripción del detective y las convenciones retóricas, las novelas de estos autores presentan los valores chicanos, sobre todo de la comunidad y de la armonía con la naturaleza, como alternativas válidas al sistema dominante. Estas intervenciones subversivas sorprenden al lector de tal forma que, sin darse cuenta, aprende sobre la cultura chicana. De igual forma, la comunidad chicana, acostumbrada a ser marginada, resulta ser central. Así pues, esta estrategia resulta ser una expresión emancipadora. Por otra parte, el trabajo señala la importancia de la naturaleza y la concienciación ecológica en la literatura chicana y pretende sacar esta literatura del olvido por parte de la escuela de los ecocríticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género de detectives, subversiones, escuela americana de detectives «hard-boiled», primacía de la comunidad, concienciación ecológica, literatura chicana, valores culturales, ecocrítica.

One of today's most pressing issues is that of preserving the environment. Unfortunately, as Glotfelty (xv-xvi) and many others denounce, most literary criticism and much creative writing seems to remain aloof from this concern. Writer Scott Russell Sanders laments that "a deep awareness of nature has been largely excluded" (192) from the main trend in contemporary fiction. Although Deitering points out the existence of the opposite pole, that of a "toxic consciousness" in recent American fiction, the lack of attention paid to nature in much contemporary literature together with the scarce involvement of the humanities scholars, who seem to be locked in their ivory towers, is surprising. Fortunately, the last few years have seen a shift in this trend, as the new wave of ecocriticism illustrates. Nevertheless, ecocritics have turned their attention to the traditional type of nature writing, such as that of Thoreau or Gary Snyder and a few others, predominantly writers belonging to the classical "mainstream" American and European literatures. In an excellent introduction to the field, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the only ethnic literature dealt with is, of course, Native American which has always been intimately linked to nature. Moreover, ecocritics have centered their attention on so-called serious writing or that belonging to the canonized genres. Nature writing or literature with a high environmental consciousness from other minority groups or popular literary genres has been severely neglected.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that popular genres, indeed even formulaic fiction, can also present serious issues and ecological sensibility, promoting greater awareness and that, precisely by using a popular genre, it reaches a much wider audience and thus its message has far reaching effects. In order to do this, I will briefly discuss some of the theoretical assumptions of the hard-boiled detective genre and then illustrate how Chicano writers, Rudolfo Anaya and Lucha Corpi subvert the genre in order to relay a message. That message is clearly a cultural and/or political one. In both cases the message centers on the Chicano heritage and worldview. However within that worldview, nature also has a prominent position. In Anaya the emphasis is that of highlighting the necessary inter-relatedness of humans and our environment. For Anaya's view, John Dewey's definition of environment is appropriate: "the relation of self to setting" which implies acknowledging that humans are necessarily a part of their environment (qtd. in Evernden 99). In the case of Corpi, the emphasis is more politically oriented, one of denunciation, particularly of pesticides and a call for greater community involvement. In analyzing the subversive interventions both these writers exercise in their detective fiction, I posit that one of their objectives is to increase ecological awareness and incite the reader to action.

Detective fiction, as all popular genres, is characterized by its formulaic nature. 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. Precisely, the formula dictates how the writer manipulates the readers' response to the text. According to Porter, the purpose of detective fiction is pleasure, the pleasure of solving the crime, of undoing the puzzle. Popular fiction, by definition, Porter argues, is a form of literature that does not offend the taste or values of

the readers (5). Thus, popular fiction 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. Among the established conventions are those referring to the detective persona, the rhetorical norms and the cultural ethos or value system portrayed. It is some aspects of these that I will be focusing on in this paper.

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. As other hard-boiled detectives, he 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 the 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). Moretti, who discusses the social functions of detective fiction, claims that detective novels are inherently antinovelistic and their characters are “inert” given that their basis lies in a Freudian master narrative propelled by the death instinct. Since the goal is to return to the normalcy of the beginning, “the aim of narration is no longer the character’s development into autonomy” (137).

Rudolfo Anaya’s detective, Sonny Baca, who features in three novels, *Zia Summer* (1995), *Rio Grande Fall* (1996) and *Shaman Winter* (1999), has most of the trappings of his counterparts. However, Anaya makes some subtle changes. Likewise, Gloria Damasco, Lucha Corpi’s detective in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995) and *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* (1999), also fits the mold in many aspects; but Corpi, too, introduces changes. Since Sonny Baca and Gloria Damasco do not share all the same values with the “mainstream” reader, much more information is provided. Both Sonny and Gloria are independent, restless, and apparently common. Sonny has been a womanizer, says wisecracks and gets involved, resorting to his fists. Gloria, no matter how restless and curious, is compelled to give up her detecting by her husband, becoming a model wife and mother. Her independence only comes at her husband’s death and her daughter’s moving away to college. Yet the differences with the stereotyped detective are many. Both are clearly Chicano and proud of their heritage. Sonny is the great-grandson of a legendary but historical Chicano sheriff, Elfego Baca. 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 the past of both detectives: their marital experience, previous professions, their mothers figure prominently as well as other extended kin and friends from the barrio. Both are well integrated in their communities, clearly Chicano communities. Neither is the marginal professional rebelling against respectability, as the typical detective (Cawelti, *Adventure* 144-45). Both share a sense of communal and

cultural identity and their character development is precisely one of strengthening connections to their traditions. Both are rounded characters, not structural tools. Throughout the series of novels, both clearly evolve into autonomous, balanced persons 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 misogyny 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. 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 be 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 Anaya and Corpi disrupt this celebration of the traditional heroic values. Sonny, despite the outside appearance of a “tough guy” is much softer; often he is downright insecure and turns to his barrio friends for help. Much of that help comes from some comic retired friends, a curandera, Lorenza, and his traditional neighbor, a sun-worshipping “viejecito.” Don Eliseo turns out to be a brujo in the end, allowing alternative belief systems, considered as superstition by the dominant ethos, to enter into play.¹ Gloria, too, is insecure and needs the moral support of her friends and family. Initially she bent to her husband’s requests. Later, her friend and poet Luisa accompanies her and ends up receiving a bullet meant for Gloria. Her mother, comadre and partner Justin help her as do other political activists of the Chicano Movement. Neither Sonny nor Gloria are perceived as lone heroes “riding out into the sunset.” Like Anaya, 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, altars and the appearance of healers is frequent in the novels. Both Sonny and Gloria, although they are forced to collaborate with the “official” agents of the law, are wary of them and the obvious corruption and discrimination within the system. Broad commentary on the latter aspects is found throughout both series of 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, neither Sonny nor Gloria agree with the official or

¹ For an extended comparative study of the appearance of alternative belief systems as a subversions to the dominant cultural ethos in African American and Chicano detective fiction, see Flys, “Detectives, Hoodoo and Brujería.”

dominant justice and they withhold information or help marginal characters such as the homeless, illegal immigrants, political activists, and so forth. The societal order is not one worth preserving or protecting but one that requires changing. Sonny and Gloria's sense of morality is not an individual one such as the vigilante, but the moral values of their community. Like their classic counterparts, Sonny and Gloria take a moral stance, but their 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. They are committed to the problems of their ethnic group and cultural heritage; history and socio-political problems do not constitute a mere backdrop. The subversive interventions, then, present 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.

Sonny's and Gloria's chicanismo 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, their ethnic identity is an integral ingredient to the success of the investigation. It enables both Sonny and Gloria to enter the barrio in a way that the police cannot. That is why the police or the FBI ask for their help, albeit, reluctantly. They are 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). Curiously this could never be more true than in the case of Sonny Baca. His detection activity is parallel to his learning and initiation to the world of dreams and spirits. Likewise, Gloria's detection activity initiates her into accepting her gift of clairvoyance and reminding her of the need to continue her political activism. In both cases, the discovery of the solution to the crime is not solely due to their 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 both Anaya and Corpi introduce their 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 Anaya and Corpi follow. 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 peripeteia occurs at all levels: plot, roles, character, content and form (Porter). 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 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 (Soitos 15), where the drama is ritualized and thereby the brutality of the crime is masked by the convention of the form (Frye 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). 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 both Anaya and Corpi. Following the formula precisely ensures readability and pleasure. However, subtly the writers disrupt some of them. They make use of the retardation device, but the interruptions, false clues and digressions clearly reveal ulterior motives. Through learning, an ethnic pride is instilled. Progressively in each of Anaya's novel of the series, the length and number of the digressions is greater and their contents become a reconstruction of the Chicano history and heritage. Sonny, through the train of events, reads or hears stories about his heritage. Lucha Corpi's digressions approach Chicano history differently. 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. The third focuses on the preservation of Chicano myths, history and traditions. The digressions contain the background needed to understand the issue on hand. In Peter Freese's study of ethnic detective fiction, he claims 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" (qtd. in Gosselin 3).

This is precisely what both writers do. The novels of both writers 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. For Anaya, as for other writers, achieving autonomy implies connecting the past and the present and recovering their cultural duality. In the case of Corpi, as Libretti points out, the crime investigation becomes a red herring. In fact, in *Cactus Blood* when Gloria sets out to solve Sonny Mares' murder in the second novel, the solution shows that there was no murder: it was indeed suicide. In the third novel 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 awareness of her community is what matters. Both Anaya and Corpi would agree with Ramon Saldivar'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).

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 as 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, 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. 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 writers such as Mosley, Himes and Reed, 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 ethnic detective fiction states that these 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 Anaya and Corpi make 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. The Chicano worldview is set up as a contrast and possible alternative to the "mainstream Anglo" worldview. The Chicano worldview is clearly involved with

community values and the relationship with the land and nature, and this is precisely the message both authors send out.

If most of the traditional hard-boiled genre takes place in the jungle of the city, here we have a major difference. Anaya seems to be saying that there is an alternative to the urban jungle. Although Sonny lives in Albuquerque, it is in a barrio where his neighbor still plants corn. Sonny moves around the country and mountains of New Mexico, not only giving a regional value to the novels, but as neighbor Don Eliseo illustrates, the close contact with nature and the land contributes to harmony and rebirth. Gloria lives in San Francisco, but she, too, travels extensively around the landscape 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. Corpi does not present nature as a mythic force, as Anaya, but ecological concerns are central. The binary opposition of good and evil is central, but the crimes lose their ritualized status, becoming more real. The problems are current: drugs, nuclear waste, water rights, the homeless, discrimination and political corruption in Anaya; racism and discrimination, illegal adoptions and drugs, hostile business takeovers, the grape boycott, pesticides and the theft of national archeology and art dominate Corpi's fiction. The threats are real but not excessively 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).

The ecological concerns, the main focus of this paper, are central to the message of both these committed writers. Therefore, it is worth exploring in depth the views on nature that each writer puts forth. In the case of Rudolfo Anaya, respect and identification with nature are presented as alternative solutions to the dominant social values. The three novels form an ongoing series. The first, *Zia Summer*, begins, as to be expected, with a crime: the cult murder of Sonny's cousin Gloria. The criminal and antagonist turns out to be Anthony Pájaro, alias Raven, an ecological terrorist who is threatening to blow up a convoy of nuclear waste as a protest against the nuclear dump near the Carlsbad Caverns. Anaya brings in very contemporary ecological concerns on the level of the main plot. Although Deitering points out the increasing tendency in contemporary fiction of toxic consciousness (196), lamenting that no line of action is proposed by the writers, Anaya addresses the issue head on, allowing the multiple view points to emerge.

On a second level of discourse, however, Anaya brings in what he considers a more important ecological concern: the necessary harmonious inter-relationship between humans and nature. This must precede the former. As Duerr would note, "people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them" (92). Anaya's characters increase their ecological awareness and learn to listen to nature's voice. Thus, they learn to respect nature and see themselves as "a very important part of the teeming life of the llano and the river" (*Bless* 37). Raven, more a terrorist than an ecologist, cares little about the earth. His tactic of blowing up a nuclear convoy in order to protest a nuclear dumpsite is questionable. So Sonny is faced with a double crime, Gloria's murder and the ecological sabotage.



In the first of the series, as the title indicates, the sun, the Zia sun, is the primary symbol, similar to the symbol Umane of the Lakota which contains the four, the most sacred of numbers, representing the unused earth force (Allen 258-9). The motif of the Zia sun with its four lines in each of the cardinal directions is repeated continuously. We find it on the cover of the book, the victim's body, at the criminal's camp, in the bedroom of the mysterious and seductive Tamara, and so forth. The Zia sun and the summer solstice constitute the chronotope,² a space responsive to history and plot, of this novel. The approach of the summer solstice has both real and symbolic meaning, both for the detection of the crime and for the learning and initiation of Sonny as a future brujo. Don Eliseo, Sonny's guide, teaches him to pray to the sun every morning. As Sonny prays to the sun, he feels its energy and, "if he learned the way of his abuelos, he was sure the light would enter his soul" (204). Precisely Sonny's increasing awareness of natural cycles and of the relationship of man to nature and with it, of his Chicano heritage, constitute the central theme of the novel, displacing the narrative plot of solving the murder mystery and preventing the sabotage. In this way, Anaya subverts the detective genre, exposing its conventional value system in which the city is central while the earth and nature are mere backdrops to action, mute objects which, following the Judeo-Christian values are to be dominated and exploited by man.³

Another nature motif interwoven into the novel and whose development is parallel to the criminal investigation, is that of Don Eliseo's cottonwood tree. The novel begins with Sonny dreaming that his leg is being cut off, only to awake and hear a chain saw searing into the branches of the cottonwood which has been tagged dead and ordered to be cut down. The parallelism is very clear. Don Eliseo is reluctant to cut it and decides to nurse it back to health, "his ear pressed against the tree, like a doctor to the heartbeat of a patient" (5). Eliseo feels "like that old tree,...dry, but still alive"(66) and he tells Sonny that:

the raices, Sonny, beneath the earth the roots of all these trees stretch far, connecting to other trees, until the entire valley is connected. You can't kill a tree and not kill the past. The trees are like the gente of the valley, sooner or later we're all related....How can I cut down my history? (75)

At the end of the novel, as Sonny returns home to tell Eliseo that he has defeated the criminal Raven and solved Gloria's murder, Eliseo runs out crying "My alamo! A branch put out leaves. Little green leaves, moist and tender...It's a miracle! The tree is alive!" (383). Both victories take place on the summer solstice, but in case an impatient reader forget what is more important, the murder or the tree, Anaya ends saying that that summer might be remembered as that of Gloria's cult

² For a discussion of Bakhtin's chronotopes, see Morris.

³ See White, Manes and Allen.



murder, “But the viejecitos of the valley would remember it was the summer when Don Eliseo’s tree recovered miraculously and offered forth its green leaves” (386).

By the time we reach *Rio Grande Fall*, representing the Autumn, Sonny is well aware that he needs to explore more fully his roots to the earth and nature. The overt detective plot is based on the murder of a prime witness to the crime in the previous novel and linked to drug dealers, CIA contras and illegal animal testing. Again we find the contemporary political and environmental concerns, but on the second level of discourse, which ends up displacing the crime narrative, nature is given the central voice. Nature becomes alive and the spirit world lying within nature provides the clues to both Sonny’s past, his values and to the detection of the new murder he is confronted with. The process of learning that takes place in this novel is precisely one of identifying with his nagual, his animal spirit—part of the Pueblo Indian cosmology—and thus, being able to, not only attain harmony with nature but, to be a part of it. Lorenza, his guide together with Eliseo, tells him that nature is the key to the past, to one’s heritage and identity, the “world of nature is our world.... Our nature is linked to that of our ancestors, to their beliefs” (121). In his dream-visions he learns to enter that world through a lake and to meet the coyote, his nagual. In these visions, he seems to become a coyote; “their energy flowed to him, filling him with lightness, exuberation. He was running, close to the ground, close to the scents of other animals, running with the coyotes, free, flying” (129). Identification with the coyote is essential as he must learn its trickster ways in order to defeat Raven, another trickster figure which changes guises but represents evil.

Anaya continues to present a rich, diverse but harmonious Chicano heritage, syncretically combining the beliefs of Catholicism, Pueblo Indian cosmology and Aztec beliefs. Other than this communion with nature, many of the references of the novel have to do with light, air, the sun and flying. There are continuous metaphors for these images, everywhere from the backdrop of the Albuquerque Balloon Festival to the dream-visions. Sonny, as he flies in a balloon, talks of an “epiphany of sunlight” (56) and remembers the ability of the brujos to fly. The Zia sun and the four cardinal points, the “four sacred directions” (129, 202, 307) remain as central motifs. In this novel the central position of the river returns, beginning with the title. The Rio Grande is Lorenza’s main reference point “like a snake, a symbol of genuine intuitive energy, guidance, clear wisdom....the giver of life, the other source of water” (220-21). The sacredness of the land and the earth is made explicit: it is “full of ancient spirits. Full of knowledge” (26). It “was the meeting ground of spiritual ways. Hispanos and Mexicanos had learned the Pueblo ways” (124). Once again, the intimate relationship between nature, land, history, roots, community and identity is made patent.

In the last novel, *Shaman Winter*, the central chronotope revolves around the winter solstice. The official crime is the theft of a nuclear bomb as a result of the dismembering of the Soviet Union and its reconstruction by a group of terrorists, led by Raven, right under the noses of the FBI. Sonny must defeat Raven before the solstice which marks the turning point of the year and the promise of a rebirth of life. The detection narrative here is totally paralleled by a similar detection narrative in the past. Here Anaya interweaves even more points of view and perspectives,



bringing out the voices of the past and present, illustrating a dynamic and encompassing concept of time much like that of the Plains tribes' sacred hoop or medicine wheel where "all movement is related to all other movement—that is, harmonious and balanced or unified" (Allen 243). The FBI, riddled with corruption, unsuccessfully try to hunt for Raven and ask Sonny for help. However, Sonny soon realizes that Raven's tactics, although a real threat, are more of a distraction from the real issue, the timeless issue of defeating Sonny himself, symbol of the sun, light and good. While Sonny tries to rescue the four girls which Raven has kidnapped in order to sacrifice them to the four sacred directions at the solstice, Sonny must also prevent the kidnapping of his four grandmothers, each in a distant past, one for each of his ancestral lines (which represent the diverse Chicano heritage) or his past will be obliterated and with it, his present. We see clearly the non-linear and non-hierarchical concept of time exemplified in the sacred hoop. The deep implications of previous quotes such as nature being the key to the past and to heritage and identity are brought out poignantly in a quest where actions in the past affect the present and vice-versa.

In both Anaya's detective novels and in the quest for identity, the underlying theme is always the deep inter-relatedness of humanity and nature. On the surface we have modern issues and crimes, all with an environmental concern. The metaphors of the earth as a fruitful female body and mother, being violated and disembowelled are continuous. Sonny's growing awareness is precisely one of dependence and integration with the earth. Through the help of Lorenza and Eliseo, Sonny learns to harness the power of his *nagual* and of nature and learns to control and act in his dreams, becoming a *brujo*. Every action is linked to nature and its cycles. Understanding and power only come through the communion with nature. Having achieved that communion, Sonny is able to defeat Raven and reaffirm his past. Anaya, by hybridizing genres, subverts the dominating cultural ethos of the American hardboiled detective novel and points out the Chicano worldview, where community and the relationship with the land is central, as a possible alternative. As in all his novels, whether it be the first trilogy or his *Albuquerque Quartet*, "la tierra" is one of the main protagonists and is given a voice: a voice that teaches, inspires and heals. Only by listening to the voice and integrating themselves with nature can humans achieve a harmonious and balanced identity. This message overrides the outer plot of any of his novels. By following what Anaya calls the "path of the sun," we are brought to a deeper understanding of the inter-relationship of all living things. This knowledge is necessary in order to solve the riddle of everyday life and identity.

The case of *Lucha Corpi* is quite different although ecological concerns are key to her message. While Anaya focuses on mythic aspects of nature, more political issues, whether ecological or of a different nature, form part of her plots. Anaya's central message is that of a spiritual communion with nature. *Corpi*, on the contrary, has a more political message. The politics of the Chicano Movement together with issues of discrimination and loss of the Chicano heritage, culture and rights are her driving force, although her character Gloria realizes that things have changed: "Intellectually, I realized it was foolish to long for the most oppressive and repres-



sive 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). Within these highly politicized novels, the environmental issue of pesticides is at the core of her second novel. 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 feminist issues of gender roles and class issues. Environmental concerns only appear in passing. Her third novel deals with class issues and national archeological treasures as she uncovers the smuggling of pre-columbian art pieces and drugs. Class issues in the novel are not to be dismissed as in both of them there are illegal adoptions made by the very rich; the power of money is clearly presented as one that can override discrimination. Corpi, thus proves Kaemmel wrong as she uses her detective fiction to challenge the capitalist value system, giving a voice to the oppressed classes and debunking the glorification of the individual hero.

However, the purpose of this paper requires a close analysis of her second novel, *Cactus Blood*. The novel begins with Gloria and Justin being summoned to Sonny Mares' death scene by his brother Leo, a police officer. The official cause of death is suicide but Leo suspects foul play, particularly when they find a home video of the United Farm Worker's boycott of 1973, with the explosion of tank of pesticide and a bunch of table grapes in the refrigerator. Sonny, as the rest, had been a staunch supporter of the movement and continued to boycott table grapes: "Sonny wouldn't have bought grapes, not even organic" (24). Leo recalls, mimicking Sonny's 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). As the investigation unfolds, everything seems to hinge on a missing Carlota Navarro. Gloria, reviewing some interviews of Chicanas made by her deceased friend Luisa, hears Carlota's story: an illegal adolescent orphan immigrant from Mexico who is employed as a domestic worker and later raped by her employer, a prestigious Anglo medical doctor. As she escapes from the elegant residential area, she runs through a vineyard which had just recently been sprayed by pesticides. Given that her skin had just been roughly scrubbed (her reaction to the rape), the poison penetrates easily and affects both her health and brain. The investigation follows its course, but foremost in it is 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 dumb-founded 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. 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. The home video is about an ecoterrorist attack on a tank of pesticides; we later find out that it had depressed Sonny and is one of the reasons which induced him to commit suicide. Sonny and Art, when drunk, had threatened to blow it up, but later, sober, backed out and Ramón, a shaman and militant Chicano, carried it out, serving a prison sentence for it. These two incidents provide the basis for the relationships between the characters and the whole novel revolves around them.

There are other significant details related to the importance of nature. The only thing Carlota brings from Mexico is a small nopalito, a cactus plant, which she always takes with her as a symbol of her land, her relationship to the earth. Even while escaping from the rape or at other times —being an illegal immigrant she is often forced to run— she carries her nopalito. At the end of the novel, when she returns to Mexico to die, she only carries a shoot from her nopalito. We also find in the novel many references to alternative medicine, anywhere from herbal remedies to shamanismo. Usually these references are positive, although the dominant attitude towards them is clearly described as superstition or being quacks. For example, some herbs are used as incriminating evidence to place the blame of Sonny's death on Carlota and Ramón. Community action against pesticides as well as doctors willing to help the victims, regardless of their legal status or ability to pay for the services and medication is also a theme. What is clear is Corpi's message of forcing the reader, like the woman at the table eating grapes, into awareness about the harm pesticides cause and instilling him/her to action. As 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 it 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 a vis environmental 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, Anaya and Corpi disrupt the dominant hero mythology of individualism found in the American cowboy or detective. In fact, Anaya names his character "Baca" a subversion of "vaca," "cow" in Spanish, reminding the audience that the American hero was originally Mexican American. Corpi often mentions the landed aristocracy of Spanish and Mexican descent who had once owned all of California. Yet for both authors, the sense of family and community values override any individualism. The rediscovery and reconstruction of Chicano history and culture, how it was suppressed, together with their increasing awareness and identification with nature present a different worldview from the dominant Eurocentric one. But even more, Sonny's initiation to the mastery of dreams and the world of spirits, to the extent of becoming a brujo, and Gloria's increasing ability to "see" suggest the viability of an alternative belief system, one in which nature has a resounding voice.



In using the hermeneutic code rather than the semiotic, as Stowe analyzes in a study on Chandler (375), Sonny and Gloria are presented as Gadamerian interpreters, willing to open themselves 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 Chicano worldview.

Secondly, in the digressions that both Anaya and Corpi use for the retardation device, the theme is always the Chicano cultural ethos: whether it be history, its heritage, values, beliefs, customs or folklore. These writers are clearly trying to recover the Chicano history, contrary to Moretti's analysis of the detective genre, and both reaffirming these values for the inside community, the Chicanos, and teaching these values to the dominant outside community. The Chicano worldview, with its emphasis on community and relationship with "la tierra" is presented as an alternative to the dominant ethos. Foremost among these values is the Chicano syncretic belief system, where Christianity and Catholicism live side by side with sun-worship, pantheism, santerismo, brujos, shamanism, 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. And among the most pressing action is that of preserving the environment where our roots and survival, both spiritual and physical lie. The quest for self-definition and knowledge becomes more important than the detective 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 more meaningful literature.

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), Anaya and Corpi transmit 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, according to Libretti, 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). 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 of those who participate in the maintenance of the dominant value system. In such a manner, Anaya and Corpi, as other ethnic writers, subvert this popular genre to expose fallacies in the dominant myths and create new ones. Both, to use Anaya's term, become "shaman story-tellers," using their imaginative strategies for an emancipatory cultural expression and to provoke the readers into their own process of self-definition. Anaya and Corpi ask their readers to reassess their relationship to the environment, to learn to listen to nature's voice and to respect it. Moreover, as Eliseo dies, passing the torch on to Sonny, and as Gloria's promise to "clean house," Anaya and Corpi are passing on the torch to the readers, inciting them to take action. Thus, Rudolfo Anaya and Lucha Corpi write murder mysteries, but with an ecological message. The message points to an alternative cultural ethos, one that respects and values the environment, the relation of self to setting.



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