

New Chicano Literature

Manuel Ramos

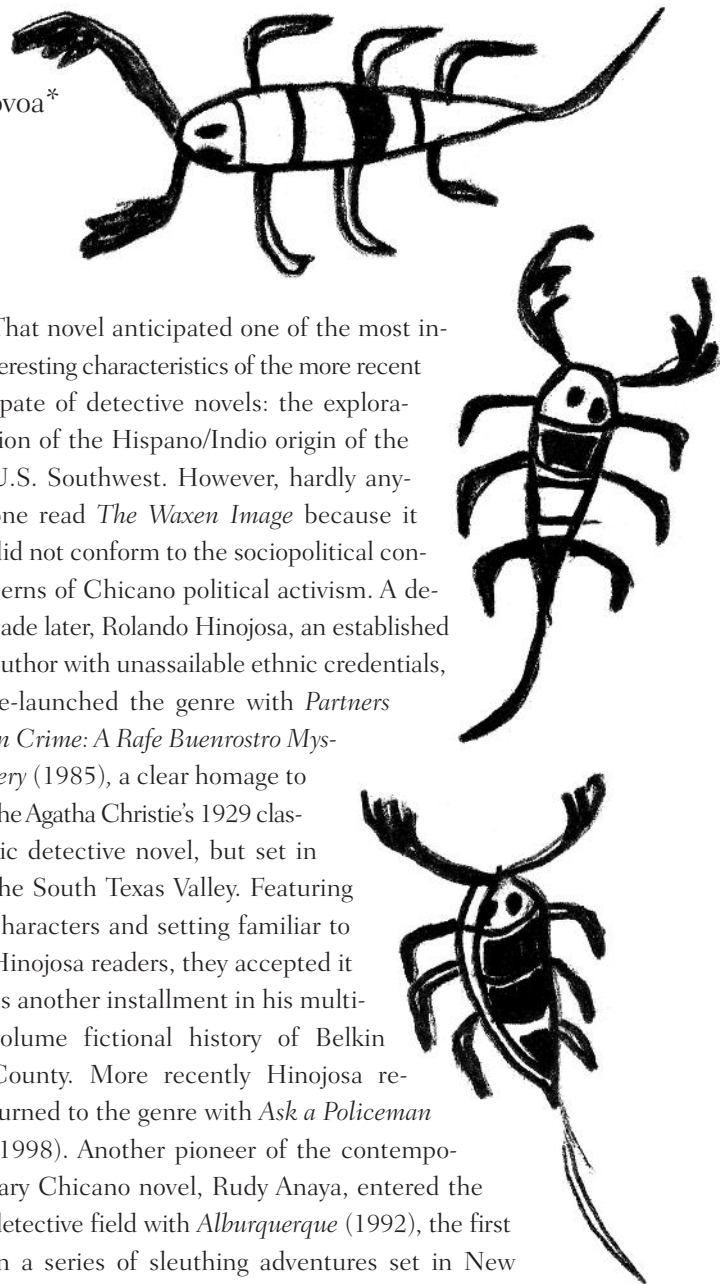
Bruce Novoa*

Marcus Embry, a most astute young critic of U.S. Latino literature, has insisted for the last few years that at this moment when old-style Chicano writing seems to have run its course, seeds of renovation can be found in the new boom in detective novels. About a decade ago, I presented a similar proposition to a group of European scholars, stating that Chicano authors were using the detective genre to investigate the social and ideological circumstances of their communities and in particular the history of the Chicano civil rights movement. They expressed misgivings, questioning if a formulaic genre like the detective novel could allow for serious commentary on socio-historical matters or even provide reliable cultural information. Though I assured them that in Latin America it already had done so, they remained unconvinced, especially since there was relatively little production in the genre by Chicanos at the time. Now, as Marcus Embry points out, we have no lack of titles by Chicano writers. The other question—whether detective writing can accommodate ideological commentary and provide cultural data—is still to be explored.

Before addressing that question, a little background may be appropriate. The mystery or crime novel is not an entirely new phenomenon in Chicano literature. When contemporary Chicano literature was starting to solidify itself in the 1970s, Rudy Apodaca published *The Waxen Image* (1977), a mystery novel with an international setting that ultimately focused on New Mexico in the search to resolve the disappearance of a main character.

That novel anticipated one of the most interesting characteristics of the more recent spate of detective novels: the exploration of the Hispano/Indio origin of the U.S. Southwest. However, hardly anyone read *The Waxen Image* because it did not conform to the sociopolitical concerns of Chicano political activism. A decade later, Rolando Hinojosa, an established author with unassailable ethnic credentials, re-launched the genre with *Partners in Crime: A Rafe Buenrostro Mystery* (1985), a clear homage to the Agatha Christie's 1929 classic detective novel, but set in the South Texas Valley. Featuring characters and setting familiar to Hinojosa readers, they accepted it as another installment in his multi-volume fictional history of Belkin County. More recently Hinojosa returned to the genre with *Ask a Policeman* (1998). Another pioneer of the contemporary Chicano novel, Rudy Anaya, entered the detective field with *Albuquerque* (1992), the first in a series of sleuthing adventures set in New Mexico. Significant as this context may be, the Chicano detective novel is more associated with newer and younger novelists.

To explore Chicano detective writing three names are essential: Michael Nava, Lucha Corpi and Manuel Ramos. Each has an impressive bibliography, each has created one or more distinc-



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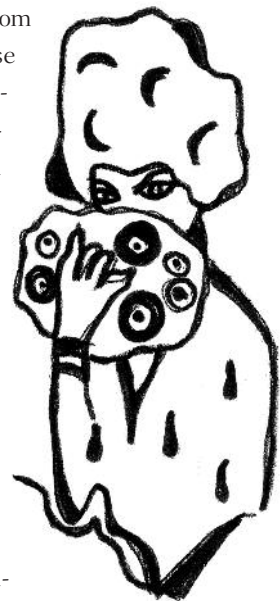
tive investigators replete with their own voice and life-style, each has staked out a milieu immediately associated with their novels, and each has achieved recognition within the genre with loyal readers who await new adventures. These three writers have mastered the technical craft of the genre, so their books do not read like momentary forays into mystery writing. Part of the pleasure derived from sleuthing texts is how they handle generic rules, another is to encounter a writer who respects those expectations while introducing innovations. Nava, Corpi and Ramos balance formula against innovation.

For me, Ramos, a native of Colorado, has created the most convincing total package. His favorite sleuth is Luis Montez, a classic *noire* down-and-outer, a middle-aged lawyer tottering on the edge of professional and personal failure. A blend of reluctant realist and sentimental soft touch, he is an easy mark for physically well-endowed women, especially if they are intelligent. Ramos' other protagonist, Danny "Moony" Mora, a full-fledged private investigator, is much harder edged than Montez, less sentimental, more calculating, and not plagued by Montez's self-effacing regrets. Where Montez's environment is endearingly chaotic and messy, Mora's is ordered and intentional. Yet despite themselves, both get swept into investigating violent crimes that threaten them and their intimate circle with death —just like the would-be screen writer of "Murder Movie," the story included in this issue. Naturally, survival depends on solving the case in time. And everywhere beautiful, sexy strangers stand —or lie— in their way. So much for fidelity to the demands of the genre.

Like his predecessors mentioned above, Ramos laces his plots with historical elements, providing readers with implicit commentary on Chicano cultural development. *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*, his first novel (Irvine Prize for Literature in 1992), reads like a response to a nagging question: why did the Chicano Movement fail? When a series

of murders forces Montez to reevaluate the 1960s killing of a student militant —metaphor for the death of idealism— he realizes that the accepted explanation was false. In a pattern repeated in subsequent works, Montez discovers corruption infecting the very heart of Chicanismo. The message is unavoidable: to survive, one must jettison naïve idealism and analyze the history of Chicano cultural nationalism and politics like a detective investigates a case, following the hard facts wherever they lead. In his latest novels Ramos includes the historical struggle over water rights dating back to the Mexican American war (*Brown-on-Brown*) and the present Mexican drug and illegal immigration trade (*Moony's Road to Hell*), although the latter also features yet another revelation of corruption within the 1960s movement similar to the *Rocky Ruiz* novel. By inserting historical materials or current social problems Ramos allows readers to consider them in summary fashion, like a sleuth might peruse the facts gathered for him by his diligent assistant. A pattern of struggle by the Mexican-American community emerges in which despite great odds it survives and even prospers. However, Ramos refreshingly avoids the simplistic binary of we/good versus they/evil. His sleuths find Chicanos on both sides of the equation, and at times it seems that the entire cast is Mexican American. In effect, some

of his worst villains are vatos from the old neighborhood. Worse still, others are powerful, respected, and even beloved community figures. While old guard Chicano activists produce nostalgic panegyrics to the movement, Ramos provides a much more realistic appraisal. Yet his protagonists were once, and still would like to be, idealists; they too yearn for that flash of optimism we called the 60s, but Ramos' plots keep confronting them with incontrovertible reminders of its betray-





al, much too often at the hands of people from their own ethnic community.

As Ramos interweaves historical and social observations with quickly paced plots, punctuated with the requisite violence and sex, he steadily provides glimpses of a specific site, the Denver metroplex and its surroundings that include northern New Mexico. Writing a series set in one location allows him to build up what anthropologists call a thick description of locale. The detective's eye for detail lends itself to rich documentation, but that eye here is always Chicano, the fibers of his intense weave tinted with an ethnic tonality new to the U.S. detective novel. Readers come to recognize Denver like a familiar landscape, experiencing at street level its rise into an international destination as well as a leading model for urban development over the last decades of the past century. This transformation into a world-class city coincided with the rise of its Chicano population into a major player in the city's life. It also coincided with the rise to prominence of the Mexican drug cartel, giving some of Ramos' novel an international dimension ripe with crime motifs. Denver becomes a space experienced through a Chicano lens.

While so much Chicano literature is still bogged down in the pretense that we are all poor, Ramos opens a window onto the burgeoning Chicano middle class. True, his plots often lead readers into low-life milieus with their picturesque clientele, but more often they move through the offices of the new institutional bureaucracy, from police to federal judges and everything between. Ramos' first novel portrayed the changing face of U.S. society by having an Italian police detective, Coangelo, retire, leaving the field open for a Chicano successor. The same novel featured a powerful Chicano judge as well as a brilliant female law student employed by one of the leading firms. Since then his books have featured an impressive list of well-placed, well-paid, university-trained professionals in power positions in the city. Ramos' sleuths move through a society in which Chicanos

are neither excluded from any level of society nor do they pretend to be uneducated or unsophisticated.

Marcus Embry likes to cite a passage from *Moony's Road to Hell* where Ramos describes his detective's bookcase, laden with well-read volumes. A few titles appear: "*The Silver Cloud Café. The Drunken Boat. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra. The Poet in New York. White Leg*". What does it mean for Chicano culture, Embry posits, that Ramos' detective stores modern, canonized classics by Rimbaud and Lorca amid three Chicano novels as if they were equals in the space of intellectual production? This is not the place to decipher the books as clues to the novel's outcome—which they are—just to point out Ramos' insistence that Chicano literature accepts no boundaries, no cultural stereotyping. As with the best examples of universalized art, while set in clearly identifiable places, with localized characters, the result is open and limitless. **MM**

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