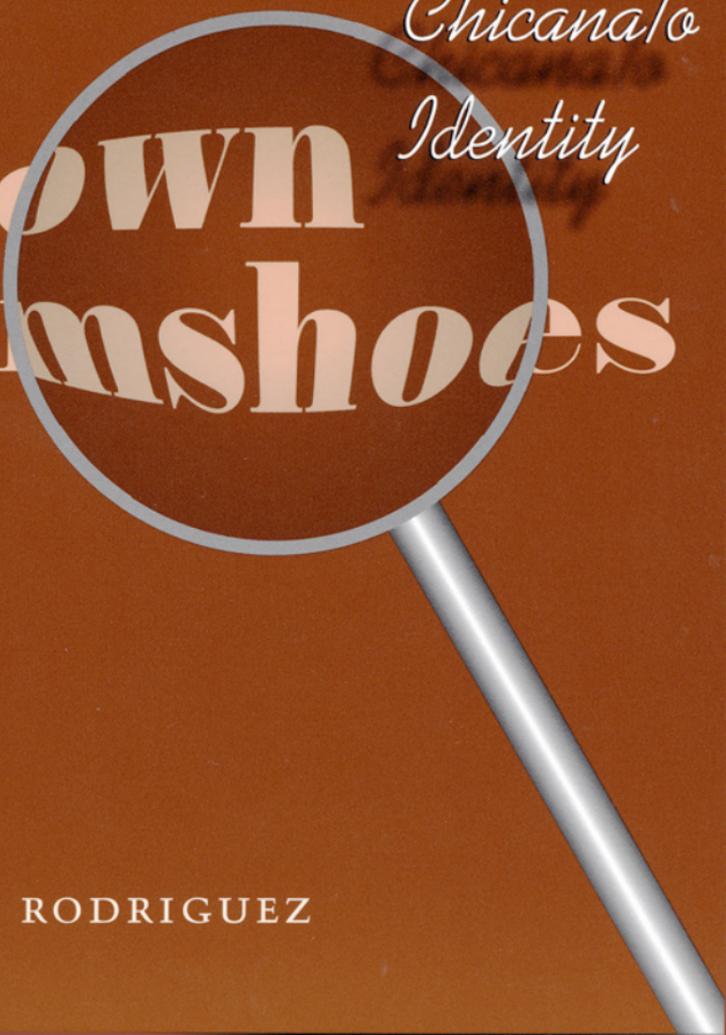


*Detective
Fiction
and the
Search for
Chicana/o
Identity*



**Brown
Gumshoes**

RALPH E. RODRIGUEZ

BROWN GUMSHOES

HISTORY, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY SERIES

CENTER FOR MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES (CMAS)

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

BY RALPH E. RODRIGUEZ

BROWN GUMSHOES

DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE
SEARCH FOR CHICANA/O IDENTITY

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*With love, gratitude, respect, and honor for my parents,
Sophie and Gumaro Rodriguez, Jr., without whom
this work would not have been possible.*

IN MEMORIAM

GUMARO RODRIGUEZ, JR. (1930-2000)

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FOREWORD

I miss Jimmy Smits and Esai Morales on the television series *NYPD Blue*.

So there. At the outset, let me confess that as an academic, I commit the unpardonable sin—for academics—of watching television other than PBS. I suppose I could say that I watch it sparingly (that part would be true), but perhaps only as a function of the many professional and familial demands on my time. Perhaps secretly I long to watch more, perhaps as other people like me may also wish to indulge in popular culture such as, shall we say, detective novels. Ralph Rodriguez confesses to the latter, but as we shall see in this book, his seeming “indulgence” has produced rich intellectual dividends even as it is evident that he enjoys the genre.

The fact is that I simply find some programs entertaining, and of these, the police procedural *NYPD Blue* is a favorite, although somewhat less so since Jimmy Smits, who played Detective Bobby Simone, and Esai Morales, who portrayed squad commander Lt. Tony Rodriguez, left the show and have not really been replaced. But now, informed by Ralph Rodriguez’s brilliant readings and overall interpretation of his chosen Latino and Latina detective novelists, I gain better purchase on why I, as a Latino, miss Bobby Simone and Tony Rodriguez. In part, I miss them because the drama’s central hero, Detective Andy Sipowicz, has no one to watch his back, to be a close friend, someone who can understand and tolerate his complicated, world-weary self even as the characters together confront the world’s vices in New York City.

Now, after reading the work that follows, I think that I really miss

them because I sense that as Latinos they played a crucial double role—*for* Sipowicz, which is also to say in support of a besieged, conflicted, but fundamentally good version of America, and *against* the degradations of the world. I do not mean simply that these characters represent Latinos in a “positive” light, although they do. Neither do I mean that the actors played their roles “culturally” with all sorts of affirmative references to Latino ethnicity, nor that the characters come off as Latin lovers. They really do not, although their (handsome) Latino phenotypes and slight—some might say charming—accents are certainly there.

Only after reading what Ralph Rodriguez has to tell us in this marvelous book about Latino and Latina detectives, could I formulate somewhat more clearly what I found so compelling about the Latino characters on *NYPD Blue*. For Rodriguez, Chicana/o writers such as Rudolfo Anaya, Lucha Corpi, Rolando Hinojosa, Michael Nava, and Manuel Ramos have used the detective novel as a powerful tool for exploring what it might mean to be Latino and Latina in the twenty-first century. “The novels themselves”, he tells us, “are reflections not only on criminal mysteries, but also queries into the mystery of identity.” Identity is a mystery in our time because older sources of such identity—as farm-workers, barrio proletarians, ethnic nationalists, and the food, festivities, rituals, language that once distinguished ethnicity—are no longer as viable. This is not to say that such sources of identity are absent in the lives of all of these detectives, including Bobby Simone and Tony Rodriguez. But they are not foregrounded as such even as we fully sense that Simone and Rodriguez *are* Latinos and that in their struggle against the world’s corruptions, they necessarily have to contend with and carry the historical load of domination that still falls upon Latinos and Latinas in the United States. But they have now (over)come and come to terms with this inheritance of social domination by exhibiting for us a struggle against the world’s largely capitalist corruptions with demonstrations of keen intelligence, professional competence, moral strength, and comradeship with the socially afflicted even while recognizing in world-weary wisdom that the struggle will never cease, and that they may give up their lives in the hard bargain—as indeed happened to Bobby Simone.

In their efforts to solve the mysteries of criminality, which is also to say the larger criminality of our society, these detectives offer us another, more complicated and far more interesting model for identity,

for conducting our lives as Latinos and Latinas in the twenty-first century, and for this lesson critically well-taught we are grateful to Ralph Rodriguez. I commend him to you in what follows.

—JOSÉ E. LIMÓN

MODY C. BOATRIGHT REGENTS PROFESSOR OF
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Unlike the celebrated private eye who often goes it alone against seemingly insurmountable odds, I have benefited greatly from the support of friends, colleagues, family members, and various institutions in the writing of this book. I am delighted to have the opportunity to thank them.

I am, of course, delighted that Sophie and Gumaro Rodriguez Jr. brought me into this world and have seen me through it. I couldn't have asked for a better set of parents. The loss of my father in 2000 was a devastating blow. Rod and Sophie, I thank you for your inspiration, encouragement, and example. For the bonds and support of a loving family, I am grateful to Tina, John, David, J. C., Stacy, and Stephanie.

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Finally, as academic researchers, we spend lots of time in libraries, home offices, and at the computer. Nevertheless, one has to get away from those environs from time to time in order to preserve one's body and sanity. My escape was the gym. At East Coast Health and Fitness, I managed to strike up numerous friendships that sustained me over the long haul of working on this book. For their good cheer and encouragement, I thank Kerry, Jamie, George, and Lucy Bestwick; Teri Bealer, Kristi Carver; Christy Curtorillo; and Michelle Dimidio.

Even in a list of acknowledgments as detailed as this, I have, no doubt, inadvertently left out folks who deserve my gratitude. Please consider that an unintentional oversight, not an ungrateful heart. And know that I thank you for your support.

A much different and shorter version of chapter 2 appeared as "A Poverty of Relations: On Not 'Making *Familia* from Scratch,' But Scratching *Familia*" in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York: Palgrave Press, 2003). I thank Palgrave Press for the permission to reprint that essay.

Chapter 3 appeared in a slightly different form as "Cultural Memory and *Chicanidad*: Detecting History, Past and Present, in Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco Series" in *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002). I am grateful to the University of Wisconsin Press for permission to reprint that article.

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INTRODUCTION

ALIENATED EYE/I

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHICANA/O DETECTIVE NOVEL

She just wants to lay in bed all night reading Raymond Chandler.

—JIM CARROLL, "THREE SISTERS"

Self-alienation is the source of all degradation as well as, on the contrary, the basis of all true evaluation. The first step will be a look inward, an isolating contemplation of our self. Whoever remains standing here proceeds only halfway. The second step must be an active look outward, an autonomous, determined observation of the outer world.

—NOVALIS, *BLÜTENSTAUB*

Jim Carroll's song "Three Sisters" makes explicit the truism that popular culture provides pleasure. Miranda does not want to trifle with the needs of the boys who pursue her. Rather she wants to kick back, relax, and cuddle up with Mr. Chandler, a bedtime pursuit much more appealing than the tough, lonely, urban world outside her door. According to John G. Cawelti, literary escapism as such fulfills two psychological needs, a flight from boredom and a quest for order (*Adventure* 15–16). We need to be able to escape the ennui of our lives and be reassured that no matter how tough it gets out there, the world is ultimately knowable and rational. While the pleasure of popular fiction tempts us to get lost in the diversion of the text, we, as critics, must remember that these novels speak powerfully to the moment in which they were written. They are cultural commodities that have much to tell us about the historical, social, and political milieu in which they emerged. As Martin Priestman asserts, "Present day detective novels ask to be treated as