

Lucha Corpi: Mystery, Evolution and the nth Generation in Chicana/o Identity via the Gloria Damasco Detective Series

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At the zenith of the Chicano Movement in the late 60s and into the 70s, the focus was on indigenous roots, the mythical homeland of Aztlán and a nationalist agenda. When the Chicano Movement progressed into the 80s it became less phallogocentric and Chicanas asserted their voice as supporters and pivotal players to the Movement rather than a backdrop. Foundational poems with male-dominated themes such as “*Yo soy Joaquín*” and the negative portrayal of Malinche caused Chicanas to inquire about the presence of female voices and the female point of view. The 80s not only heard the voices of Chicanas; it also introduced the term Hispanic. By nature, cultural identity is fluid and dynamic. And, as such, there are various factors that cause its change. One of these factors is the age difference within generations. Age is usually categorized into generational groups such as Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y (or Millennials). As the shape and form of Chicana/o¹ cultural identity changes, is the current generation (or the nth generation²) able to identify with the leaders of the Chicano Movement and the nationalist and political agendas of forty years ago? The leaders of the Chicano Movement can typically be associated with the Boomer generation. In various protests and walkouts of the 1970s Chicanas/os chanted “*¡Si se puede!*” and “*¡Viva la raza!*” What are Chicanas/os chanting forty years later in 2010? Anything at all? Is the nth generation of Chicanas/os still at the center of a nationalist movement whose focus is the heart of Aztlán? How have things changed for the Chicano Movement since its birth forty years ago? The scope of this essay proposes to investigate what Chicana/o identity looks like in a postnationalist movement via the lens of the Gloria Damasco detective series written by Lucha Corpi. I will examine the fluidity and transition of Chicana/o identity from a nationalist movement to the introduction of an(other) cultural label—Hispanic. This essay will push the boundaries of Emma Pérez’s grouping of Chicano history into four distinct periods. I propose a fifth category, contemporary identity. I will investigate how Chicanas/os identify themselves in a postnationalist movement and examine the characteristics of the nth generation in the twenty-first century.

Lucha Corpi is a poet and writer who was born in Jáltipan, Veracruz, Mexico and has resided in the U.S. for the last forty-six years. She is “accomplished and recognized as a prose writer and as a poet” (“Lucha”). Her Gloria Damasco detective series includes *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995), *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*

(1999) and *Death at Solstice* (2009). In the first novel, while protagonist Gloria Damasco and her friend Luisa Cortez are escaping the aftermath of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, they happen upon the body of a dead toddler blocks away from the ruckus of the Moratorium. Gloria then spends the rest of the novel trying to solve the crime. In *Cactus Blood*, Gloria takes steps to become a licensed private investigator while joining forces with already licensed private investigator, Justin Escobar. Both try to solve the suicide/homicide of the fictional Chicano poet Sonny Mares and his possible link with Carlota Navarro, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who was raped and exposed to pesticides while in the U.S. Corpi’s third book in the Gloria Damasco series is *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* and follows the life of Licia Román Lecuona after her prison sentence for killing her physically and emotionally abusive husband. As Licia begins her new life outside of prison, she encounters various instances of crime such as an attempted break-in of her house and two attempts to kill her. Licia believes that she is the reincarnation of Malinche or Malintzín, Cortés’s interpreter, and while the mystery of the crimes against Licia is the main focus of the plot, a secondary yet strong theme in the novel is the history regarding Malintzín’s life. The final novel in the Gloria Damasco detective series is *Death at Solstice* which mixes the myth and (re) appearance of Joaquín Murrieta and his horse with the mysterious disappearance of a character named Virginia Moreno, known to some as *la santísima niña*, and the murder of her nurse, Hilda Gallardo.

Lucha Corpi’s Gloria Damasco detective series can help explore and propose possible answers to the mystery of Chicana/o identity in a postnationalist movement. Ralph E. Rodriguez notes that Chicana/o writers such as Rudolfo

Anaya, Lucha Corpi and Michael Nava have used the detective novel to explore what it might mean to be Latina/o in the twenty-first century and that “the [detective] novels themselves...are reflections not only on criminal mysteries, but also queries into the mystery of identity” (qtd. in Limón x). Let us examine a brief history of the cultural roots and etymology of the term Chicano and the etymology of the word Hispanic. Initially the term Chicano was a negative term. Mexican Americans used this term to distance themselves from recent immigrants from Mexico who were less educated and less familiar with U.S. culture. In this manner, if Mexican Americans created a sense of equality with Anglos⁴, they eliminated some of the discrimination that they and recent immigrants experienced from Anglos. In the 1960s, however, Chicana/o activists assigned a new meaning to the term Chicano and it became a source of pride and a link to the indigenous of Mexico (Tatum 4). As for the origins of the term Hispanic, its Latin root is *Hispania* which refers to Spain (Gracia 2) and its descendants who would be identified as “Hispanic”. Some attribute the use and origin of Hispanic to the Nixon administration (1969-1974). During that time, “Hispanic” gained wider use in the U.S. and served as a governmental classification for all groups whose cultural language was Spanish. While the U.S. Census Bureau is often credited with the creation of the term Hispanic, the term originated from “a 1976 act of Congress and the administrative regulations that flow[ed] from it” (*Who’s Hispanic?* 1). Since one of the origins of the term Hispanic stems from the dominant Anglo culture, some Chicanas/os feel this cultural label was imposed upon them and reinforced the conqueror-dominated relationship that existed between Iberians and pre-Colombian people (Gracia 16). For some Chicanas/os, Hispanic is not a label

chosen from within the Chicana/o community as a means to self-identify. Renowned Chicana author Sandra Cisneros dislikes the term Hispanic and states, “The term Hispanic makes my skin crawl. It’s a very colonistic term ... a term imposed on us without asking what we wanted to call ourselves” (Granados 42).

The starting point of Chicana/o identity and nationalism in the Damasco series begins with *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*. The novel opens with a *corrido* by “José Montoya, one of the principal poets and leading figures of the [Chicano] Movement” (Rodríguez 59). Since the *corrido* is the tradition of oral storytelling through song as a means to express the heroic struggle of Mexicans and Mexican Americans against their oppressor(s), Montoya’s *corrido* sets the tone in *Eulogy* for the political and cultural struggle of the time (Rodríguez 59). A nationalistic theme in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* is the Chicano Moratorium of August 29, 1970. In Los Angeles’s Laguna Park, 20,000 Chicanas/os assembled and marched peacefully in protest of the Vietnam War and the disproportionate number of Chicanos serving and dying there (Acuña 378). The peaceful protest came to an end when 1,200 officers entered the park full of participants, children, elders and families and began to disperse the crowd without warning (Acuña 378). Panic ensued and the day ended with many injured and two fatalities. The Moratorium reinforces the effect of Montoya’s *corrido* and underscores the height and gravity of the Chicano Movement. Corpi proceeds to outline the nationalistic tone of the book by mentioning two well-known figures in the Chicana/o activist community, lawyer Oscar Zeta Acosta and *Los Angeles Times* journalist Rubén Salazar (one of the deaths at the Chicano Moratorium and whose homicide is disputed to this day). Corpi also accentuates this challenging time in a scene

where Gloria phones the police to report the dead toddler’s body. Gloria’s call is transferred to several different sections of the police department and when she finally reaches someone to help her, she pauses before giving her last name to the detective on the line. She narrates that “a Spanish surname always meant a delay of at least an hour in emergencies” (Corpi, *Eulogy* 21). Detective Kenyon, who takes her call, seems “to guess the reason for [her] hesitation and [adds], ‘All right. Just give me your first name’” (Corpi, *Eulogy* 21). Aside from her call being transferred to several people, in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, Corpi further observes that at the height of the Chicano Movement, every action a Chicana/o performs is done with a consciousness since, at that time, all actions had an impact on the Chicana/o community. Gloria Damasco remarks, “In the summer of 1970 everything any one of us [active in the Chicana/o community] did had to be considered according to its political impact on the Chicano community. Our behavior was constantly under scrutiny, our culture relentlessly under siege” (64). That is, for any action any Chicana/o performed, the effect of its consequences upon the Chicana/o community must be considered. Lastly, although *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* highlights the strong Chicano nationalist undertones mentioned above, the Chicano community at that time was not beyond reproach. Gloria notes, “Chicano nationalism and feminism didn’t walk hand in hand before or during the summer of 1970” (66). Her observation marks a shift in the male-dominated discourse of Chicano identity and Chicano nationalism and signals a change toward the inclusion of Chicanas and feminism, which will be more closely examined in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*.

As we turn our analysis to *Cactus Blood*, a transition occurs in Chicana/o identity; this

same change is reflected in the novel. The transition is marked by three items: Gloria Damasco’s nostalgia, the question of why the use of the word Hispanic is regarded with disdain and a brief history on the debate of the use of the word Hispanic. The second novel in the Gloria Damasco detective series is set in 1989, sixteen years after the Chicano Moratorium. The novel opens with the investigation of the suicide/homicide of one of the characters, Sonny Mares, and a glimpse of Gloria’s nostalgia for the early days of the Chicano movement. While Gloria investigates the crime scene in Sonny’s apartment, she notices a video left running in the VCR. Upon closer examination the tape shows the 1973 grape strike and march supported by César Chavez and the United Farm Workers³. Although Gloria is watching a video from sixteen years earlier, her reaction to the issues of Chicano activism (labor equality being one of them) is the same as it was in 1973. Sonny’s apartment is warm yet Gloria notices that her hands feel “cold and cramped”. She admits that after viewing the tape she grows “politically nostalgic” for the days of Chicano activism but realizes that what she yearns for is the innocence that underlined the activism of the 70s (21).

In spite of her nostalgia and longing for a time and actions in the past, her realization marks a shift in Gloria’s own Chicana identity and a shift in cultural identity for Chicanas/os in general. The shift is marked by two instances in which the word Hispanic is referred to with disdain. In *Cactus Blood*, Art Bello, one of the main characters who supported all the Chicano causes declares, “I’ll call myself Latino, but not Hispanic. It’s got to be this way or there won’t be any of us Chicano *chingones* left” (56, italics original). The second negative reference to Hispanic is when another main character, Carlota Navarro, asks 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, emphasis original). Gloria responds to Carlota by saying, “You’re absolutely right. I myself have been thinking that I am growing politically apathetic and quite selfish. And when this [case] is over, I know I have to do a lot of mental and emotional house-keeping” (174).

Do all generations of Chicanas/os feel the same disdain toward Hispanic or is the contempt generation-and/or class-specific? The nth generation is a contemporary generation that did not grow up speaking Spanish but does have a connection with their Chicana/o culture. Aída Hurtado recollects her initial experiences as an assistant professor with the nascent nth generation, “In my classroom I came face-to-face with Tizoc, Xochitl, and Saguache. The children of the activists of the 1960s had grown up and were demanding a reconceptualization of ethnic identification. Unlike their parents, [they] did not desire a nativist return to their Aztec past. Although they did not reject it...” (16). Returning to the scenes in *Cactus Blood*, to be labeled or accept the term Hispanic was antagonistic. The character Art Bello vowed to never call himself Hispanic and another character, Carlota Navarro, suggested to Gloria that Gloria would soon label herself Hispanic.

The introduction, contemplation and possible acceptance of the term Hispanic could be another change or extension in Chicana/o identity. This extension applies to Emma Pérez’s four methods of categorizing Chicana/o history. Those categories are as follows: “(1) ideological/intellectual—‘Chicanos are heroes/intellectuals’; (2) immigrant/labor—‘Chicanos are immigrant laborers/colonized workers’; (3) social history—‘Chicanos are also social beings, not only workers’; and (4) gendered history—‘Chicanos

are also women’”) (8). I propose a fifth category, (5) contemporary identity, and ask – How do Chicanas/os identify themselves in a postnationalist movement? Christine Granados makes the following comment in reference to the argument of the Hispanic versus Latina/o label, “Choosing one term over the other means taking a political, social, and even a generational stand. Stereotypically, those who call themselves Hispanic are more assimilated, conservative, and young, while those who choose the term Latino tend to be liberal, older, and sometimes radical” (41). I hypothesize, however, that this same concept can be applied to the dichotomy of Hispanic versus Chicana/o identity. Recall that the characters in Corpi’s *Cactus Blood* who criticize the use of Hispanic are part of the Boomer generation and are more likely to protest against the notion of Hispanic. It cannot be assumed that the nth generation has the same issues as the elders of the Chicano Movement. Rodriguez further underscores this by stating that:

the Chicana/o community was never as homogenous or monolithic as it presented itself to be in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not to denigrate the positive social changes the Movement effected, but to recognize that those who called themselves Chicano had to efface a number of cultural and ethnic differences to imagine themselves as a united front. (74)

Of course, not all Boomers reject the term Hispanic and not all members of the nth generation accept it. The nth generation is not the same generation of the nascent Chicano Movement of forty years ago, yet this current generation still maintains ties and pride with its culture, in spite of its possible use of the term Hispanic.

Once a fifth category is created, what are the characteristics of the nth generation in the

twenty-first century? One characteristic is less political activism. María Montoya observes that “the first and second generations of Chicano scholars may have done their job too well. [Later generations] ... are the beneficiaries of all that hard work. ... we should examine ... [the] experiences [of the most recent generation] and understand why they seem to have no need to embrace radicalism” (191).

Let us return to the mystery and evolution of Chicana/o identity via the Gloria Damasco series. *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* shows the beginning of Chicano nationalism and Gloria references the conflict between Chicano nationalism and feminism. *Cactus Blood* introduces a longing for political activism and the polarization of the term Hispanic. The evolution of Chicana/o identity continues in the 80s with a greater voice for women in the Chicano community. At last, *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* addresses feminist issues and women’s voices which were absent in the nationalistic *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*. *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* centers upon the question of who is trying to kill the protagonist Licia Román Lecuona. A secondary focus is on one pivotal woman in Mexican and Chicana/o history—La Malinche or Malintzín, Cortés’s interpreter. Licia believes she is the reincarnation of Malintzín and the history of Malintzín unfolds as Gloria tries to learn more about both women. The parallels to Malintzín and women in the Chicano Movement are similar, in fact; as is commonly known in Mexico, someone who “sells out” is known as a Malinchista. Malinche can be compared to a Mexican version of the biblical Eve; Malinche is the downfall of the Mexican civilization and Chicanas who fought for an equal presence in the Movement were initially referred to as Malinchistas. Just as Chicanos took the negative aspect of the term Chicano and converted it into something posi-

tive, Chicanas did the same with Malinche. And although *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* has elements of spirituality that are stereotypically associated with women and Third World women in particular, Laura Pérez cautions that one must not lean on the assumption that women and Third World women are synonymous with spirituality. This assumption would be easy to make since Gloria has what she terms a “dark gift” (Corpi, *Eulogy* 123) or visions and dreams that seem to foretell the future. Other elements of spirituality in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* include Gloria’s godmother who frequently consults palm readers, psychics and spiritualists. In fact, Gloria and her godmother Nina visit a spiritual guide because of the guide’s connection with the protagonist Licia. Gloria hopes her visit will garner more information about Licia so that she can solve Licia’s case. But again, as Laura Pérez cautions, just because these women consult this branch of spirituality, one should not categorize them due to their spirituality and race. Pérez maintains that “dominant cultures ... assume that women ... especially in communities of color, would, ‘of course’ believe in spirituality. We have been exoticized by Euro New Agers and other Euro seekers and spiritual tourists as ‘naturally’ being more spiritual...” (L. Pérez 160).

Following *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* is *Death at Solstice*, Corpi’s fourth and final book to date in the Gloria Damasco series. This final novel moves its readers into contemporary time and helps address the question, “How do Chicanas/os identify themselves in the twenty-first century and a postnationalist movement?” Gone are the days of marching in the streets, shouting “¡Viva la raza!” and boycotting grapes. Corpi’s audience no longer reads about listening to cassette tapes but rather “Googling” someone to obtain information to solve the case at hand. The first novel in the Damasco series, *Eulogy*

for a Brown Angel, builds much of its cultural identity on the mythical land of Aztlán and a mythical monolithic identity. Myth continues in *Death at Solstice* with the myth of Joaquín Murrieta; however, a new generation is evolving from the mythical identity of Aztlán and into contemporary time to form the nth generation. This time period is more contemporary because the nth generation may choose to accept the cultural label of Hispanic. In a scene in *Death at Solstice*, Gloria is talking to a staff member at the visitor’s center in Sutter Creek, California, which is not far from Sacramento. Gloria inquires about a local ranch and the staff member tells her, “You’re Hispanic, dear” to which Gloria admits her “ethnic pedigree with a head nod” (72). If in *Cactus Blood* Gloria was admonished by Carlota for possibly accepting the term Hispanic, one might ask how to interpret the affirmative head nod that Gloria gives to the staff member in *Death at Solstice*. Gloria’s admission to her ethnic pedigree of Hispanic leads to a litany of questions: Why did the staff member ask Gloria if she was Hispanic? Is the staff member stereotyping Gloria? Does she assume that just because Gloria is Hispanic that she should know all things Hispanic including local Hispanic history outside the area in which she lives? If Gloria’s head nod is indeed an acceptance of the word Hispanic, this is quite significant given the evolution of her identity beginning with the nationalistic tones in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*. There is a connection between Gloria’s personal evolution of cultural identity and the evolution of Chicana/o identity for Chicanas/os outside of the Damasco series which has spawned the nth generation. Is Gloria accepting the word Hispanic and moving into the circle of space that nth generation members occupy by accepting the term Hispanic? On the other hand, one must also question if Gloria nods her head only

to placate the staff member in order to obtain the information she needs for the case.

The Gloria Damasco detective series shows the evolution of Chicana/o identity and its shifts as it manifests itself in the four novels. Within the second novel, *Cactus Blood*, the 1989 San Francisco Bay earthquake serves as a metaphor for the shifts and changes in Chicana/o identity and the four novels. The earthquake serves as a metaphor in two instances. First, the earthquake symbolizes the shifting in Gloria's cultural identity. She participates in a nationalist agenda in *Eulogy for a Dark Angel* and in *Cactus Blood* she is ambivalent about her cultural identity and the cultural labels with which she chooses to identify herself. The second example of earthquake as metaphor is the shifting of generations to create the nth generation. This generation may accept the term Hispanic (unlike its predecessors) and members of the nth generation may not be as politically active as the generation of the late 60s. Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta and Salvador C. Fernández contend that "*Los periodistas de las narrativas policíacas del Norte y la frontera ... saben que una justicia clara y prístina no es una posibilidad, pero también están conscientes de que algo es mejor que nada y prosiguen con su labor de exposición de los agentes delictivos*" (16). That is, detective fiction forms a connection with cultural identity and the earthquake metaphor. Each of these categories is fluid, not always organized in a neat and compartmental fashion.

And although earthquakes, cultural identity and the justice in detective fiction are not always linear, the positive changes in the Chicano movement are reflected throughout the course of the Gloria Damasco series. Even though the evolution of Chicana/o identity in the series has its positive strides and has moved into the twenty-first century, regrettably there are still some barriers against the Chicana/o commu-

nity. For example, in *Death at Solstice*, a police officer threatens a U.S.-born Chicana with deportation. After witnessing the officer's empty threats, Gloria commented, "I hated to see a cop or anyone else in authority immediately threaten a person of color, even those born in the United States, with deportation or harm. Ethnic rage was beginning to make my blood boil" (64). Another instance where Chicanas/os are seen as the other is toward the end of *Death at Solstice*. When a city councilman speaks with Gloria, he continuously refers to Chicanas/os and Latinas/os as "your people" (233). While it is regrettable that these attitudes still prevail in the twenty-first century, unfortunately in a post 9/11 era there are some practices that center on people of color. Gloria notes that the van and office she and Justin use for work "had been bugged before by a fed. But after the 9-11 terrorist attack and with the reenactment of the Patriot Act, no person of color was safe from suspicion or surveillance" (10).

How does the nth generation view the Chicano Movement forty years after its birth? For several reasons, it is important to take a retrospective look at where the culture has come in the forty years since the Chicano Movement. First, the efforts of the Chicano Movement in the 70s made it possible for the nth generation to be successful. Chicanas/os can now take courses in Chicana/o literature and not have to fight for the right to do so. Second, Hispanics now constitute the largest minority group in the U.S. Whether a person is Hispanic or not, it is important to learn about this group that forms such a large part of the country. Third, while Chicanas/os have progressed in their fight for equality, Chicana/o students and faculty are still underrepresented on college campuses. The state of affairs for Chicanas/os is still far from perfect, especially in light of anti-Latino legisla-

tion in various states such as Arizona's SB 1070 and Indiana's similar copycat legislation SB 590. Lastly, even if one is not Hispanic, examining the work above presents the reader the tools to understand the history and literature of the Chicano Movement and of the culture in general. I present the audience with the tools to determine for themselves which element(s) of Chicana/o culture are relevant today. Given the predominance of the use of the term Hispanic, does this mean the nth generation does not identify with the Chicano Movement? These conflicting terms are reason for analysis and to expand upon Emma Pérez's four groups to categorize Chicana/o history. The nth generation has members of the middle class in its group and needs narratives that are relevant to them. The efforts of the Chicano Movement in the 70s enabled some Chicanas/os to reach the middle class, yet given the current economic situation in the U.S. that class is shrinking across the republic. These issues will be of the utmost importance to Chicanas/os in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Let me distinguish between Chicano and Chicana/o. I use the term Chicano Movement to reflect the phallogocentrism of the nascent period. I use Chicana/o to show gender equality and subvert male dominance in language (Tatum 5). Throughout this essay, Chicana/o usually refers to culture, cultural identity and community.

² The nth generation is a term I use to define any and all generations beyond the founders of the Chicano movement; that is, the nth generation would be Generation X and the Millennial generation.

³ In 1973 César Chávez and the United Farm Workers of America began a battle with grape growers in California. When farmworkers' three-year contracts were up for negotiation that year, many of the growers signed contracts with the Teamsters and Chávez responded with a strike. Roger Burns notes, "Beginning in farms in the Coachella and San Joaquin valleys, approximately 10,000 farm workers walked out of the fields" (81).

⁴ Anglo is "used to denote any person in the United

States who is not black, Indian, Asian or of a Spanish speaking background. It is a term of difference instead of negative in connotation. If a negative undertone is intended, the term *gabacho* takes the place of *Anglo*" (Martínez 473, italics original).

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