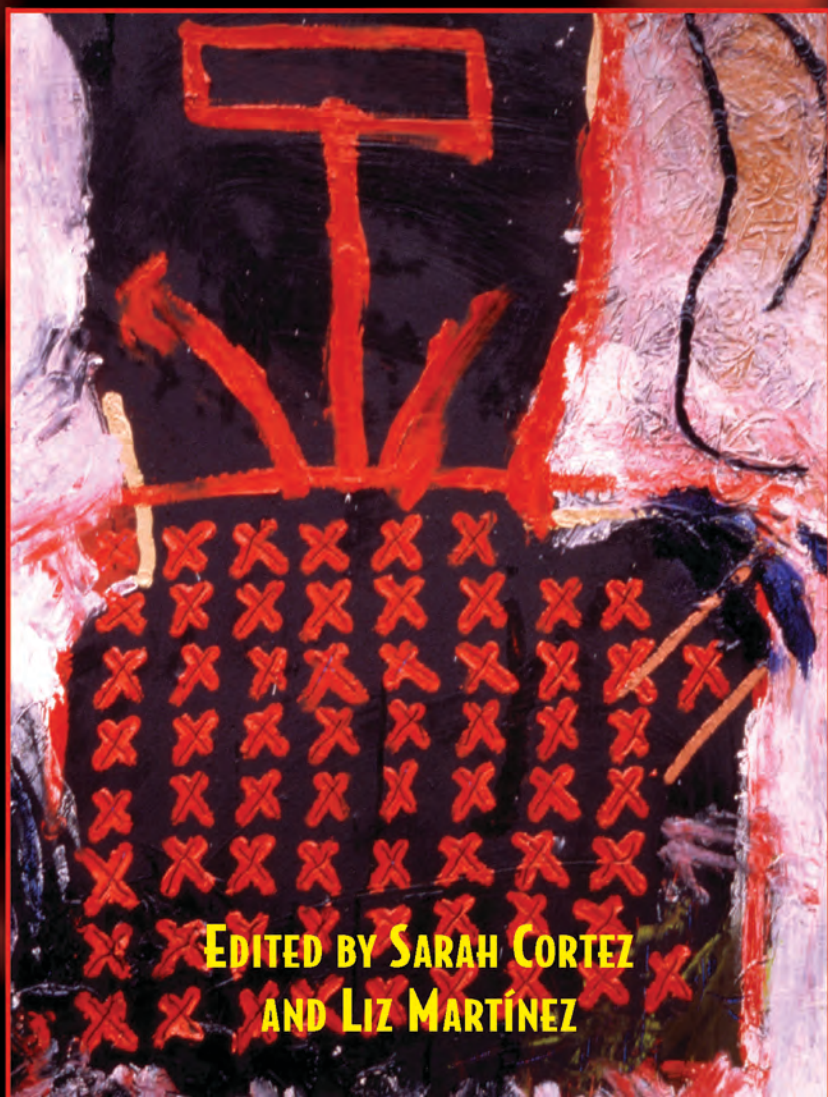

HIT LIST

THE BEST OF LATINO MYSTERY



EDITED BY SARAH CORTEZ
AND LIZ MARTÍNEZ

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LATINO MYSTERY**

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Arte Público Press
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My friends all have stories of their lifelong love of books. Each one is a more inveterate reader than the next. They talk, sometimes ad nauseam, about their romance with fiction. You would think they fell out of the womb with a book in their hand. In their company, I feel like a bibliofraud. As a child I was, if anything, a shameless watcher of TV. I was stunned when, in third grade, I learned my classmates didn't watch Johnny Carson. I didn't decry them to the teacher, but I made a mental note to think less of them in the future. I mean, *really*. How could they not know the *Tonight Show*?

Things change. For me, it was seventh grade and Agatha Christie. I would love to say that I was once racing around the school library with my friend Gregory, when suddenly I tripped, knocking a shelf of books down upon me. Then, in cleaning up the mess I couldn't help but open one of the Christie novels because the cover captivated me. Upon reading the first paragraph, I simply couldn't put the book down. Indeed, I got so lost in the narrative that I was accidentally locked in the library overnight. Left to my own designs, I finished not one novel, but ten. That's the sort of narrative people love to hear about reading, but alas, that's not how things played out. I didn't so much stumble upon Agatha Christie as I was forced by Mr. Martelli to read *The Orient Express* for English class. I took a moment to resent him for it. He was, after all, the very same teacher who assigned *Treasure Island*, a book that, in my twelve-year-old sense of judgment, I more than generously gave a whole paragraph to enchant me. When it didn't, I consigned it to Cleo's (the family basset hound's) box of toys.

My parents must have been on a "let's make the children more well-rounded" kick the weekend Mr. Martelli assigned *The Orient Express* because, as I remember, they made me stay in my bedroom on a Saturday afternoon until I had finished the first two chapters. Regular monsters, I tell you. But then it happened—the conversion, I mean.

I couldn't put the book down, even when Gregory stopped by to get me to play stickball. From *The Orient Express* I graduated to *And Then There Were None*, which led almost predictably to Edgar Allen Poe's mystery stories, and then to Sherlock Holmes.

Since those glorious adventures in the late seventies, I have been a fan of mystery novels. Indeed, as some readers of this foreword will know, I gave over much of the last decade to reading Latino mysteries and writing a critical study, *Brown Gumshoes*, of the Chicano detective novel. When that book came out in late 2005, I felt certain I was done with the mystery novel for a while. Having spent far too many waking hours reading novels about murder, deception and torture, my slumbers had become filled with either people chasing me or I chasing them, and we all had one goal—to kill one another. Sure, the sleep specialists will blame my insomnia on the cappuccino I like to down before bedtime, but I know it is the fear of being gunned down in my dreams that makes me dread putting head to pillow. So upon finishing *Brown Gumshoes*, I decided a respite from the detective novel was in order, and until Sarah Cortez and Liz Martínez contacted me about writing this foreword, I had been pretty successful. The mystery novels I owned sat quietly on my bookshelves, and we had come to the mutual agreement that we wouldn't disturb each other. But darn it all, Cortez and Martínez have me hooked again.

Hit List: The Best of Latino Mystery, which they have compiled, locks you in your seat and won't let you up until you finish the last page. Even then, you may very well be tempted to get in line with your ticket and ride the roller coaster all over again. It's just that good. Cortez and Martínez have assembled veterans of the genre such as Lucha Corpi, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith and Steven Torres, to name but a few, as well as newcomers to the field. Each of these authors knows the genre and knows it well. Moreover, the range of stories includes private eye tales, police procedurals, a legal thriller and even one story told from the point of view of a bullet. These authors are an ambitious and talented bunch. They craft dialogue, plot and character in such a way that you want to linger over the sentences and memorize lines to whip out at your next cocktail party. And with proper attribution, I have already started using, to great effect, Carlos Hernandez' line, "Life and limes are delicious, but sour." It's insightful and funny because it's true. That it comes couched in a story about a reality television show dealing with hit men for hire makes the line only that much more

savory. Hernandez and his deliciously twisted and intriguing story are not the exception; they are the rule in this anthology.

You will find no boring Latino caricatures or stereotypes in this volume. What you will find are numerous characters (not all of whom are Latino) living their lives in all of their racial, gendered, class and sexual complexity. No predictable lives, but rather an investigation into the very multiple and protean identities people carry with them in the world, and with these mystery stories it is a world that brings us to locales as distinct as Mexico, California, Texas, Puerto Rico, Colorado and New York, to name just a few of the places we traipse through on our journey through the book.

As you sit reading this foreword, I'm guessing that you are doing so with your sole copy of the book. Run out to your local bookstore now and buy three more copies. You are going to want to give them to your friends. You'll be the person who turned them on to Latino mysteries, and they will be forever in your debt. If being haunted by nightmares of men with 9mm guns and ski masks is the price to pay for fiction as wonderful as that in *Hit List: The Best of Latino Mystery*, I'll turn my paycheck over every time and call my pharmacist for a refill on the Ambien.

*Ralph E. Rodriguez, Ph.D.
Providence, Rhode Island*

We came to this ground-breaking project—the creation of the first anthology of short fiction by Latino mystery writers—with many similarities in our backgrounds. As kids, we were both enthralled by reading mysteries. It didn't bypass either one of us that in our reading, most of the sleuths lived the adventurous life we craved, replete with fast cars, villains and a satisfying participation in serving justice.

Years later, we both take pride in bringing to you, our reader, this collection featuring many, if not most, of the Latino mystery writers who have functioned as pioneers in their use of the mystery genre to reveal their unique cultures, neighborhoods and realities. Reading these award-winning writers is as exciting as reading the new voices of emerging writers in the field, who are also featured in this volume.

We are eager to introduce readers to a cast of sleuths, murderers and victims of crime who reflect contemporary society's preoccupations with identity, with self and with territory—both internal and external—and its concomitant complex allegiances and surprising compromises.

Some of these stories display a wickedly inventive use of traditional mystery apparatus, e.g. the use of a Macguffin in Manuel Ramos' *The Skull of Pancho Villa*, or the dazzling modern twist on the locked-room mystery in Carlos Hernandez' *Los Simpáticos*.

We admire the way so many of these stories lead the reader to a darkly wry consideration of the ethical issue of whether or not there can be a moral murder: John Lantigua's *A Reunion with Death*, S. Ramos O'Briant's *Death, Taxes . . . and Worms*, Steven Torres' *Caring for José* and Sergio Troncoso's *A New York Chicano*.

Some of these stories unwind in the rich interior of domestic spaces in the central character's home or garden: Sarah Cortez' *In My Hands*, Arthur Muñoz' *Made in China*, R. Narvaez' *In the Kitchen with Johnny Albino* and S. Ramos O'Briant's *Death, Taxes . . . and Worms*. Oth-

ers spin us through a dizzy array of urban spaces as the central character, whether PI or crook, either solves the mystery or commits the crime: Carolina García-Aguilera's *The Right Profile*, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's *Nice Climate, Miami*, Carlos Hernandez' *Los Simpáticos*, A. E. Roman's *Under the Bridge* and Sergio Troncoso's *A New York Chicano*.

Two of the stories take us to Mexico: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Shortcut to the Moon*, for a noir set in contemporary times, and Bertha Jacobson's *A Broken String of Lace*, for a haunting historical tale. We are even treated to a glimpse of small-town Puerto Rico in Steven Torres's *Caring for José*.

The narrative voices in this collection range from the hardboiled in *Nice Climate, Miami* to the softboiled in *Death, Taxes . . . and Worms*, more reminiscent of the cozy. *Los Simpáticos* introduces a narrator who is the chilling epitome of the entertainment industry's greed and ruthlessness, while Lucha Corpi's *Hollow Point at the Synapses* introduces the most intriguing narrator you'll meet in the mystery genre. The tone and mood of narrative voices ranges from the frantic sense of borrowed time in L. M. Quinn's *A Not So Clear Case of Murder* to the confident sense of unquestioned superiority in Mario Acevedo's *Oh, Yeah* and Hinojosa-Smith's *Nice Climate, Miami*.

We bring these stories to you with the same sense of anticipation as we have experienced since childhood when reading mystery. Whatever your preference—traditional, historical, chick lit, PI or police procedural, revenge, dark domestic, ruthless noir or cozy—you'll find something to delight you in this collection.

We thank these authors with whom we have worked, and whose writing has helped to fill yet one more publishing void for Latinos. And, most of all, we thank our publisher, the ever-innovative Arte Público Press.

Sarah Cortez
Houston, Texas

Oh, Yeah

Canela held up his Browning 9mm HP. The slide was stuck halfway.

I took the pistol from him and removed the magazine. “You got the bullets in backward. Like I told you before, the pointy end of the bullet goes to the front.”

Canela hunched his beefy shoulders and squinted at the Browning. He mumbled, “Oh, yeah.” He took the pistol, handling the gun like he still wasn’t sure how it worked.

I didn’t like or dislike Canela, it was just that he was as dumb as a Labrador. Canela got his name from the cinnamon-colored scars on his face. My *abuelita* said that Guatemalans weren’t too smart, and she got that right. Canela was the king of the *pendejos*.

I hadn’t known him until a couple of weeks ago, when Enrico and I were looking for a third partner, and we found Canela in the warehouse district loading stolen furniture into a truck. His intimidating bulk and eagerness for serious bread, plus the fact that no one around here knew him—not the hustlers, not the snitches—meant I could use him. Quick in-and-outs didn’t require much upstairs, and that described Canela for sure.

Enrico and I had done time for armed robbery, and neither of us was going back into the slammer. Canela was my guarantee. He was slow on the uptake about everything, and if things went into the crapper, I’d leave him behind to get pinched.

I wrapped my sawed-off shotgun in a newspaper. Canela folded the laundry bags for the loot under his jacket and zipped up the front. We tucked our pistols into our pants so they were hidden beneath our jackets.

“Your disguise?” I asked Canela.

He yanked a knitted ski cap from his jacket pocket and pulled it over his watermelon head. The eye slits and mouth hole were stretched crooked, and Canela looked like an obese, spastic clown.

I remembered what had happened during our first robbery last week, a practice run at a convenience store. “And this time,” I said, “when you pull your gun, it’s ‘Hands up,’ not ‘Trick-or-Treat.’”

Canela removed the cap. “Oh, yeah.”

We went outside and got into the Ford Maverick, Enrico and me up front, Canela in the back. On the way to our heist, a savings and loan south of Brandt Avenue, Canela put his gorilla-paw mitts on the top of my seat. “So tell me again, the plan?”

Man, was this guy a bowl of dumb ass. I had told him seven, eight times already. A chimpanzee would have known it by heart, but not this stupid ape. I repeated the plan and added, “Nothing’s changed.”

Canela scratched his head like thinking made his brain itch. “Oh, yeah.”

Enrico parked across the street and left the motor running. Canela followed me through the front lobby. Easy as one-two-three, we put on our masks, pulled our guns and yelled for everyone to stay cool. Canela stuffed the laundry bags while I made scary moves with my shotgun. When I turned around to leave, I looked out the front plate-glass window toward Enrico.

He was climbing out of the getaway car and raising his hands. Cops with rifles bobbed around him, using the Maverick for cover.

Panic poured through me like ice water.

Okay, I was ready for this. Now, to ditch the big stupid Guatemalan and escape. “Canela, cover me while I find a way out the back.”

Canela leveled the Browning at my face. “Drop the gun and get on your knees.” His mask was off. That flabby expression of his looked suddenly threatening and hard, like it belonged on the front end of a Buick about to run me over. “You’re under arrest. Oh, yeah.”