

Literature as Activism - From Entertainment to Challenging Social Norms: Michael Nava's *Goldenboy* (1988)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: October 14, 2019

Accepted: December 13, 2019

Published: January 31, 2020

Volume: 9 Issue: 1

Advance access: January 2020

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine how Michael Nava appropriates the conventions of Detective/ Crime Fiction to engage in activism, whereby art is used to challenge sexual and ethnic social oppression and inequality. By providing an analysis of the heteronormative conventions of the Detective and Crime Fiction genre, the article focuses on the ways in which narratives portray homophobic violence, as well as on the fact that such portrayals result from and contribute to the promotion of heteronormative hegemonies. Following this, I focus on Michael Nava's *Goldenboy* (1988) and I analyse Nava's writing in relation to the wider Chicano tradition of using art to engage in activism, what has been termed as 'activism.' The central argument of this paper is that Nava 'queers' the form of the Detective Fiction genre to highlight the shortcomings of our society, the effects of the hegemonial heteronormativity, and the need for social change.

Key words: Activism, Queer literature, Heteronormativity, Violence, Detective Fiction, Queering, Queer theory

INTRODUCTION

In a society like ours where social inequalities and oppression are heightened rather than eliminated, it is more important than ever to explore as many possible ways of offering social commentary and providing opportunities for discussion and change as possible. In recent years, more and more people engage in anti-war and anti-globalisation activities. Pushing agendas and raising awareness of social issues using art is becoming more and more common (Brody, 2017). Detective fiction, one of the most widely read genres of fiction (Cox, 1992), could not but engage in these activities. As this essay shows, artists such as Michael Nava use their work not only for their audience's entertainment but also in order to engage in the ever-growing discussion about social injustice and inequality.

The aim of this essay is to examine the ways in which Michael Nava's *Goldenboy* (1988) appropriates the conventions of the genre in a manner that elevates the work from a literary artefact to a work of activism arguing against heteronormativity and homophobic behaviour and practices. The focus of this essay is 'queering,' a hybrid technique of altering already established genres to make a socio-political statement. Queering is a result of the queer theory developed in the 80s and the 90s (Cohen et al., 2013). It is, therefore, important to situate this essay within the works of Sedwick (2013), Warner (1993), and Butler (2007).

Following the emergence of activist groups (e.g. Act Up), the term queer was used not only to describe "assimilationist

tendencies" (Cohen et al., 2013); but it also acquired more radical connotations. Rooted in queer theory, politics, and activism, 'queering' came to represent ways for "social and political subversion of [the] dominant culture" (Barker and Scheele, 2016). For Sedgwick, queer meant "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, [...] and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1993; p. 8). "To act queerly," Hanman (2013) argues "is to think across boundaries, beyond what is deemed to be normal, to jump at the possibilities opened up by celebrating marginality, which in itself serves to destabilise the mainstream." Similarly, for Warner (1993) and Butler (2007), queer is defined against what is considered normal rather than against the heterosexual.

Understanding the various meanings attached to the words 'queer' and 'queering' is important in the discussion of 'queering' as a technique used by Nava in *Goldenboy* to challenge the injustices and inequalities caused by heteronormativity. I start this essay by surveying violence in detective fiction. This is followed by a focus on homophobic violence in particular. With these two sections, I examine how engraved heteronormative ideas are to the genre of detective fiction. The next two sections focus on Chicano detective fiction and activism. Not only do I want to situate the discussion of *Goldenboy* in the right context, but I also wish to introduce the relationship between sexuality and ethnicity and show how art has been used as a locus for discussion and

societal change. I then include present the essay's theoretical background to highlight the emergence of 'queering,' as a tool which allows audiences to reinterpret and re-envision works of art or history in a way that explores sexual oppression and injustices.

The second part of this essay focuses on Nava's *Goldenboy* and explores how Nava uses well-established institutions, such as masculinity, religion, and the macho culture to expose the toxic ways in which heteronormativity has informed these facets of the society. Then, I provide some examples of how Nava is 'queering' the genre itself by appropriating some of its conventions, namely the characters and plot. In doing so, rather than having the audience 'queer' their reading of his text, he actively facilitates this 'queering' process to emphasise the shortcomings of our society, the effects of the heteronormative matrix, and the need for social change. The artist, therefore, uses his art and becomes an activist against sexual and ethnic oppression and inequalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence in Detective Fiction

Violence is not only at the core of detective fiction, but it is also celebrated through the conventions of the genre. According to Cawelti, "[it] is normative rather than exceptional, and the hero who can use it for just and valuable purposes is inevitably a leading citizen" (Cawelti, 2004: p. 162). Whether it is described in detail or it is assumed, violence is the central motif in all detective fiction (Danyte, 2011). It is important to note that it takes multiple forms and it is exerted and experienced by all central characters. The initial point of a detective fiction plot is the result of the violence exerted by the murderer (Cox, 1992). The victim, as Van Dine (1928) confirms, experiences physical violence, while being murdered, but they can also experience emotional or mental violence in the events preceding and/or leading up to their murder.

Victim and murderer are not the only characters involved in acts of violence. During the investigation process, the detective becomes susceptible to emotional and, in some cases, physical violence (*ibid.*). However, the detective is a character who also exerts institutional violence while collecting evidence and interviewing possible suspects. The last act of the detective's violence is the punishment of the murderer. Cawelti (2004) describes the law of retaliation, what is termed as 'lex talionis', as "the dominant moral principle informing [detective fiction]" (p. 162).

Homophobic Violence in Detective Fiction

Another form of violence often portrayed in detective fiction is homophobic violence. Greenwell (2015) observes that this genre "use[s] queer people primarily as figures of ridicule and contempt." Some examples of literary works that portray homophobic violence include Calder-Marshall's *Victim* (1961), Walker's *Cruising* (1970), Muller's *The Cheshire Cat's Eye* (1983), and Hansen's Dave Brandstetter crime stories (1970-1991). These are examples of works in which

"explicit homosexuality is brutally attacked, those identified as gays are ostracized [and/or] beaten up every night" (Žižek, 2006: p.366).

Instances of homophobic violence in detective fiction, though, are not limited to physical violence. Attributing "damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, [...], calling gay men "feminine" or calling lesbians "masculine" (Butler, 1993: p. 238) is not uncommon in this genre. In Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), for example, Sam Spade, the protagonist detective, refers to the homosexual Cairo as "the fairy" and to Wilmer as a "gunsel". Similarly, in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), Marlow comments that "fags can't hit hard, no matter what they look like" (Berlatsky, 2012).

Chicano Detective Fiction

This essay focuses on the way in which homophobic violence has been used in Chicano detective fiction but before discussing this, it is important to survey the emergence of Chicano detective fiction as a genre. The traditional American detective fiction of the 60s, 70s, 80s, and the 90s is set in urban environments. Such settings were gradually populated by Chicanos/as. The change in the demographics of urban environments was followed by an increase of new Chicano detective fiction authors and readers. García (2016) attributes the birth and popularity of Chicano detective fiction as a genre to the proliferation of Chicano writers and to the readers' increasing interest in these stories. Chicano detective fiction received "growing credibility" and became the "cultural capital of detective fiction" (Rodríguez, 2005: p. 4).

Such a change could not but translate into the genre itself. Characters - Chicano characters in particular - stopped being portrayed in a negative manner and they were no longer represented as being closely associated with crime. Chicano writers started questioning the archetypal form of the genre and by modifying it, they engaged in an endeavour whereby "minority groups [...] would claim a meaningful place in the larger social context" (Rosell, 2009: p. 1). Therefore, Chicano characters were given more meaningful roles. Those "whose cultural experiences have been excluded from the traditional detective formula, and whose cultural aesthetic alters the formula itself" (Gosselin, 1999: p. xi-xxi) are now using this formula to challenge social injustices and inequalities which have historically been deemed deviant, if not criminal.

Chicano Detective Fiction and Activism

Using a well-established artistic form to fight injustices is not new to the Chicano culture. Since 1997, Brody (2017) argues that Chicano artists started using their art as a means of protest and awareness raising on matters of public and social importance.

Asante (2009) explains that "the activist [...] uses [their] artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression - by any medium necessary. The activist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens,

the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination” (p. 39). This new form of activism, therefore, invites the artist to use their art in such a way that will bring about change in the art form itself and, subsequently, to society.

In other words, by appropriating the conventions of a genre, in this case detective fiction, the artist reinvents their art but, more importantly, they have the opportunity to question societal forces and manifestations of inequalities. In doing so, they invite their audience to question and challenge such forces, as well. Another very famous literary activist, Eve Ensler (2011) argued that through activism “edges are pushed, imagination is freed, and a new language emerges altogether.”

Queer Theory and ‘Queering’

The next part of this essay examines the extent in which Nava is queering the genre of detective fiction as well as the effects of this. Before doing so, though, it is important to trace the term ‘queering’. Coming out of queer theory, queering has been used interchangeably with queer reading (Barker and Scheele, 2016). The aim of queering for the reader, Sedgwick argues (2013), is to identify how heteronormativity manifests itself in a literary work and to find ways to challenge it.

Famous examples of ‘queering’ in literature are Butler’s (2007) reading of Larson’s *Passing* (1929) and Hekanaho’s (2007) reading of Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951). In both attempts, the scholars focused on the representation of established heterosexuality and the possible underlying existence of non-binary sexualities in these works. In doing so, they attempted to “[dismantle] the dynamics of power and privilege persisting among diverse subjectivities” (Young, 2012: p. 127).

In this essay, rather than using the term ‘queering’ to describe a specific reading of a work of art, and in light of the discussion on activism I presented above, I use the term ‘queering’ to explain how Nava uses the genre of detective fiction to challenge heteronormativity. How, in other words, ‘queering’ becomes a writer’s tool in their quest to topple the dominant culture.

HETERONORMATIVITY IN NAVA’S GOLDENBOY

In order for heteronormative behaviours to be challenged, they first need to be presented in ways that are faithful to the conventions of the genre of a work of art. Like in any other work of detective fiction, heteronormativity is mostly evident through homophobic instances throughout the story. As Sedgwick (1985: p. 88) put it, “homophobia [is] a mechanism for regulating the behaviour of the many by the specific oppression of a few.” In this section, the essay analyses those instances of homophobic behaviour in an attempt to highlight how heteronormativity has shaped three of the basic features of detective fiction: masculinity, religion, and the macho culture.

Heteronormativity and Masculinity

Plain claims that crime fiction “[.] is seen to be almost synonymous with conventional discourses of masculinity” (p. 11). The International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities (Flood et al., 2007) offers a typology of male detectives in crime fiction: a. those who perceive violence as an attribute of masculinity but who also need to be in control of this violence in order for them to be good members of the society, b. those who are “cleansed of any sort of feminine taint” and whose manliness is defined in relation to what isn’t feminine, and c. those whose sole purpose is to get rid of their somewhat feminine psychological traits in order for them to avoid “a literal death or a psychotic rupture” (p. 134).

Faithful to this typology, Nava includes such representations of masculinity in *Goldenboy*. For instance, when Henry Rios first meets Jim Pears to announce that he is his new lawyer, the following exchange is taking place:

“You’re gay,” he said.
“That’s right.”

“Gay lawyer,” he said, mockingly. “Do you wear a dress to court?”

(Nava, 1988: p. 47)

What is interesting in this exchange is that both men are gay. By having Jim mocking Henry for being gay, Nava is challenging the male stereotypes of detective fiction. Rather than representing male characters who define their masculinity in opposing terms of femininity, he is using homophobic violence, in this case mockery exercised by another gay man, to address the issue of internalised homophobia.

Heteronormativity and Religion

Another institution which is linked to heteronormativity is religion. Christianity has always been closely tied to detective fiction. “Solving a crime and bringing the guilty to justice still do not undo the wrong that was done to the victims. And so, where the detective is limited, Christian faith can comfort the suffering and give meaning to the loss endured” (Morlan and Raubicheck, 2013: p. xxvii). It is, therefore, common for works of detective fiction to celebrate Christian faith.

In *Goldenboy*, Nava challenges this faith when, in an encounter with Jim’s parents, they tell him that they want to sue the government for negligence. Henry, though, realises that they are doing this not out of love for and acceptance of their son but because they want to benefit from the money they could claim, should they win the case. Toward the end of the encounter and upon Henry’s disapproval of Jim’s parents’ intentions, Mrs. Pearse, Jim’s mother, addresses Henry saying that “[t]here is a special place for people like you” (Nava, 1988: p. 95), alluding to the hell of the Christian doctrine.

Nava portrays a pseudo-Christian mother who, rather than protecting and caring for her child, is solely interested in the profit she can make out of her son’s misery. As it is clear from this encounter, the mother would not be able to protect and care for her child because Jim is gay, and he only deserves to go to that “special place for people like [him]” (ibid.). Readers, here, are presented with the established

institution of religion but rather than celebrating it, they are led to challenge it. By not disregarding them altogether and by excluding them from his work, Nava asks us to reconsider and question the functions of such institution in our society.

Heteronormativity and Macho Culture

The Cambridge dictionary (2019) defines macho as “behaving forcefully or showing no emotion in a way traditionally thought to be typical of a man.” Ramos (2005) further explains that “[i]n the United States “macho” [...] has been used historically as a derogative adjective to describe Hispanic males” (p. 108). Heteronormativity, therefore, in Chicano literature and culture cannot but result from a complex interplay between layers of identities.

In examining this interplay, Nava comments on the relationship between heteronormativity and ethnic identity. Toward the end of the book, in a conversation about Cresly, a character in the story, Josh, Rios's new lover, says to Rios

“Why do you hate him? [...] Cause he's a homophobe? The world's full of them [...] I was one. I called Jim Pears a faggot, just like the other guys at the restaurant.”

(Nava, 1988; p. 204)

Foster (2008) argues that “homophobia is bound up with maintaining an ‘authentic’ ethnic identity” and Nava, in this excerpt, shows that for a Hispanic male, such as Josh, embracing his Hispanic ethnic identity means subscribing to heteronormative values of homophobic behaviour and bullying. Once again, Nava invites us to question our society and culture which dictate that in an attempt to ascribe to one's ethnic identity, one has to turn against their sexual identity.

CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY

So far, I have shown how Nava uses heteronormative clichés of detective fiction to twist them around and make the reader aware of the unjust society which we live in. By using those conventions, Nava manages not to estrange but to engage the reader in a discussion about the effects of heteronormativity in Chicano culture. Here, I further discuss how Nava is queering the characters, the plots, and ultimately the genre of detective fiction “for the purpose of furthering a viewpoint or, in this case, a cause” (Sauerberg, 2016: p. 148).

Queering the Characters

Nava has been faithful to the characteristics of the genre and has incorporated all characters typically found in detective fiction: a detective, a primary suspect, other characters who could be suspects, and representatives of justice (Szpak, 2017). However, the way he has portrayed them is not a typical representation of such characters in detective fiction.

“Like other hard-boiled heroes, Rios adheres to a high moral code, and he's driven to seek the truth” (Markowitz, 2004: p. 144). In detective fiction where the main protagonist is heterosexual and adheres to the masculine and macho culture analysed above, the reader is shown the dark side of our society by focusing on issues of “child molestation, spouse abuse, exploitation, betrayal, and murder” (ibid.). By

deciding to present us with a gay detective, Nava explores “homophobia, violence, fear, and self-hatred,” (ibid.) urging the readers to expand the way they see the world and become more sensitized to issues affecting gay people.

A similar analysis can be applied to all other characters involved in this story. For instance, it is not uncommon in detective fiction to read about the justice system being corrupted (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019) but here, Nava presents us with a judge who is willing to oversee certain evidence out of fear of prejudice. Nava (1999) illustrates this when Hart explains to Rios that “[j]udges are elected, too, and if you're black and a woman someone's always gunning for you” (p. 88).

The fact that these characters are typical of detective fiction but are represented here in light of the sexual and racial prejudice existing in America at the time provides the readers with a better understanding of the context of the story as well as the real effects of the existing societal mechanisms and its values.

Queering the Plot

In *Goldenboy*, Nava is using the basic courtroom plot of a detective fiction story “but inverts the usual polarisation of the individual against the high and mighty to the supplementary polarization of discriminated minorities against mainstream, that is sexually and racially prejudiced, America” (Sauerberg, 2016: p. 148). What we read, in other words, is not one but two plots.

The first plot is the one that follows Rios from the courtrooms to the streets and is focused on the investigation of a murder. This is consistent with the conventions of the genre and readers experience one of the best examples of detective fiction writing (Kirkus, 2019). Nava, however, is telling an additional story: the story of the gay community who, in light of the AIDS pandemic, are fighting for their rights. Ross's gradual death by AIDS and Rios's investment in his relationship with Josh are the two main events which function as the gates to this second subplot.

In doing so, Nava elevates his work by not only providing “just” another masterpiece of detective fiction writing, but mainly by turning his detective fiction writing into a canvas of social and cultural thought and by bringing into the limelight issues of sexuality, gender, and ethnic identity. This is typical of younger generations of artists who are using their art to challenge oppression and social injustices (Barker and Scheele, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have shown that Nava's *Goldenboy* is an example of activism whereby Nava is using his art to not only address issues of inequality and oppression but also to challenge the current *status quo* and to invite readers to question their own ideas and beliefs.

By presenting a brief survey of violence and homophobic violence in detective fiction, I aimed to show how the genre itself promotes and celebrates heteronormative ideas. I, then, focused on Chicano detective fiction and activism. Here, I

traced the development of the genre in Chicano culture, introduced the interplay of sexuality and ethnicity, as well as the ways in which art has been used to provide a locus of discussion and societal change. Before focusing on Nava's *Goldenboy*, I also provided a theoretical background to the act of 'queering' which formed the basis of my discussion of *Goldenboy*.

In the second part of this essay, I focused on the ways in which Nava used the conventions of the genre to offer an insight into the heteronormative society within which his story is set. I also provided some examples of how he 'queered' some of the conventions of the genre in order for him – and the readers – to “destabilize [and challenge] heteronormativity as the matrix upon which people and social institutions function” (Bollas, 2014: p. 97).

Nava, in his work, referred to masculinity, religion, and the macho culture not in a celebratory manner but in a way that highlighted the hypocrisy that underlies those institutionalised social values. In addition, he tweaked the well-established characters and plot of detective fiction in order to invite the readers to a journey of questioning heteronormativity and to urge them to challenge instances of social oppression and inequality.

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