
Burning Down the House: Latin American Comics in the 21st Century, Edited by Laura Cristina Fernández, Amadeo Gandolfo, and Pablo Turnes, Routledge, 2023 (Book Review)

BIRTE WEGE (FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN, GERMANY)

The days when both the comics form itself, and the academic study of comics, had to defend themselves against accusations of unseriousness and irrelevance have long passed. In the North American context, works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* have become canon, their relevance accepted far beyond the field of Comics Studies, while at the same time continuing to influence and inspire the work of both comics creators, and scholars. Across the globe, artists are utilizing the affordances of the comics form in ever more creative ways, demonstrating that the capacity of the medium to engage with topics both political and aesthetic is far from exhausted.

In the volume *Burning Down the House: Latin American Comics in the 21st Century*, editors Laura Cristina Fernández, Amadeo Gandolfo, and Pablo Turnes bring together a range of contributions that add to a field of research within comics scholarship that so far has received somewhat less attention than its North American and European counterparts: the dynamic and diverse creations by Latin American comics artists over the past twenty years. The volume is divided into two parts: *Politics, Protest and Memory*, and *Genre and Sexual Dissidence*. There is significant overlap, however: as soon becomes evident, some manner of political engagement is a defining feature of practically all comics works under discussion in the thirteen chapters that make up this book. This is clearly not a coincidence. As the editors lay out in their introduction, as a whole, the past few decades (as well as the previous century) have seen significant political and economic fluctuation in most countries of the continent. As this volume very effectively demonstrates, the medium of comics has proven to be a valuable outlet to critically engage with past and present trauma, its broader appeal to both readers and creators

in the twenty-first century aided, given the lack of an established comics publishing industry on the continent, by the internet as a means of disseminating and monetizing this work.

The scope of this volume is notable, not least due to, as the editors point out in their introduction, the hybridity and diversity of culture(s) all too frequently simply collapsed within the label of "Latin American." It is thus only logical that the editors have explicitly chosen to focus on contributions primarily by scholars from the region. As is common in the multi-disciplinary field of Comics Studies, they also include a range of academic backgrounds. While most are – like two of the editors themselves – historians, others come from Social Sciences, Literary Studies, and Philosophy, amongst others, giving ample opportunity to do justice to the many facets of the form. Accordingly, the editors' stated aim is that of "opening debates" on a broad array of topics pertaining to the Latin American context specifically: "decolonial perspectives, the discussion on recent memory, and social struggles linked to ethnic and sexual minorities" (1).

The work explored in the opening chapter, Argentinian artist Lucas Nine's *Borges, Inspector de Aves* (2017), sets the tone for the volume, and demonstrates the unique contribution the comics form allows for. It features iconic writer Jorge Luis Borges in a (seemingly) unlikely alternate history setting, as a poultry inspector slash noir detective solving crime. Only seemingly unlikely, that is, because the comic pursues a "what if" narrative in which Borges did accept the position of "poultry and rabbits inspector" (19) with which the Perón government indeed sought to sideline the avowed anti-Perónist writer. Thus, high art in the figure of Borges meets the pop culture medium of comics, and attempts at totalitarian oppression in the past are intertwined with the

present moment, allowing us, as the entire volume leaves no doubt, at the very least to reflect on both. Similarly, other chapters explore graphic representations of student movements past and present in Mexico, aspects of historical trauma and memory in Chile and in Brazil, the impact of funding on topic choice in recent comics in Uruguay, and connections between violence, diversity, and embodiment in a number of current and historical contexts across the continent.

Again and again, the editors' observation from their introduction, on the stunning "decisive need to settle scores with the past" (11) demonstrated in many of these works is thus showcased, adding a significant arch to the debates surrounding memory and trauma representation in comics. In sum, *Burning Down the House* serves as an excellent guide to the wealth of material being created in the region (and running the full gamut the comics form has to offer, from graphic novels to punk zines). It gives significant insight into specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that inform the broader Latin American comics scene, (especially perhaps for those previously more focused on North American output) and demonstrates the continued appeal the form is likely to have in this century. If criticism could be voiced, it is perhaps that the focus tends to be more heavily on historical and sociological analysis and the narrative element than on engagement with the artwork, though several chapters form a notable exception to this.

Author's Biography

Birte Wege is Assistant Professor for North American Literature at Freie Universität Berlin, as well as, currently, Research Associate for English Didactics at Technische Universität Braunschweig. She completed her PhD in North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin and is the author of the monograph *Drawing On the Past: Graphic Narrative Documentary* (Campus, 2019).