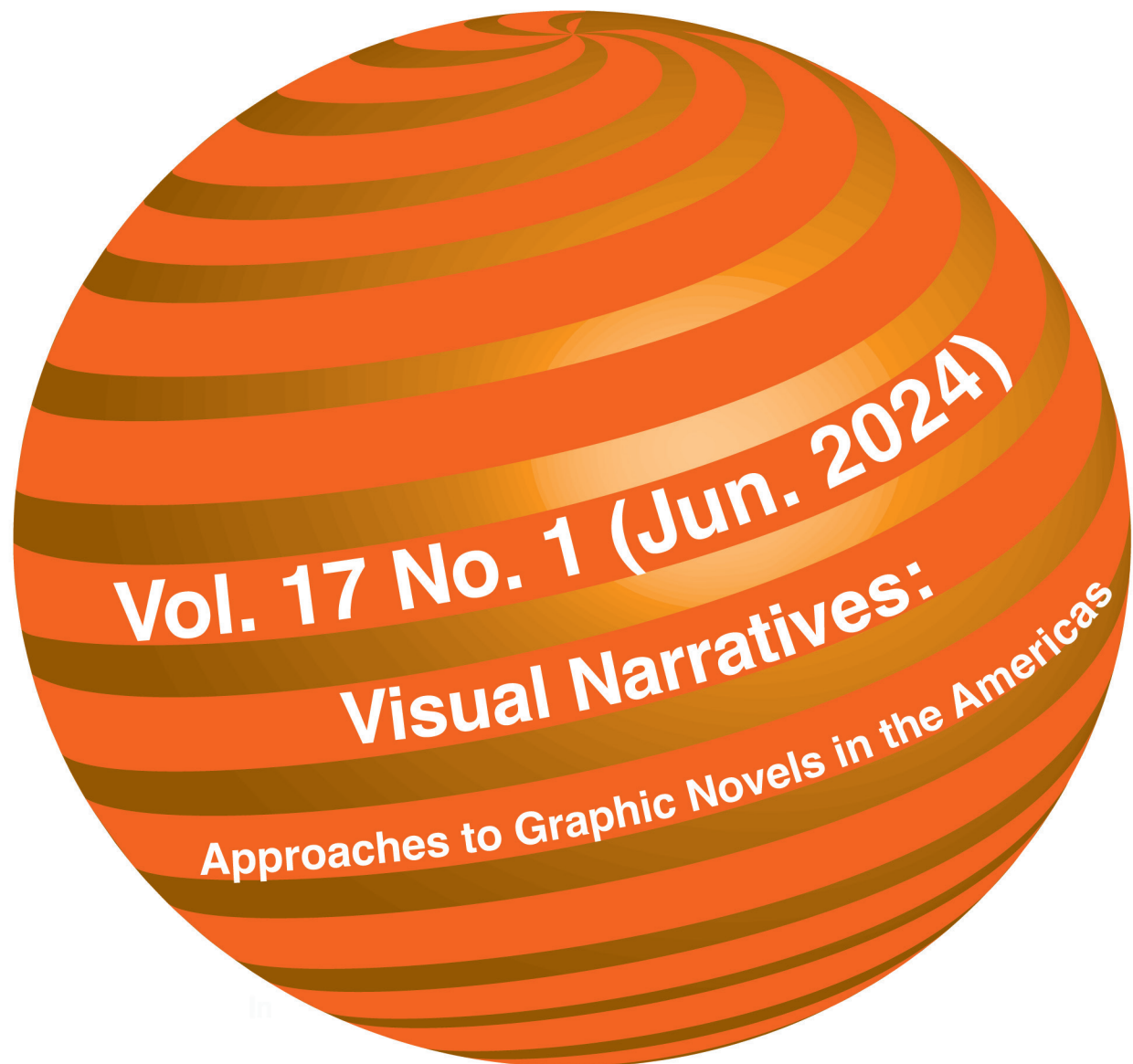


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Approaches to Graphic Novels in the Americas

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“Tudo melhora depois de uma guerra”: Prosthetic Memory and the Graphic Adaptation of Milton Hatoum’s *Dois Irmãos*

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Abstract

*Milton Hatoum’s devoted readership has become an economic asset for crossover audiences the last ten years, and nowhere is this more visible than with his “modern classic,” the Jabuti Prize-winning *Dois Irmãos* (2000), which has been adapted for television, theater, and comics. Identical twin Brazilian cartoonists Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon’s graphic adaptation of the same name in 2015 not only won the prestigious Eisner Award, but it was also accompanied by a strong marketing campaign from Hatoum’s editorial press utilizing the brothers’ fraternal status and mass cultural appeal to expand readership bases. Drawing on Angela Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory,” Pointner and Boschenhoff’s exploration of spatial embodiment in graphic adaptations, and recent Latin American comic scholarship linking military dictatorships and the rise of memory discourses, this article demonstrates that Moon and Bá’s hauntingly beautiful rendition, far from being derivative or merely “faithful,” is able to apply medium-specific strategies to even more effectively render Hatoum’s association between individual history and national allegory, in the process introducing new generations of citizens increasingly alienated from Brazil’s darkest period.*

Keywords: adaptation studies, Brazil, comics, dictatorship, Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá, graphic novel, national history, spatial memory

Much twentieth-century critical work on Latin American comics and mass culture can trace its origins to *Para leer al Pato Donald* (How to Read Donald Duck, 1971), Chilean Ariel Dorfman and Belgian Armand Mattelart’s Marxist-inspired deconstruction of the ideological practices in Disney’s graphic representations of postcolonial regions. Jennifer Manthei makes this anti-capitalist genealogy explicit by citing the foundational text’s title in her own “How to Read *Chico Bento*: Brazilian Comics and National Identity” (2011), a case study revealing contradictory internal logics of developmentalism undergirding Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-85). A watershed moment occurred in 1970 when artist Mauricio de Sousa successfully persuaded one of the largest publishing houses in Brazil to begin producing his decade-old *Turma da Mônica* newspaper comic in book form (Catalá-Carrasco et al. 8), and the media franchise and merchandizing universe that resulted, replete with multiple amusement parks dedicated to the

characters, earned him notoriety as the Walt Disney of Latin America. This popularity can in part be attributed to celebration of de Sousa’s works as representing quintessentially Brazilian themes and cultural concepts, yet, via the *Mônica* spin-off featuring the character “Chico Bento,” Manthei is particularly interested in why de Sousa’s were the only Brazilian comics permitted to be published under the censorship of Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-85). In addition to exploring exactly what “vision of the nation—its history, populations, and future—are proposed through this cultural text” (143), the anthropologist disentangles de Sousa’s contradictory logics of national nostalgia, (under) developmentalism, and the regime’s economic modernization initiatives.

The study of comics as serious cultural artifacts appeared concomitantly with the consecration of memory studies during the 1990s. Across much of Latin America, the recovery of the comics industry and the rise of

memory discourses coincided with complex post-dictatorial/redemocratization processes and thus nationally-inflected attempts—from the formation of truth commissions to the informal judgments in the court of public opinion provided by exilic literature and, increasingly, cinema and television—to come to terms with human rights abuses. The initial focus on the recent traumatic past has increasingly expanded, however, to consider transnational meaning-making within historical discourses that extend beyond Cold War contexts, and in the process, “comics have adopted different historical, aesthetic, thematic, or contextual strategies” (Catalá-Carrasco et al. 19) to equally represent and reflect upon processes of memory transmission.

Thus, in *Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel in Latin America* (2017), Edward King and Joanna Page distinguish between ideological scholarship about the sequential arts and haptic approaches such as their own that foreground the materiality and organization of graphic presentations. The duo delineates market tendencies along regional and geopolitical lines, posting that, in contrast to the domination of autobiographical and para-journalistic modes in Europe and North America, across Latin America the most prevalent genre in the twenty-first century is speculative, with particular focuses on science fiction tropes. Significantly, while much of the mass cultural appeal behind posthumanist labels concerns the dystopian implications of how technological advances displace the autonomy of the figure of the human in future settings, science fiction comics “often serve as allegories of real-life [present] conditions and/or historical developments” (Espinoza 7). Thus, King and Page posit a second layer to the posthuman paradigm as a metacritical perspective. These less “nostalgic” and therefore less reactionary approaches can “explore ways in which the [problematic] construction of the category of the human as separate from and superior to nature is intricately bound up with the assertion of hierarchical differences among humans, both racial and sexual” (King and Page 4). The book examines case studies from several national traditions, and while Chile serves as a particularly rich nexus of production, the scholars briefly reference Brazil’s famous

twin-brother collaborators Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá as the most visible embodiment of this trend in their home country. Presumably, this is in reference to the Eisner Award-winning *Daytripper* (2011) series, their acclaimed addition to the *Hellboy* universe and its Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense titled *1947* (2009), and Bá’s illustrations in the US serial *Umbrella Academy* (2007-2019), which has more recently been adapted into a multi-season Netflix superhero series.

While the above titles indicate the twins’ mass cultural appeal, this article examines Moon and Bá’s 2015 graphic novel adaptation of *Dois Irmãos*, Lebanese-Brazilian writer Milton Hatoum’s second novel. Considered a modern “classic,” Hatoum’s book won the prestigious Jabuti Prize for Literature in 2001, and the adaptation in turn achieved an Eisner Award, the so-called “Oscar” of the comic industry. The visual transposition, which took two years to script and another two to illustrate (Clark), showcases a different side of the duo’s writing and illustrating capacity; indeed, much has been made by reviewers of the novelty of identical twins adapting a literary work about the same fraternal relationship. Through flashbacks verging on stream-of-consciousness, Hatoum’s nonlinear, intergenerational novel poetically weaves through the cycles of love and loss between Lebanese immigrant father Halim and Zana, a Brazilian woman of Lebanese descent. The book’s motor, however, is the antagonistic relationship between the couple’s identical twins Yaqub and Omar, who are born in Manaus between the end of the first Amazonian rubber boom and implementation of Getúlio Vargas’ Estado Novo (1937-45). As teenagers, the boys covet the same girl, and after a violent incident in which Omar scars Yaqub’s face with a shard of mirror, their family sends Yaqub to Lebanon to prevent any violent retribution. Yaqub’s exile is unexpectedly prolonged due to World War Two, and when he returns, he initially struggles to communicate in Portuguese, although this is not the reason the two brothers cannot communicate. In fact, they never formally speak again, taking diametrically opposed paths towards adulthood and citizenship. The resourceful Yaqub “exiles” himself, moving to

São Paulo, where he enrolls in a university, becomes an engineer, and maintains a resentful distance from his family. Meanwhile, the coddled Omar shows little interest in any of the trappings of labor or societal expectations, remaining at home and spending his time philandering with a long line of women from different social and ethnic backgrounds. While Halim holds up Yaqub's progress and eventually disowns the lazy Omar, Zana demonstrates an almost incestuous protectiveness of her younger twin, constantly sabotaging his sexual relationships outside the community to bring him back home under her supervision.

The war between the two brothers takes on allegorical dimensions during the military dictatorship, for financially stable Yaqub's push to modernize the family's home and business align with the regime's economic "miracle" during the 1970s, while the dilettante Omar both represents the decadence of peripheral Manaus and the repression of the opposition (when he is eventually captured and tortured for his friendship with supposed subversives). In other words, the family saga both participates in Brazil's national history and comments upon the toll its conflicts take on individual citizens' lives. In a reflection on the "margins" of history, Hatoum has provided autobiographical details suggesting that the immigrant family details structuring the book are partially inspired by his own family history (Hatoum "Escrever"), yet as a US reviewer put it, "Whether the plot is invented or borrowed from reality, it takes second place to a teeming memory of place and culture. More exactly, to the imagination of memory: blurring the edges in legend while intensifying its emotional resonance" (Eder E40).

My analysis of Moon and Bá's visual and textual interpretation of this historical mediation is structured around by two axial considerations related to the "imagination of memory" cited above. In order to synthesize posthuman allegory and historical discourses relating to the exploration of trauma, I will apply the concept of "prosthetic memory" coined by Alison Landsberg to account for new technologies of memory. The cultural historian's primary interest lies in how these new collective means of representing the past, whether the rapid ascension of cinema

in the twentieth century or the emergence of experiential sites of trauma, are created by individuals who have no direct connection to the past events in question, as well as how this lack of ownership paradoxically helps foment greater empathy across a broader range of constituencies, a framework equally applicable to Moon and Bá's graphic adaptation. Significantly, while Landsberg believes prosthetic memory has been most clearly expressed through science fiction and film (28), her focus lies on sites of memory, a status she extends to Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1980-91). This lack of hierarchical criticism is important, for "graphic novels as material (and, when in cyber form, immaterial) objects operate as mediums or technologies of memory, similar to but also distinct from other memory devices such as photographs, memorials, or museums, which have received far more attention from scholars of memory" (Catalá-Carrasco et al. 5).

Landsberg's transmedial approach points to a second, larger question that is vital for understanding both the evolving sociocultural viability of graphic novels in Latin America and their uneven global production, distribution, and reception. To wit, what is the relationship between graphic novels and other media, including literature, film, and digital creation? Just as Maurício da Silva's economic empire is synergistically built on a network of adaptive relationships and receptions of his various media enterprises, how does a "material" approach to adaptation (Murray 7-8) illuminate the hidden processes behind graphic adaptation? Indeed, rapid consolidation of the field of adaptation studies in the last two decades has turned from literature-to-film paradigms towards complex intertextual networks that acknowledge both transhistorical and transmedial processes. Similar to graphic novels, adaptations have long been marginalized as derivative artifacts, but as Thomas Leitch has argued, not only fiction but all nonfiction forms of knowledge production (science, journalism, history, biography, etc.) are essentially acts of adaptive revision (14-15).

Numerous international comic adaptation case studies have since appeared, and the same year that Moon and Bá's graphic adaptation was published, so too was the first volume explicitly

dedicated to the intersection of the two modes, *Comics and Adaptation*. I contend that while Moon and Bá's existing oeuvre of adaptation must be understood in the marketing and circulation of their literary comic, so too must Hatoum's work be understood as a form of adaptation rather than an "original." And in a final twist in connotation, I will demonstrate how the twin artists' adaptation is graphic in a second sense, attaching a more affective association with individual and national trauma through their hauntingly beautiful visual depiction of Hatoum's dreamlike prose. Contrary to futuristic posthuman takes, the graphic novel establishes its characters' subjugation to the entropic forces of tropical nature that eventually consume most of the family. Thus, if Hatoum's book captures the experience of forgetting, Moon and Bá utilize an array of techniques to involve the reader to become viscerally involved in remembering. If, on the one hand, the artists intend to draw greater attention to Brazilian literature and sequential arts fields, historically peripheral within Latin American paradigms, on the other the duality of Hatoum's novel is also an appropriate analogy for understanding the adaptation of literature to comic books.

Comics, Adaptation, and the Marketplace

A majority of adaptation scholarship on comics has focused on the new global domination of Hollywood superhero films, as the publicity mechanisms of cinema overshadow adaptive relations between comics and literature.[1] Yet while comic books are published in smaller batches, the number of literature-to-comic adaptations in Europe far outweighs heritage films. Similar to trends across Latin America, literary classics have historically served as vital resources in cultural and economic terms, allowing cash strapped publishers and cartoonists to update cultural heritage via texts entering the public domain, while also acting as a metric for illustrating the industry's legitimacy and profitability (Mitaine et al. 6-7). The practice dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, and though the adaptation of classic literature in Brazil dates back to the 1930s (Santos and de Paula 322), its importance to the comics industry became central shortly after World War Two. In

this sense, adaptation has "been an integral part of the history of comics from the very beginning, facilitated, no doubt, by the polysemiotic nature of a medium that draws its capacity to tell stories both from images and words" (Mitaine et al. 7). Indeed, it is important to note that adaptation has been integral to the growth of popular genres incorporating words and images beyond literature and cinema. And as Pointner and Boschenhoff posit, comics are not only closer to literature as a medium than cinema, but also consumers "should treat comics based on literary texts as emulations of their sources rather than cheap illustrations, which unfortunately remains the chief approach of self-appointed guardians of western civilization" (89).

Milton Hatoum's devoted readership has become an economic asset for crossover audiences in visual and stage adaptations in the last ten years, and the relationship has been mutually beneficial. Bestseller *Dois Irmãos*, for example, sold one hundred thousand copies in its first decade (Monteiro), but transpositions to other media have stoked renewed sales of the hypotext. Known for his methodical, dedicated writing process rather than prolific output, Hatoum's critical consecration was seemingly immediate, with his first three novels—*Relato de um Certo Oriente* (1989), *Dois Irmãos* (2000), and *Cinzas do Norte* (2005)—all taking home the honor of Brazil's Jabuti Prize. And as the author's popular cache has increased, several of his novels and short stories have been adapted to different media, both reinforcing his cultural valence and establishing newfound appreciation for Brazil's marginalized northern region (Almeida). Most recently, Sérgio Machado's *O Rio do Desejo* (2023) was inspired by Hatoum's "O Adeus do Comandante," taken from his first collection of short stories, *A Cidade Ilhada* (2009). Machado is now in talks to adapt *Cinzas do Norte* (Fonseca), while director Marcelo Gomes's feature-length adaptation of *Relato de um Certo Oriente* is in pre-production. Scriptwriter Maria Camargo also intended to adapt *Dois Irmãos* to the large screen, but when the project fell through, she developed it instead into a six-part limited series for TV Globo in 2017, with a simultaneous release of the script with commentary the same year serving as marketing tie-in. While Camargo

deviated in a few key moments from Hatoum's novel, the author approved of the transposition, and had even given Camargo complete control over the cinematic end-product. His rationale for not controlling the final product echoes the "total liberty" he gave Moon and Bá for the graphic novel (Al'Hanati; Clark): "Não quis me envolver e nem poderia, porque é uma linguagem diferente da literatura. O roteiro não é literatura, é uma escrita para ser filmada. Mas gostei do roteiro e do resultado, foi um filme que passou na TV" (Medeiros).

It is no accident that reviewers have been captivated by the concept of Moon and Bá visually (re)interpreting Hatoum's epic of twin sibling rivalry, given their own fraternal relationship; this was the planned intent from its inception. Editorial house Companhia das Letras has published all of Hatoum's award-winning books, and its subsidiary, Quadrinhos na Companhia, has emerged as one of the primary platforms for graphic novels to gain traction across Brazil, from mass cultural tomes to adapted canonical biographies, including Jon Lee Anderson's *Che: Uma vida revolucionária* (2023). While the relatively low cost of production means that comic adaptations often originate via an artist's personal choice (Mitaine 8), the sibling cartoonists' involvement was first and foremost a marketing ploy, for Hatoum's editor took advantage of a propitious meeting between Hatoum and the brothers at the 2009 Paraty International Literary Festival (FLIP) to propose the twin-on-twin project as publishing novelty (Al'Hanati; Betancourt). Moon and Bá initially rejected the offer, believing Hatoum's dense lyricism would not effectively distill into a comic format, yet the challenge that this transposition posed would eventually cause them to reconsider the offer. Additionally, after several projects in the U.S. had seen them provide separate illustration services, the book allowed them to collaborate together again (Hennum).

According to Jasmin Wrobel, in addition to serving as sites of resistance during the postwar military dictatorships dominating the continent, Brazilian comics have more recently begun to address the region's cultural heritage, violence, and gender debates (108). Wrobel notes that a parallel tendency has involved

graphic adaptations of canonic literature and biographies of canonical figures (122 n. 1); Anderson's famous work on Che Guevara above is only one of many published by Quadrinhos na Companhia. Yet while the protagonist of Moon and Bá's *Daytripper*, Brás de Oliva Domingos, and his various manners of death at the end of each chapter clearly find inspiration in Machado de Assis' *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880), Wrobel criticizes their decision to adopt a white middle-class perspective instead of utilizing ethnicity in more socially engaged ways. Because migrant ethnicity and alterity are constantly at odds with hegemonic Brazilian culture in Hatoum's novel, the visual storytellers' status outside the Lebanese community adds an additional layer to the process of intended faithfulness to the source. In fact, I would suggest the question of identity (racial, class, or otherwise) must be further unpacked within the framework of "classic literature," for the artists had previously graphically adapted Machado's novella *O alienista* in 2008 with the purpose of attracting crossover readership (Prado). To provide authenticity to Hatoum's project, therefore, the Paulistano brothers performed research, visited Manaus for an extended period to learn about its people and to examine its architecture, and also corresponded with Hatoum, who sent them pictures of his family when taking issue with some of their depictions of Zana (Betancourt; Prado).

The twin cartoonists' preexisting adaptive incursions into Machado de Assis are not entirely out of place in the present discussion, for just as comics/adaptations are not merely derivative, Hatoum's "original" novel was not created in a vacuum. Multiple Anglophone reviewers interpret the book as a secularized version of the Cain and Abel (Eder). But as Hatoum has revealed, he took a tale heard while studying comparative literature in Paris and refracted it through Machado de Assis' final novel: "Ouvi em Paris uma história incrível de irmãos marroquinos. Tinha na cabeça *Esau e Jacó* (1904), de Machado de Assis. E na minha família havia irmãos rivais. O mito é o pretexto da literatura, que deve se transformar num relato realista. Levei dez anos para publicar de novo" (Monteiro). While beyond the scope of this

article, consideration of Machado's novel as a central intertext helps understand both the plot and structure of *Dois Irmãos*. At the same time, Hatoum's focus on the Amazon region provides a voice to a region historically ignored, while his focus upon Arab immigrant communities also plays into the increasing popular interest in marginalized ethnic discourses.

As their previous work adapting "highbrow" or classical cultural texts suggests, the two cartoonists are aware of the expectations that come with engaging the collective legacy of canonical texts, whether that is for economic or pedagogical reasons:

É um risco: quem é muito fã de um original deve enxergar a adaptação também como algo original. Pensando ao contrário, em quem nunca ouviu falar e descobre *Dois irmãos* por quadrinho, se quiser depois pode ler o livro, ou outra coisa do Milton. Queremos mostrar que o interessante é conhecer o trabalho do Milton e o nosso. E não negamos a preocupação em fazer quadrinhos para quem não lê quadrinhos. Tem umas adaptações incríveis, e tem outras que são só para constar. Acho que o Bá e eu temos esse pensamento excessivo de como transformar a adaptação numa boa história em quadrinhos. (Prado)

The brothers claim their purpose was fidelity to Hatoum's novel. The concept of faithfulness to a perceived originary source is problematic at best and has become a trope in contemporary adaptation scholarship critical of early practitioners. As Brazilianist Robert Stam has famously noted, "Terms like 'infidelity,' 'betrayal,' 'deformation,' 'violation,' 'bastardization,' 'vulgarization,' and 'desecration' proliferate... Too often, adaptation discourse subtly reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literature to film" (3-4). The situation changes, however, when such valuations emerge from the producer rather than the critic. Another much-debated early methodology in the field involves medium-specificity, which originally stipulated that fidelity is impossible because of the separate languages and conventions that govern literature and cinema. Emblematic of this approach is Seymour Chatman's "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)"

(1980). As the discipline of adaptation studies evolves in line with expanding media options and possibilities for crossover, so too has the idea of how and where media converge. As a corollary to Chatman's approach, Frank Pointner and Sandra Eva Boschenoff's "Classics Emulated: Comic Adaptations of Literary Texts" (2010) details the capabilities of graphic novels that can exceed prose alone, and their typology will in turn structure our entry into the comic version of *Dois Irmãos* before the penultimate section examines the symbolic portrayal of Brazil's dictatorship within the context of prosthetic memory.

Spatial and Discursive Parallels

Adaptation across media always entails particular challenges related to language, yet the disembodied style of Hatoum's novel posed a particular problem for Moon and Bá, who would need to adapt the unfixed nature of prose into realist visual languages requiring concrete location and character representations. Not only does the novel lyricism seamlessly transition between past and present through flashbacks, but it only becomes clear in the third chapter who the narrator is. Nael, the daughter of the family made Domingas, narrates past events in the third person (based on conversations with Halim before his death that are documented in the novel), but as he grows up gradually expresses his own memories in the first person. As the visual storytellers explained,

The way that the story is narrated [in the book], you don't always know where the characters are when things are happening or...there are a lot of things that were told to the narrator, so we had to choose: were we going to show the things they're talking about? Are we going to show someone talking to the narrator? Are we going to show the narrator? Whenever we wanted to show the narrator: is he going to be in the scene? He's [narrating] something that he saw, he's going to be in the scene or he's going to be talking about it. All these visual decisions were one of the hardest parts of the work that was not in the book (Hennum).

Curiously, Nael is never directly informed of his paternity by his mother, but he infers it is either the philanderer Omar, who is revealed to have raped Domingas and dismissed her ever since, or Yaqub, whose socioeconomic success and distance lead to idealization by the family, including Nael and his mother, who later confesses her love for him. In this sense, the boy is both insider and outsider within the family circle, and his tale is equally private and prosthetic (he has not lived the memories involving the brothers' adolescence).

Aspiring to reproduce the novel as closely as possible, Moon and Bá's "transcodification" of the book focuses on the visual by minimizing interpretation of its discourse (Santos and de Paula 326). This is to say that exposition and dialogue are lifted verbatim from Hatoum's prose, although the artists streamline entire paragraphs down to key excerpts. Despite the discrepancy in word count, however, there is not as large a distinction in each medium's length as might be expected; Hatoum's first edition runs two hundred and sixty-six pages, whereas the



Figure 1. Nael's mother refuses to reveal the identity of Nael's father, but his status as both employee and family member mark his hybrid status and access to family secrets.

graphic version comes in around two hundred and forty. Perhaps in honor of the novel's fluid treatment of time and memory, the comic's pages are unnumbered, meaning that structure is constructed purely through visual referents.

If outdated critical narratives have presumed that graphic adaptations surgically gut their source texts of significant content, Pointner and Boschenoff instead foreground the advantages that comics' visual dimension enables in terms of constructing spatial relationships and the immediacy of emotion (89-90), two issues that will guide my subsequent reading of the adaptation. The duo notes a double standard; while film and cinema are increasingly evaluated on separate terms, "[l]iterature based comic books, on the other hand, are generally judged with regard to the faithfulness of their rendering of 'original' material, and, with this as the basis for their evaluation, the genre cannot help but fall short" (88). The additional visual components in comics, like painting and photography, both represents space and influences the viewer's perception of that setting along with the characters who inhabit such spaces. In relation to ethnic minority groups, via the "depiction of phenotypical identities comics panels may be much more suggestive, abstracting from the appearance of real-life characters. Consequently, ethnic and

cultural stereotyping—not necessarily a bad thing—is inherent in the system of comics" (92) and can enhance the sensation of alienation depicted by characters or otherness perceived by readers.

The different ways the two media approach in-group identity (that of Lebanese immigrants in Hatoum's hometown) is instructive, and it begins paratextually with the messaging that each book cover communicates. While subsequent editions of Hatoum's novel have emphasized abstract designs (prior to the tie-in edition after Globo's limited series hit televisions), the original front cover is designed to evoke the tension between human civilization and human nature circumscribed by their environment. The solid, leafy green covering the bottom half of the cover image fades into the Rio Negro, out of which emerges an archival (circa 1900) black and white photograph of Manaus' bustling riverside market. In other words, a literal establishing shot. Beyond the grainy quality of the image, its historicity is instantly recognizable both from the type of boats appearing in the foreground to the dress of citizens who walk its promenade in the background. At the same time, while not necessarily exoticizing, the architecture in the image acts to mark the space as other in relation to the São Paulo-Rio cultural axis.

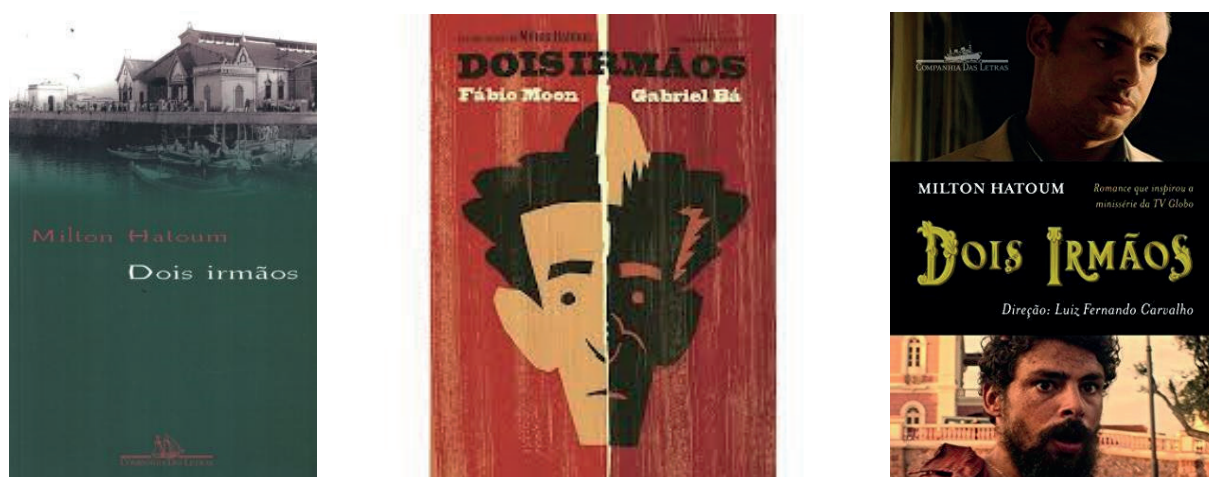


Figure 2. The first edition cover of *Dois Irmãos*, the graphic novel's dust jacket, and the updated edition's cover featuring actors from the Globo television series.

By contrast, Moon and Bá's cover art foregrounds characterization by embodying the rift between Yaqub and Omar. The vibrant orange and red background is emphatically split in half via a line resembling a lightning bolt, which also splits the brothers' countenance into two. Yaqub appears in dark relief, his cheek marked by a red scar. At once a symbol of doubling and alterity, the cover markets the disharmony through which national historical events are both reflected and filtered. Of course, its purpose is distinct, for readers familiar with the novel will already know the plot, while the stark design contrasts act to guide for first-time buyers.

Significantly, the importance of setting via establishing shots is expanded once readers open the book in a way that highlights comics' prowess in terms of spatial embodiment. The title page reproduces a drawn version of the same riverfront market appearing on novel's first edition cover, but situates the bustling space in relationship to a greater cross-section of the city's core to create a more embodied sense of space, yet it is noteworthy trees tower above buildings or circumscribe street layouts, as the tension between human development and nature's chaos is constantly at play. (The title page in fact is a reproduction of a scene in Chapter Five when Yaqub tours the city Nael in one of the few moments of emotional vulnerability.) And to further relate the scene to the larger network of locations and events dotting the novel, an aerial

map of the Manaus colonial center's grid system frames the title in the upper quadrant.

In addition to maintaining Hatoum's prose, Moon and Bá also preserve the book's structure. The novel consists of twelve chapters preceded by an unlabeled, two-page preface that establishes the tragic arc of the siblings' alienation from the outset. Moon and Bá divide their adaptation into a preface and eleven chapters followed by an epilogue, each of which narrates the events corresponding to Hatoum's corollary chapters. Yet, the visual storytellers greatly expand on the preface's textual function to perform something that Pointner and Boschenoff label "atmospheric setting," in which "the subject's own associations, whether negative or positive, are reflected by the space surrounding him or her" (91), a practice that is typically established between dichotomies of dark and light, order and chaos, etc.

This is particularly visible in the graphic adaptation's preface, where the city's duplicitous nature reflects (or rather, determines) the brothers' jealousy. Whereas the cover's clash of bright, amber colors easily conjures up anger or discomfort, the book is, unexpectedly, entirely chiaroscuro. As the authors have noted in multiple interviews, the binaric choice of black and white was designed to increase categorical contrasts between characters and their setting while minimizing distractions for the reader (Clark). By way of example, Hatoum's book begins with descriptions of space: "Zana teve de deixar

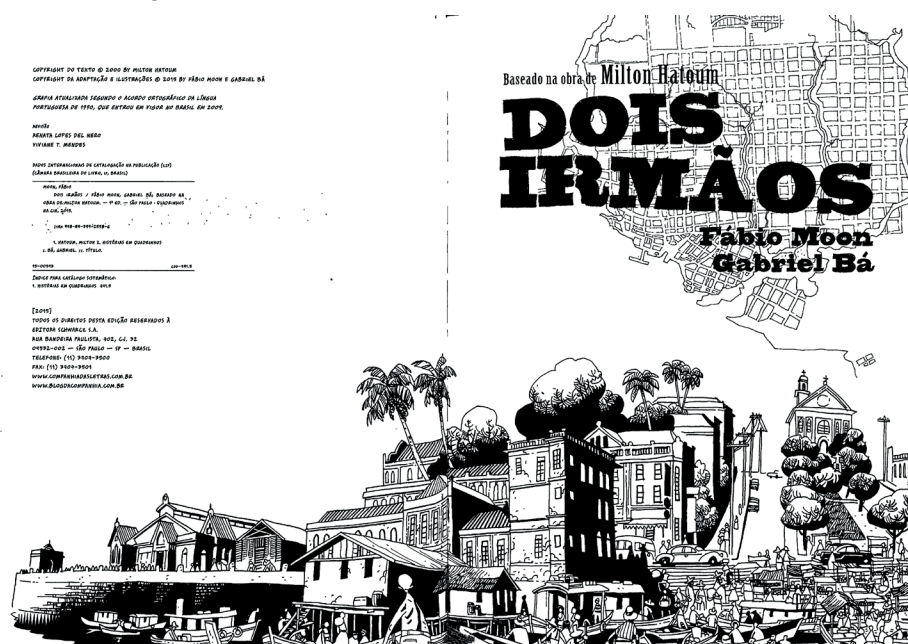


Figure 3. The graphic novel's title page evokes the book's setting image and expands upon its spatial range to involve the surround neighborhood.

tudo: o bairro portuário de Manaus, a rua em declive sombreada por mangueira centenárias, o lugar que para ela era quase tão vital quanto a Biblos [no Líbano] de sua infância" (11). And while the comic begins with the same sentence spread across a single panel that takes up more than half a page, these words here occur only after four pages of atmospheric setting via what appear to be stills of filmic establishing shots of various locations in the city, all of which promote an absence of human subjects, an emptiness that hints at the tropical city's decadence that becomes full-on dissolution in time with the crumbling of familial and national bonds during the dictatorship (Sava). The dark sky and clouds framing the opening shot of the river ambiguously evoke either dusk or dawn, though the gradual transition to white in subsequent panels reveals that it is the latter. By the second page, the camera eye shifts from a partial shot of river boat deck moored against the market's landing before heading inland to highlight the profiles of several colonial architectural landmarks. The emptiness of these spaces is in turn accentuated by the wild foliage of flora that frames buildings and fills entire panels on its own, characters in their own right.



Figure 4. The second page of the comic begins a visual tour of the city where concrete and nature are constantly in tension.

The atmospheric scene setting reaches its apex on the last page of the preface. In the final paragraph of Hatoum's original prose, an (as yet) unidentified Nael claims not to have seen Zana's death, but shortly beforehand heard her ask in Arabic while in the hospital whether her children had finally reconciled ("Meus filhos já fizeram as pazes?"). The answer is silence: "Ninguém respondeu. Então o rosto quase sem rugas de Zana desvaneceu; ela ainda virou a cabeça para o lado, à procura da única janelinha na parede cinzenta, onde se apagava um pedaço do céu crepuscular" (12).

Compare this to the sequential version's final panel communicating Zana's heartache, a borderless splash that fills the entire page and includes only the words "Ninguém respondeu." Instead of showing a hospital room, the artists again assert the subjugation of human spirit by the jungle's incessant reconquest of human spaces. Zana is shown collapsed in the backyard of the renovated house that Yaqub's money has financed, her small figure dwarfed by the shrubs and trees threatening to swallow up the house. The silence is thus verbal and visceral, her solitude and despair presaging the bitter loneliness each brother maintains inside.



Figure 5. The graphic adaptation situates Zana's the painful silence to Zana's plea for her sons' reconciliation within the lush garden of her yard, her isolation and despair established through her small size relative to the encroaching entropy of nature.

Prosthetic Memory and Graphic History

In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Alison Landsberg considers a different connotation of space, positing that cultural commodification is not limited merely to the dangers associated with hegemonic ideologies. She therefore coins the term “prosthetic memory” to theorize “the production and dissemination of memories that have no direct connection to a person’s lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity” (20). While these memories are thus not organic, highlighting their artificiality additionally delineates the interchangeability that underlies the commodified form through which they are communicated. The production and acceptance of memories that we have not personally experienced is not a new phenomenon, but what distinguishes this new modality is its transmission by mass media technologies starting in the twentieth century. Landsberg traces this dissemination via experiential forms of mass-media, starting with the rise of cinema up through the appearance of “serious” comics engaging with history and experiential museum exhibits at the turn of the twenty-first century dedicated to traumatic collective events (whether local or international). For her purposes, “Through such [transferential] spaces people may gain access to a range of processual, sensually immersed knowledge that would be difficult to acquire by purely cognitive means” (113).

Of course, this adaptation of the past into accessible formats is never neutral, and Landsberg is interested in how memory is instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices, noting the role of mass culture in these memory projects has had unintended consequences. As one caveat, she describes how they complicate the distinction between memory (i.e., internal/private) and history (i.e., collective/transhistorical), which can be misappropriated in the wrong hands (19). Furthermore, these transmission projects have been largely undertaken with the aim of preserving a group’s memory in the face of historical dislocations and/or silencing. Yet the turn to mass culture has paradoxically made

what was once considered a foundational part of in-group identity available to a much broader public. In this process, memories have ceased to belong exclusively to a particular group and instead have become part of a common public domain (11). While these transferential spaces may rob the memory of its specific subjectivity, it is also fundamentally democratic in that it introduces images and narratives widely to different constituencies, communities, classes, and cultures, providing the possibility to produce a pedagogical form of empathy and social responsibility (21). In their best form, Landsberg maintains, invented political alliances can transcend race, class, and gender.

The advantage of comics is that they blur the line between ingrained assumptions of highbrow and “popular” culture in the process of breaking down the distinction between truth and memory, making complex topics just as immediately accessible as they do escapist adventures. The immediacy and visceral nature of the experience help transmit what once might have been firsthand accounts as forms of what has more recently been labeled post-memory. Indeed, Nael’s hybrid account of personal and collective alterity in an immigrant community already intertwines experienced and post-memory, and this shift in experiential medium is only further enhanced by the shift in authorship to mainstream artists whose work becomes globally accessible via its immediate translation into French and English followed by a multinational media tour. It is telling that one reviewer meant as a particular form of praise the observation that Moon and Bá’s narrative is designed with such beauty that it somehow feels that the cartoonists have shared their own autobiographical referents, rather than Hatoum’s (Jones).

Chapter One details Yaqub’s return from Lebanon after World War Two ends. Whereas the book lingers on his culture shock and unawareness of social norms to express his outsider status (much to his father’s chagrin, he nonchalantly urinates on a public street), the sequential adaptation jettisons these details to strengthen his later symbolic association with the new, militarized Brazil. The first encounter between the two brothers takes place inside

the family home. Omar's performative behavior is on display as he enters the party, but after hugging and kissing various family members, he and Yaqub maintain a silent distance on either side of their father. This visual symmetry is also metaphorical, as each son has inherited one side of the patriarch's traits: Omar his father's passionate sexual exuberance and Yaqub his ambition. The bottom panel zooms into a medium shot that takes advantage of the chiaroscuro aesthetic to contrast the siblings' clothes and countenance. Their protracted stare, which continues for two more panels on the following page, provides an ironic dimension to their father's speech bubble entering from outside the panel: "Tudo melhora depois de uma Guerra." While ostensibly referencing Brazil's involvement in the war, these words inadvertently prophecy the internal war that is to entangle the entire family.

Shortly thereafter, the comic gives verbal confirmation of their oppositional pulls in captions, for "[o]s gêmeos eram dois opostos, habitando o mesmo corpo e dormindo sob o mesmo teto. Mas isso estava prestes a mudar." During their final year of high school in 1949, Omar is expelled from school for assaulting his math teacher and is taken under the wing of Laval, a countercultural French teacher and poet. Yaqub, by contrast, requests a military uniform for his birthday and is shown marching in Manaus' parade to celebrate Brazil's Day of Independence, both associations that take on importance when the dictatorship leads to the occupation of the city. Yaqub soon moves to São Paulo, where he pursues a career in engineering and becomes financially successful. He also, we later learn, clandestinely marries the woman he and his brother first fought over, which further antagonizes Omar, who projects his feelings for



Figure 6. The sharp contrast in colors marks the irony of their father's statement when the brothers' first see each other since Yaqub was sent into exile in Lebanon.

her onto a series of short-lived romances with women whose ethnicity and lower-class status Zana does not welcome. When Yaqub visits Manaus in Chapter Five, he takes Nael on a tour of his memories of childhood, visiting residents of the city's floating city homes built on stilts over the river, an important location given that Omar will soon abandon his home and hide out with a mistress in the district until Nael is able to find him. After such visits, he also begins sending money for the house to be remodeled and to revive Halim's once-flourishing business. As such, the older brother attempts to bring models of development to the peripheral Amazonian city in a way that anticipates the military regime's focus upon constructing infrastructure in the region, particularly its creation of a special economic zone in 1967.

In Chapter Seven, Omar's relationship with the poet Laval takes a turn after several years when the mentor becomes involved in resistance

against the dictatorship. Hatoum mentions his capture in passing, but Moon and Bá make the violence far more visceral and graphic. A box showing Laval fleeing from soldiers frames two subsequent events. First, an embedded panel shows military police mercilessly beating an unshown individual, with blood flying through the air. Underneath that, the artists subtly force readers to identify with the subversive by adopting his point of view from inside a military van as the soldiers prepare to slam the trunk shut, accompanied by a caption revealing his confirmed death two days later. This shift from an omnipotent focal point to Laval's perspective—the only time this happens in the text—is a subtle, yet clever means of encouraging identification. The process is mirrored interdiegetically as well. When Nael discovers a collection of poems Omar has dedicated to the memory of Laval, the narrator for the first time is able to imagine a human side to the brother he has long detested.



Figure 7. The comic powerfully adopts the perspective of Omar's revolutionary mentor as he is captured and executed.

Shortly thereafter, when Nael witnesses the military's occupation of the city, the view cuts from a long line of trucks filled with soldiers to a close-up of their stockpile of weapons, symbols of repressive power. Yet Nael's perspective then evokes the chaos of the soldiers' violence through nature again, jumping to close-ups of frightened birds and bloodied protestors' faces before Nael's own horrified expression leads him to black out. When Yaqub visits the house as Nael, he is unperturbed by the military vehicles. Hatoum has Yaqub explain that he was once a soldier—a conversation the comic glosses over—but the implicit association is once again that the elder brother represents values sympathetic to the dictatorship. Just as Omar's veneration of Laval softens Nael's perception of him, this moment in the city creates the first crack in Nael's image of his other potential father, and he becomes increasingly neutral towards each sibling. When Yaqub returns again with plans for the construction of a modern building on the site of their property, Omar brutally assaults him and destroys the plans, for his older brother had secretly cut him out of negotiations to create a familial construction company as a quiet act of vengeance. After the attack, Omar is quickly apprehended by military police in a central park, beaten, interrogated, and imprisoned for two and a half years, ostensibly for his connections to Laval, but, in the context of the narrative, also in retribution for his brawl against a proponent of the state. While Yaqub increasingly disappears from the narrative, the images of Omar's violent arrest again invite empathy with an ambiguous character associated with political resistance, a subtle hint about the visual storytellers' politics in the comic.

Two final scenes illustrate the more graphic relationship between memory and space that the comic impressively establishes. The first involves the military's demolition of the floating city on the banks of the river in the eighth chapter. The site is of course an archive of family memories, but it is also emblematic of old Manaus, which is destroyed in the process of its occupation. This two-page scene, witnessed by Halim, appears to quicken the patriarch's death alone in his sitting room, which visually echoes Zana's own demise in the prologue. Here Moon and Bá begin to

destroy the various spatial memories the graphic adaptation has artfully constructed. Halim's loss is externalized via an expansive shot of the black river reclaiming wood fragments that exaggerates the width of the channel so that it stretches into the horizon. The neighborhood, so vital for Halim's identity, becomes a collective metonymy for the nation's rejection of its past in the push for modernization, of its previous connection to nature.



Figure 8. The destruction of the floating city becomes a metonymy for the concomitant loss of old Brazil in the push towards modernization

The final scene of both novel and comic adaptation expands on this theme through Nael's initial hesitant attempts to begin writing his memoirs, constructing an account of the family's past. Now living alone on the property after his mother's death, Nael has largely cut ties with any remaining family members.

The night of Omar's release from prison, the city—appropriately—is beset by a particularly violent storm. In Hatoum's words, "Olhava com assombro e tristeza a cidade que se mutilava e crescia ao mesmo tempo, fastada de porto e do rio, irreconciliável som o seu passado... Desde a partida de Zana eu havia deixado ao furor do sol e da chuva o pouco que restara da árvores e trepadeiras. Zelar por essa natureza significava uma submissão ao passado, a um tempo que morria dentro de mim" (264-5). Nael notes how the grizzled Omar has aged when he enters the property in the darkness through a broken section of fencing. It is the final time the narrator sees him. Nael waits for Omar to say something that will approach an apology, as the comic caption notes on the penultimate page: "Uma palavra bastava, uma só. O perdão." Skipping Hatoum's final paragraph, the last page of the comic is "silent", providing a close-up of Omar's hardened eyes before he slowly moves backward and exits through the same gap in the dilapidated fence through which he entered, all without a single word. The progression of the panels from Nael's perspective leads the reader to imagine Omar's slow retreat in the gutters between the boxes. Dialoguing with the dawn-setting of the prologue, in the darkness of the epilogue's last panel the inexorable force of nature again frames an empty lot abandoned to a wilderness of sprouting trees—a literal post-human vacuum. Like his mother and father, Omar ends up alone, but his departure marks a finality in terms of his decision to cut ties with the house and its memories. In the final act of symbolism, it is not important whether Nael is Omar's or Yaqub's son. He is the next generation of Brazilians, thus the lack of resolution to the war's end points to the disjuncture between the regime, the resistance, and the amnesiac nation it produced during the "years of lead."

Conclusion

The categorical nature of Omar and Yaqub's war serves as a convenient metaphor for questions of fidelity in remediation or transcodification practices, as media are both in contact and in conflict. This is not to say that hypertext and hypertext are diametrically opposed, but

rather that the same tensions take on greater significance under new conditions of production and politics of reception. Henry Jenkins labels the increasing difficulty of confining any work to a single medium "convergence culture," and this is particularly important for understanding how comic scholarship can enhance the field of adaptation studies. In this sense, contemporary adaptation is less about transposing a story or its characters from one medium to another but instead follows "a practice in which the work seems to migrate in order to adapt and survive within changing production and reception contexts" (Mitaine et al. 22). In the case of Moon and Bá's remediation of a modern classic, the duo's transnational and digital presence grows networks of peripheral national circulation into a globalized context, expanding upon the process that Hatoum's novel began in terms of inserting the Amazonian region into larger national sociocultural discourses.

The openness of prosthetic memory models to new technologies that globalize experiences of history has made it a particularly fertile reference point for scholars of comics. Edward King suggests two main reactions to prosthetic memory, reterritorialization and deterritorialization, both of which influence marketing strategies within Latin America's fledgling comic industry. As a prime example, King notes how Moon and Bá use social media (and Reddit discussions) to include fans as participants through interactive interviews and commentary on the progress of their ongoing projects (225). Precisely because comics already force engagement, since readers must make connections across or within the panels to create meaning, King believes it is no accident that "graphic novels have become the most visible platform on which to stage these tensions between reaffirming the individual and national ownership of memory and the dissolution of the individual in the ever-more visible global networks of memory discourses" (226).

But there is an additional development within the convergence of media through new technologies such that comics and other experiential sites, ranging from festivals and art exhibits to street art and subway graffiti, provide evidence of the *collective* forms of circulation

that Latin American visual culture is increasingly experiencing in addition to paper-based formats (Scorer 1). The transnational dimension of comics across the region has traditionally been determined by the importation of US genres and traditions, although examples like Moon and Bá's demonstrate the increasing agency of Inter-American production in both critical and popular terms. By straddling the line between history and speculative fiction, the cartoonists also make visible valuable Brazilian contributions to larger Latin American generic tendencies involving both memory discourses and the posthuman.

Endnotes

[1] In addition to numerous articles, recent monographs and collections include Grant and Scott Henderson's *Comics and Pop Culture* (2019), Liam Burke's *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* (2015), and Matthew McEniry et al.'s *Marvel Comics into Film* (2016).

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Author's Biography

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Beyond Scarcity and Hardship: Historical and Contemporary Reflections on Cuban Comics

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Abstract

*This article aims to show the special status of Cuban comics within the Americas. As the article argues, the special status derives primarily from Cuba's particular political situation – the revolution of 1959 and its political, social, economic, and cultural repercussions being perhaps the most decisive factor – as well as from the ways in which cartoonists, artists, and writers have handled these repercussions. This article begins by tracing this tradition and history from the republican period to the revolution and its aftermath through the *Período Especial* and to the present. The authors then take stock of contemporary Cuban comics and their culture, which are more dynamic than they may seem at first glance and which belie attempts to reduce them to emanations of scarcity, hardship, political uniformity, and cultural conformism.*

Keywords: pre- and post-revolutionary comics, anti-capitalist style, choteo, parody, satire, internationalization, race and diversity

1. Beyond Scarcity and Hardship: Introduction

Cuban comics constitute somewhat of a special case on a continent whose history and comics production are both highly diverse and increasingly interconnected. [1] As we aim to show in this article, this special status derives mainly from Cuba's particular political situation – the revolution of 1959 and its political, social, economic, and cultural repercussions being perhaps the most decisive factor – as well as from the ways in which cartoonists, artists, and writers have handled these repercussions. Our inquiry is grounded in the observation of an ongoing overlap of material hardship with sustained creativity. Cuban graphic artist Aristides Estebán Hernández Guerrero (Ares), in an interview with John A. Lent conducted in 1991, addressed the dire economic situation in the *Período Especial* after the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, when publication was curtailed by shortages of paper and other

materials needed for drawing and printing: “We are facing serious difficulties related with the publication deficit. This is becoming a limitation for the cartoonist who creates to see his work published,” Ares explained, but “we must not confuse difficulties with crises since Cuban humor is getting stronger every day” (Lent, “Cuban Cartoonists” 87). Reflecting on these difficulties at the end of the decade, the artist Tomás Rodríguez Zayas—Tomy—expressed a related sentiment: economic and material scarcity “forced us to invent, to use other materials. And, I think far from hurting graphic art, it enriched us, because a lot of cartoonists had to deal with other materials” (87-88). What we gather from these statements is a two-tiered phenomenon that shapes our argument: First, rather than resigning themselves to the limitations imposed through prolonged periods of scarcity and economic crisis, Cuban cartoonists and graphic artists historically decided to “look [...] for solutions, which came in ingenious ways of continuing to work, including improvising materials and finding new outlets” (87), and they

still do so to the present day. [2] Second, rather than framing the history and present of Cuban comics as a narrative of lack and limitation, we tell a more vibrant story of making comics matter.

English-language scholarship on Latin American comics frequently focuses on graphic narratives from Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, while Cuban comics sometimes get short shrift. John Lent's edited volume *Cartooning in Latin America* (2005) is an exception, as it devotes one full chapter to "Cuban Political, Social Commentary Cartoons" (by John Lent), a second to parallels between Cuban comics and animated cartoons (by Dario Mogno), and a third to Santiago "Chago" Armada's *Salomón* (by Caridad Blanco de la Cruz). In more recent volumes, Cuban comics receive a single chapter – as in Fernández L'Hoeste and Poblete's *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics* (2009) and Catalá Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer's *Comics & Memory on Latin America* (2017) – or are addressed in the introductory chapter – as in Fernández, Gandolfo, and Turnes' *Burning Down the House: Latin American Comics in the 21st Century* (2023). Yet Cuban comics warrant further investigation. Lent maintains: "Unlike the rest of the Caribbean, Cuba had a strong comic art tradition, full of humor periodicals, comic strips, political cartoons, and some animation," and "[m]uch of this continued during the Revolution's formative years" ("Cuban Cartoonists" 82). [3] Post-revolutionary Cuban comics, Jorge L. Catalá Carrasco agrees, have "a rich cultural history" ("From Suspicion" 139).

We begin this article by tracing this tradition and history from the republican period to the revolution and its aftermath through the *Período Especial* and to the present. We then take stock of contemporary Cuban comics and their culture, which are more dynamic than they may seem at first glance and which belie attempts to reduce them to emanations of scarcity, hardship, political uniformity, and cultural conformism.

2. Cuban Comics: Historical Perspectives

Comics in Latin America, unlike in the United States and Europe, are not an "industry"; their production remains small-scale, precarious,

and marginal to the broader realm of arts and literature. [4] While certainly a special case given its socialist history of the past six decades, Cuba is no exception. Nonetheless, as James Scorer writes, comics in the region, which in large countries such as Argentina and Mexico thrived during the field's so-called "Golden Age" (1940s-1960s) but faced subsequent challenges related to market-driven globalization, "have become a key site for exploring and contesting transnational exchanges, and also for developing dialogues between state-driven narratives of identities, histories and traditions" and international comics communities (Scorer 3-5). [5] While sequential art has a long tradition in the Spanish-speaking world (cf. Barrero), the flooding of Latin American print markets in the first half of the twentieth century by syndicated strips from the United States predated the emergence of locally themed characters and forms. Famously an economic and political neo-colony of its northern neighbor, Cuba commercialized North American comics in the pages of its mainstream media – *El País*, *Diario de la Marina*, *El Mundo*, *El Herald de Cuba*, and others. From 1945 onward, comic books circulated widely in Spanish translation via Latin American publishing houses such as the *Novaro* in Mexico (Blanco de la Cruz, "Cuadros" 32).

Caricature and comics that sought to develop home-grown sensibilities were not absent from the republican neocolonial era. The popular magazine *Bohemia* published Pedro Valer's *Aventuras de Pepito y Rocamora* from 1915 to 1922, and strips featuring Black Cuban characters, Horacio Rodríguez's *Bola de Nieve*, *Mango Macho y Cascarita* (in *Carteles*) and Rafael Fornés' *José Dolores* (in the *Revista Rosa* supplement of *El Avance*), appeared in the 1930s (Catalá Carrasco, "From Suspicion" 142). [6] In 1944, the communist *Juventud socialista* began the clandestine bi-weekly magazine, *Mella*, which eleven years later presented the iconic graphic character of the struggle against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, *Pucho*, created by Virgilio Martínez Gainza and Marcos Behmeras; and a guerrilla fighter named Santiago Armada Chago, from the hills of the Sierra Maestra in Eastern Cuba, developed the figure of *Julito 26*, a skinny, bearded irregular soldier

with a black beret named after Fidel Castro's insurgent movement, within whose ranks his stories were widely read, in the mimeographed pages of *El Cubano Libre* founded by Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The character continued appearing in the early revolutionary years in the magazine *Revolución* (Contreras 21-22). *Mella*, which reached a circulation of about 20,000 and published some eighty issues, was distributed in bundles throughout the island, camouflaged with North American figurines, prior to being legalized by the revolutionary government after 1959 (Martínez Gaínza, qtd. in Mogno, "Dibujando" 183). [7] This period saw the emergence of many authors considered classics of comics today, such as René de la Nuez, Silvio Fontanillas, Rafael Fornés Collado, Plácido Fuentes, Niko Lürsen, Antonio Prohías, Carlos Robreño, Domingo García Terminel, and Carlos Vidal (Mogno, "La historieta" 7-11), who depicted everyday life through humor peppered with political satire. Jorge Catalá Carrasco notes that the iconic revolutionary artists Martínez Gainza and Behemarras, who in addition to *Pucho* authored *Luis y sus amigos*, a reflection on revolutionary consciousness, and who would produce some of the best satirical humor in the early stages of the revolution, were influenced by *Mad Magazine* – a reminder that the aesthetics of comics produced in the U.S. exercised an influence even among the staunchest proponents of anti-Americanism (Catalá Carasco, "From Suspicion" 149). Martínez Gainza and Behemarras were also the creators of *John Despiste investigador senatorial*, which mocked U.S. intelligence against communism, *¿Como se fabrica un anticomunista?* on anticommunist educational propaganda among children, and radical parodies of *Superman* (*Supertiñosa*), *Mandrake the Magician*, and *Dick Tracy* (Ibid.).

Another character, *Salomón*, imagined by Chago in the early 1960s and less overtly propagandistic than *Julito 26*, represents a tradition known as "gnosis humor," which, according to Caridad Blanco de la Cruz, perhaps Cuba's most rigorous comics scholar,

was expressed conceptually and formally in the set of situations of a character (neither a hero nor an anti-hero) employing a new

type of humor, demolisher of banality, of the epidermal; a humor in search of depth representing a genuine avant-garde. Salomón is a paradigmatic figure of Cuban graphic humor and comics, with the philosophical, existential, and above all humanistic weight they carry, a character who fought against the currents and (was the first to) transcend the usual stereotypes imposed by the heritage of North American comics. (Blanco de la Cruz, "Salomón" 109)

Irreverent and experimental, fruit of a period of cultural effervescence and contemporaneous with Chago's collaboration with *El Pitirre*, a humor supplement of the newspaper *La Calle*, founded in 1960, in which young artists broke with formal and conceptual conventions, *Salomón* was, according to Blanco de la Cruz ("Salomón" 110), a kind of essay on comics as an art in which doubt, irony, introspection, and imagination prevail over didacticism – a perspective which, strained in subsequent decades, was revisited by the public during a retrospective of Chago's art in 2000, the dawn of a "renaissance" of the Cuban comic genre after four decades of emergent and sometimes stifled revolutionary culture. At a colloquium on comics held in Havana in 2016, artists and writers called on the government to catalogue, preserve, and disseminate sequential art and foster its full-scale recognition by cultural and educational institutions (Contreras 16).

In the contemporary surge of Cuban art, a conscious collective effort is underway not only to adjust to changes in the times but to critically evaluate the earliest years of the revolution, during which *El Pitirre* (1950-1961) symbolized the emergence of an anti-capitalist style of caricature that directly addressed campaigns to overcome underdevelopment, illiteracy, and mimetic cultural production. [8] The artists involved in the project aimed not only to foster support for the new authorities but to transform graphic art itself (Negrín, "El Pitirre (1)" 194-95), and to take root in popular culture during a period of social upheaval and governmental ambivalence toward criticism emanating from the cultural vanguards. The first issue of the

popular two decades-old graphic magazine *Zig-Zag*, published in 1959, featured a note by Fidel Castro congratulating its staff for its cleverness in evading censorship under the tyranny of the Batista regime. Shortly thereafter, the publication drew negative attention for portraying the *Comandante* surrounded by *bombines*, or archetypical opportunistic minions (209). Some humorists accustomed to aiming tropes of *choteo* (irreverent kidding) at the political establishment in satirical jibes were unprepared for the compulsion of revolutionary unity in the face of the threat of annihilation by a foreign enemy. Several of *Zig-Zag*'s contributors, among them Antonio Prohías, then-president of the Association of Cuban Cartoonists and a suspected CIA agent, displayed their anti-communism and wound up in exile; Prohías went on to create the strip "Spy vs. Spy" for *Mad Magazine* in the U.S. (Knowlton 53). [9] *Zig-Zag* folded in 1960, and its most revered artists joined *El Pitirre*, directed by Rafael Fornés, or *Palante*, edited by the Venezuelan socialist Gabriel Bracho Montiel, which would chronicle the most storied episodes of the Cuban revolution for several decades, creating iconic comic characters in the process: *Crisanto Buena Gente* (an indolent and soft idealist portrayed by Val), *¡Ay Vecino!* (by Francisco Blanco or "Blanquito," showing naked neighbors exchanging gossip from their balconies), *Las Criollitas* (by Luis Wilson Valera, presenting Cuban women as beautiful and independent), *Subdesarrollo Pérez* (the embodiment of Cuban kitsch imagined by Arístide Pumariega), *Holmos* (a Sherlock Holmes parody by Alberto Enrique Rodríguez Espinosa or "Alben" and Évora Tamayo), *Matojo* (by Manuel Lamar Cuervo or "Lillo," illustrator of quintessential Cuban children), and others (cf. Hernández Guerrero).

From the reorganization of the Cuban press in 1965 emerged *Juventud Rebelde*, organ of the Cuban Communist Youth, which published the comic supplements *El Sable*, directed by Marcos Behemaras; in 1968 *La Chicharra*, from which the famous of revolutionary comic artists Manuel Hernández Valdés (Manuel) and Juan Padrón, rose to prominence; in 1969 *Dédeté*, named after the insect repellent with obvious political intent. Aesthetically more sophisticated

than its predecessors, the publication received the internationally prestigious Forte dei Marmi prize for best political satire in 1985. This wealth of graphic production and creativity in the early phase of the revolution should not obscure the overarching dual realities of the artists' dedication to the cause of social transformation and cultural literacy, on the one hand, and the often intrusive patronage of state institutions within which they worked, a source of didacticism and political uniformity in the absence of independent media, on the other. Particularly after the U.S.-staged 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, popular artists René de la Nuez, Santiago Armada (Chago), and Manuel Vidal turned their attention to raising consciousness in support of mass mobilizations for revolutionary change, such as the historic literacy campaign, with the intent of enrolling the people in an ongoing political process initiated by the government. Jorge Catalá Carrasco writes that "a large part of the masses to whom the revolutionaries appealed in their fight to overthrow Batista were people from the most disadvantaged sections of society, from rural areas where illiteracy was widespread, and for whom the lexico-pictographic language of comics was ideal" (Catalá Carrasco, "El humor gráfico" 5-6). He cites Argentine anthropologist Nestor García Canclini, an influential social theorist among intellectuals of the region: "The only Latin American experience of the socialization of art within a socialization of production, that of Cuba, reveals that the revolutionary process – far from amputating imagination and experimental search – can create the social conditions to expand its development by an entire people (García Canclini 113, qtd. in Catalá Carrasco, "El humor gráfico" 10). The sporadic and ephemeral existence of many illustrated magazines, however, indicated that even conceived as an intellectual weapon, humor and satire did not always make good bedfellows with the besieged revolutionary state.

Roberto Alfonso Cruz (Robe), the creator of *Naoh*, a hunter confronted with a panoply of early Neolithic challenges to his survival; *Yarí*, a young Taíno comic hero who struggled mightily against Spanish conquerors; and *Guabay*, his adult counterpart, insisted that neither he nor any of his collaborators in various comics magazines was ever pressured by censors to modify content

or messaging. What he acknowledges is that all cultural production, even critical, had to remain within the boundaries of the revolution and its goals, as stated in 1961 by Fidel Castro in his “*Palabras a los intelectuales*,” and that some officials, particularly during periods of acute crisis, voiced their opposition to the comic form on the grounds that it either corrupted young people or directed their attention away from higher forms of art and literature. The naysayers were never all-powerful, however, and the Ministry of Education in particular defended comics consistently. Some of the sharpest criticisms emanated not from government censors but from intellectual figures, such as literary critic Algamarina Elisagaray (who later sponsored comic exhibits in the headquarters of the Movement for Peace) and famed Cuban poet Eliseo Diago (Mogno, “Dibujando” 186). Certainly, though, it was out of bounds, during the first decades of the new comics traditions chronicled here, to celebrate North American comics, which could only be subjected to imitation or parody. [10] Catalá Carrasco notes that communists allied with Fidel Castro’s guerrilla movement in the early 1960s, such as Blas Roca and César Escalante, denounced them as pernicious, bourgeois, and imperialistic, a view upheld by the *Comandante* himself when he told the Revolutionary Youth Student’s Congress: “[I]n the past, we read only Yankee American magazines, Yankee books, Yankee news agency reports, Yankee papers, Yankee comics’ (qtd. in Catalá Carrasco, “From Suspicion” 143). Comics could also be a vehicle for mocking counterrevolutionary attitudes, as in the case of Virgilio Martínez’s strip *Florito Volandero*, but not to uphold them (145). [11]

As the formidable spread of literacy coincided with a sense of emergency and ominous international threats to the nation’s sovereignty, culture in the early 1960s became a battlefield for many figures weary of the revolutionary direction, such as Carlos Franqui, an influential patron of *Pitirre*, who left the country. Popular comics from before 1959 such as *Pucho* and *Julito 16* continued to be produced, with messages aligned with the challenges of the new period (Scull Suárez and D’Andrea 38). The most interesting character to emerge from the onset of the revolution was *Supertiñosa*, a satirized

version of Superman imagined by Marcelo Behemaras and Virgilio Martínez Gainz, who landed in August 1959 from the fictional planet *Poketón*. A journalist like Clark Kent, Pancho Tareco worked for the counterrevolutionary newspaper *Lingote Express*, where he undertook his mission of overthrowing the new regime with a comically pathetic feebleness that undermined his efforts to embody the Cuban equivalent of the iconic superhero of the defeated neocolonial power. Roberto Hernández writes that in addition to ironically auscultating the myth of the “American way of life,” *Supertiñosa* “became a powerful tool that would empower scriptwriters and cartoonists to dismantle the entire edifice of lies and slander erected in more than five decades of imperialist domination” (16). Created by two Jewish teenagers in the Rust Belt of the United States as a hero of the oppressed, adept at defending unjustly condemned prisoners and victims of domestic abuse, Superman was perceived in Cuba not as a purveyor of social justice, but as the incarnation of cultural consumerism and imperialism as well as the comics they encapsulated. This critique anticipated the publication of the widely influential critique of Disney articulated by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart in 1971 during Chile’s democratic socialist experiment. [12] It was not new: Martínez Gaínza himself began illustrating comics written by Behemaras during the apogee of McCarthyism in the United States, in reaction to what they considered the ideological biases of *Life Magazine* and *Selections from Readers’ Digest*, both widely circulated in Cuba (Mogno, “Dibujando” 184).

Supertiñosa was reminiscent of the misled hunter of escaped captives during slavery, which in Cuba was only abolished in the mid-1880s, who would repeatedly execute his master’s orders, always failing because of the cunning and bravery of the anonymous heroes of resistance to Spanish colonialism. During this period, superheroes like Batman and Wonder Woman, along with other figures of the “comic boom” who in the U.S. drew the ire of censors to the point that the government promulgated a restrictive Comics Code in 1954, were associated with the enemy and unavailable to the Cuban public. What emerged instead was the creation

of characters whom the revolutionary leadership deemed identifiably Cuban and anti-colonial to their core. Modified tales harvested from the Disney catalogue appeared in the children's magazine *El Pionero*, but, by the end of the decade, it was generating its own portfolio of stories adapted from literature, such as *Cecilia Valdez*, a nineteenth-century novel adapted by Alfredo Calvo, as well as original comics such as *Matías Pérez*. Like many of the new creations, this story was inspired by a historical figure, a canopy salesman who disappeared flying a hot-air balloon in 1856. In the strip, he is kidnapped by aliens, taken to the planet Strakon, and engages in various adventures including time travel to colonial Havana. *Matojo*, a character created by Manuel Lamar Cuervo (Lillo), was less colorful and more propagandistic but came to embody the quintessential Cuban child of the sixties, attentive to his father and respectful of his teachers, dedicated to the collective endeavors of the revolution. He epitomized the message of the vanguard that "children in the post-revolutionary period no longer sold newspapers, shined shoes, or wandered the streets" (Hernández 17). Many the comics from *El Pionero* were didactic recreations of historical epics (Blanco de la Cruz, "Cuadros" 35), but none had as enduring an impact as *Elipido Valdés*, perhaps the best-known comics character of the 1970s, often compared to Astérix, the nemesis of the Roman Empire in occupied France.

Juan Padrón Blanco's character was not just a youthful representation of the figure of the *mambí* or heroic rebel soldier fighting in the hills of eastern Cuba against colonial Spain, but a vehicle for transmitting to children the discovery of the island's natural landscapes and habitats, the historical memory of its provinces, the tactics and technologies of nineteenth-century guerrilla warfare. He embodied youthful but erudite curiosity and pride in the dream of sovereignty, adept at resolving problems and outsmarting the better armed and more experienced enemy. The stories of *Elipidio* were drawn from oral and peasant histories, anthropological in their evocation of Cuban national identity, both humoristic and pedagogical. More effective than the ideological pamphlets of the Soviet-inspired years of institutional consolidation, they sought

to maintain the spark of rebelliousness within the framework of Fidel's narrative of continuous revolution against Spain and the United States, ergo, a home-grown cultural epic rather than an importation of foreign ideology. "I began by diving into the symphony of Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez (heroes of the wars of independence, *ndlr*) that was in the books, and I set out, like Don Quixote, creating my own history of that history." "In the beginning," Padrón commented,

Elipidio was an adventurer who like Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck always got himself out of trouble; but later, [...] other characters entered the dramaturgy, such as his girlfriend who was the intelligent one. That is, the character became more serious, the jokes were made by others so that he retained his prestige. (Porbén 119) [13]

His popularity emerged at a time when the revolution had incurred major setbacks, Soviet and East European animation flooded Cuban television, censorship was rampant, and a public longing for authentically Cuban stories was manifest. In 1993, during Cuba's most profound economic crisis, the lyrics of Carlos Varela's song *Memorias* recalled: "I don't have Superman, I have Elipidio Valdés, and my television set is Russian" (Pérez Cano 64).

Pedro Porbén argues that the extended history of the comic became enmeshed in the "performance" of three periods in Cuban revolutionary history. In the 1970s and 1980s, the character was summoned as a metaphorical substitute hero for Fidel Castro, whose rebel persona had given way to that of the somewhat humbled statesman of a less glamorous decade, and to whom Elipidio's genealogy in the wars of independence gave meaning to his quest for a "second independence" through the narrative reconstruction of Cuban national identity. At the onset of the twenty-first century, when a "battle of ideas" was launched to breathe new life into an exhausted post-Soviet revolutionary project, Elipidio chimed in as an advisor to the *Comandante*, drawing new lines in the representation of the people as protagonist. During that period, when the saga of five-year

old Elían González, taken to Florida on a raft by his mother, played out in mass mobilizations demanding his return, the child was symbolically identified as the new Elipidio, his father as a successor to the *mambí* rebels who forged the nation, and his story associated with the fatherland itself, besieged by forces of treason but determined to outfox the empire (Porbén 120).

Elipidio Valdés made the leap to cinema when his inventor directed the nation's first full-length animated feature in 1979, at a time when cultural authorities widely regarded comics as a children's medium. Padrón's second film, *Vampiros en La Habana*, triggered debates about the status of animation for consumption by adults because it transgressed the didactic method and revealed aesthetic tendencies associated with a bygone past, such as *machismo*, racial prejudice, and other elements deemed vanquished in revolutionary Cuba. It also departed from evoking Cuban idiosyncrasies by staging scenes in foreign places, borrowing from *noir* and horror genres theretofore considered alien to Cuban creole traditions or contrary to socialist realism. Two groups of vampires, one made up of immigrants in Chicago and called the "Capa Nostra" and the other in Düsseldorf, capital of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, is led by Count Dracula. They fight for control of a new scientific formula developed by Dracula's son that enables vampires to resist harm from the sun, which is then stolen by the Cuban character "Pepito," a trumpeter and opponent of the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado in the 1930s, who is persecuted by both vampires and the government. In the end, Pepito makes the formula available to all vampires the world, preventing the two rival bands from profiting from its commercialization.

In a subsequent animated film, *Elipidio Valdés Contra Dólar y Cañon*, a North American character named Mister Chains, always fearful of his estates being burned by rebels, represents the alliance between Spanish colonialism and the United States, and Elipidio's steadfast resistance to both marks the continuity of Cuba's historic battles for sovereignty (Planes 95). Tania Pérez Cano critiques Padrón's erudite use of Cuban vernacular and carefully researched

traditions. The storyteller's rendering of these epic struggles, she argues, "serves once again to strengthen a version of history in which certainties, answers, and definitions abound. Never doubts, questions or existential conflicts (Pérez Cano 64). For Justo Planes, however, in affirming the glory of the anticolonial past and the validity of socialist revolution, the *Elipidio* comic served as a mirror in which aspirations for freedom remained central to the nation's history, past and present. "It did not have the same meanings for a black as for a white person, for a landowner as for a peasant, even when they fought hand in hand to achieve it. Elipidio Valdés then becomes, beyond the real Cuba, the desired Cuba" (Planes 87). The popularity of the series stems from its role as an "antibody to the aesthetic utilitarianism of Soviet-inspired didacticism, starchy language, morality without practical foundations, and above all, verticality of communication, the philosophy of which found the public unable to interpret certain nuances" (91).

The period in which *Elipidio* was created, the early 1970s leading up to the foundation of the current-day Cuban Communist Party in 1975, is referred to by contemporary Cuban writers and artists as the *Quincenio Gris*, a dismal period of conformity and adjustment to the norms of Eastern European socialist realism. It is during this time, though, that Fidel Morales, Director of the *Prensa Latina* Latin American news agency, oversaw the creation of *P-Ele*, dedicated to deepening the theoretical and practical aspects of narrating stories. Morales wrote at the time:

[T]he comic exists as a means of ideological penetration of imperialism, and it works because it communicates something effectively, even if it is something alienating, mediocre or reactionary. These "tastes" are rooted in the people. It must be declared that there is a culture of sequential graphic art. [...] But luckily, there is an alternative. In Cuba, after liquidating the last vestiges of all that foreign monopolistic press, a large group of young people trained during the years of hardship had the opportunity to begin a comic tradition. Today those values of the brush and Chinese ink "sneak" their serials

into many Latin American and European countries. (Pérez Alfaro, “©Línea” 56)

That this was true – numerous Cuban comics were published abroad – in the heyday of Cuba’s isolation from Latin American and global markets is noteworthy. The group organized comics exhibits and created historically themed strips like *Túpac Amaru*, *Galileo Galilei*, *Amilcar Cabral*, *Macheteros*, *Emiliano Zapata* and *Dien Bien Phu*. From 1973 onward, it published a magazine, *C-Línea*, which brought Cuban comics and their creators to an international audience (Blanco de la Cruz, “Cuadros” 36). *C-Línea* “was the first attempt in Cuba to study comics thoroughly, following the emergence worldwide of journals dealing with comics, such as *Linus* in Italy in 1965, *Phénix* in France in 1966, and *Bang!* and *Cuadernos de Información y Estudios sobre la Historieta* in Spain in 1968” (Catalá Carrasco, “From Suspicion” 154; Merino). In 1974-75, *P-Ele* collaborated with publishers in Mexico to produce a genre known as “Anti-Comics” influenced by Hungarian artists, including *El Mariscal Negro*, a graphically sophisticated realist strip dedicated to the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution produced at a time of increasing Cuban engagement with Pan-African struggles against colonialism, racism, and apartheid. *Pásalo*, *Zun-Zun* (which published, in addition to Padron’s *Elipidio*, Alfonso’s *Yari*, Lamar Cuervo’s *Matojo*, and Martínez Gainz’s *Cucho*), generated characters who “traveled through the historical, the fantastic, the everyday environment or science fiction without ever forsaking their humorous narrative spirit” (Blanco de la Cruz, “Cuadros” 37). At the end of the decade, in 1979, Cuba organized its first comics and graphic art festival, the *Bienal Internacional de San Antonio de los Baños* in the province of Artemisa, some fifty kilometers outside of Havana. Still in existence today, it brought together hundreds of artists from Cuba and the world and led to the creation of a Museum of Humor.

In 1985, the *Editorial Pablo de la Torriente*, Cuba’s most prolific publisher of comic art, appeared, at a high point of what is considered the genre’s apogee (only five years before drastic shortages of paper and ink would temporarily

stall its momentum) (Avilés, *Historietas: Reflexiones* 58). In 1986, Fidel Castro called for a national campaign of “rectification of errors and negative tendencies in all spheres of society,” a thinly veiled critique of the era of Soviet-style vertical institutionalization and artistic conformity. Philosophical questions were tackled by artists such as Luis Wilson Varela, who in 1987 published *Génesis* with the *Ediciones Unión*, the story of an anxious spermatozoon that addressed controversial subjects such as underdevelopment, racism, human rights, and nuclear energy. On the opposite end of the island from Havana, in Santiago de Cuba, the *Editorial Oriente* produced graphic adaptations of Homer’s *Odyssey*, *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott, and Jack London’s *The Mexican* by Isaura Antonio Salas, and other creative comics, such as Jorge Dauber’s exploration of the mechanics of chess (Hernández 21-22). The weekly tabloid *El Muñe* and monthly magazine *Cómicos* produced new stories for adults in formats not dissimilar to international publications, such as *Il Mago*, *Orient Express*, or *Corto Maltese* (Scull Suárez and D’Andrea 40). In addition, a Comics Workshop was created by Francisco Blanco and Manolo Pérez to train young scriptwriters, many of whom were published in *Nueva Generación* in 1989, one of the period’s most innovative publications (Blanco de la Cruz, “Cuadros” 38). In 1990, the biannual journal *Pablo*, which had familiarized the Cuban public with international artists such as the Argentines Alberto Breccia, Joaquín Lavado (Quino), José Muñoz, and the Spaniard Carlos Giménez, became the organ of the newly created Latin American Association of Comic Artists. In the same year, an international congress of comics artists convened Havana with invitees from Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, Spain, and Italy. [14]

In the 1990s, when the island’s economy suffered its worst crisis as a result of its decades-old integration with the moribund European socialist bloc and tightening of the U.S.-imposed embargo, only a handful of magazines – including *Zunzún*, *Pionero*, and *Palante*, which reinvented itself for the tourist and export markets – survived (Müller 137; Scull Suárez and D’Andrea 40-41). A new title, *Mi Barrio*, dedicated to illustrating the concerns of neighborhood life, appeared with

the support of the Committees of Defense of the Revolution and the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists or UNEAC (Müller 156). The *Editorial Pablo de la Torriente* continued for a few years thanks to foreign assistance and recycling of old magazines, pausing production after 1995. Still, despite the crippling scarcity and existential crises of the decade, Cuban comics were twice exhibited in Italy at the Lucca Festival, facilitated by Italian publicist Dario Mogno's connections with the island's illustrators (Blanco de la Cruz, "Cuadros" 38-39).

With Miguel Rojas Mix's article on the history of comics that defined the medium, alongside film, as one two most salient forms of popular art in the twentieth century (Rojas Mix 5), a conversation began about the technical deficiencies, didactic repetitiousness, and heroic themes of the nascent Cuban tradition, and preoccupations with "national" narratives receded in favor of transnational dialogues on the form and content of graphic and sequential art. By then, the reflex of associating comics with cultural imperialism had given way to a more nuanced understanding of the medium's parameters. Blanco de la Cruz's assessment is illustrative of the change in tone:

In a general sense, the Cuban comic strip has the merit of having created an entire system of new content and its own heroes and adjusted to contextual needs. However, in its attempt to move away from the stereotypes imposed by North American comics, it inevitably formulated its own. Without denying the success of this story, it is fair to say that except for unimpeachable characters, there have been, in recent years, many less seductive ephemeral series. A process characterized by an irregular ascendancy and formal conventions in the execution of its works was further hampered by a deficient printing apparatus, which notably disturbed the luster of prints and offered artists few technical possibilities. The Cuban comic, by privileging children as its main audience, unintentionally marginalized adolescent readers and ignored the interest it aroused among adults. By doing so, it undermined the potential of delving into higher-risk topics that would have

been more in tune with the preferences of its more mature public, which would have undoubtedly broadened the horizons of the Cuban genre. Marred by didacticism, excessive educational intent and a dearth of imaginative professional scriptwriters, it also had to endure editorial policies that did not sufficiently structure it as a distinct phenomenon with its own lines of development and thematic order. (Blanco de la Cruz, "Cuadros" 39)

A turn had been taken, and, in 2001, the first issue of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, the trimestrial journal of the Observatory of the Latin American Comic, appeared. It began with limited resources, from Cuba, offering in-depth analyses and critiques of Cuban and international comics throughout its decade-long existence. By the mid-2000s, comics were again on the ascent. In 2005, the French Minister of Culture presided over the first national Cuban celebration of comic books as one of the nine officially recognized art forms; today, a *Cátedra de Humorismo Gráfico* promotes the academic study of comics at the José Martí International Institute of Journalism. The following year, the Dador Prize granted by the Dulce María Loynaz Cultural Center in Havana went to comics artist, archivist, and historian Miguel Bonera Miranda, author of a *Diccionario de historietas en Cuba* (Dictionary of Cuban Comics), and self-professed fan of action graphic novels, manga (including the *mangakubano*), as well as all sorts of characters from the North and Latin American traditions (Pérez Alfaro, "Para un diccionario" 105-8). In 2006, Belgium financed the creation of the *Vitrina de Valonia*, part of the Office of the Historian in Havana, further encouraging the internationalization of aesthetic and narrative exchanges. In 2017, the annual journal of graphic novels *Kronikas* launched as part of the collaboration, focusing on the urban cultural fabric of Havana and the graphic rendition of its architectural and imaginative cityscapes.

For the general public in our time, Spanish director Fernando Trueba's feature-length animated film *Chico y Rita*, a jazz romance based in Havana in the 1940s and 1950s, may

be the best-known graphic document on pre-revolutionary Havana to capture the spirit of the city. Co-directed by Javier Mariscal, it ventures into cultural themes that were, in Cuba itself, reaching a high point of historical revision at the onset of the new century's second decade: racism and the loss of artistic cross-fertilization between Cuba and the U.S. While the protagonists meet in New York and the narrative relies on a diasporic vision of Cuban reality, the film gives a vivid, urbanistically detailed view of the neocolonial city based on Mariscal's research in the photographic archives of the Office of Historian in Havana, the authority charged with historical preservation and architectural restoration, as well as *reportage* laced with melancholia on the contemporary streets. The film, however, typifies what happens when foreign producers infinitely better financed than the Cuban Institute on Cinematographic Arts and Industry (ICAIC) exoticize the representation of Cuban culture, deploying under the guise of documenting Afro-Cuban music history, the very archetypes that graphic artists of the revolution sought to conjure. For Camilo Díaz Pino, the film can be seen to

embrace regressive discourses of cultural othering in its plot resolution (and) cultural focus on aspirational Cuban figures who struggle against systems of political, racial, and cultural oppression. Chico and Rita – like so many other films concerned with the oppression and exclusion of hegemonic structures – ultimately works to symbolically redeem the same oppressive and exclusionary hegemonic structures it critiques. [...] This resolution turns Chico and Rita's narrative into one in which stereotyped subaltern protagonists carry out failed attempts at entrepreneurial self-exoticism, from which they must ultimately be rescued by the fortuitous historical legitimation of their art within the canons of the white European intelligentsia. In a perverse way, their failure does not serve as a condemnation of persistent systemic inequities, but is instead brushed off as a being a vestige of its time, with their subsequent rescue a source of re-centralization and pleasure for hegemonic

subjectivities. It serves as a reaffirmation of Latin American (and black) otherness and inferiority through the failed mimesis these characters enact of the reputedly European pursuit of entrepreneurialism. (Díaz Pino 242-43)

While Cuban humorists and graphic artists on the island itself were immune neither from the self-exoticism denounced by Díaz Pino, who in the same article compares *Chico y Rita* to Padrón's *Vampiros en La Habana*, nor from aesthetic stereotyping in racialized depictions of Afro-Cuban characters, the issue of race was, after 1959, largely treated as a holdover of Yankee imperialism and Spanish slavery. Disingenuously declared to have been resolved in the early 1960s, racism, until recently, was never treated by comics and graphic artists as a contemporary problem. Fidel Castro acknowledged the continued existence of racial prejudice in revolutionary Cuba in 1986, signaling a shift in perceptions that would deepen in the 1990s with the return of market mechanisms and rise of tourism, and become publicly debated after 2012, the bicentennial of the 1812 José Aponte rebellion and centennial of the 1912 massacre of black insurgents in 1912. In 2019, President Miguel Díaz Canel, lamenting the vestiges of racism in humor and other areas of society, established the National Program against Racism and Racial Discrimination involving eighteen government agencies and an equal number of civil society organizations. The program created a legal and political framework for organized initiatives from the grassroots to the halls of power, themselves not immune to its offenses, against what is now regarded as a systemic problem rooted in centuries of enslavement, colonialism, and capitalist history. [15] Black Cubans were generally portrayed in a positive light, within the boundaries of an idealized racial harmony dating back to the wars of independence. Cecilio Avilés was a black cartoonist whose popular strips *Cecilín y Coty* and *Marabú* depicted Afro-Cuban characters, as did *Yami*, created in 2008, the story of a strong black woman who pursues contrabandists and delinquents in contemporary Cuba. Avilés is an example of an illustrator who addressed race since the early times of *Pionero*, with which he

collaborated in the 1960s. *Marabú*, like Tulio Raggi's *El negrito cimarrón* (which, like many of Avilés's works, was adapted for television), depicts a maroon fighter who, at great risk to himself, endeavors to free others from slavery. Avilés was a prominent figure in the emergence of grass-roots community work as a means of addressing racial discrimination, sexism, and other vices in the first decades of the new century, creating the popular *Imagen 3* project in Havana to teach artistic creation. He told journalist Lissel Pino Ceballos:

As a priority we have to dedicate greater care, due to its complexity and emerging meaning, to childhood, gender orientation and the elderly, (linking) art with the protection of tangible and intangible heritage: diversity, care for the environment and flora and fauna, among other important topics. (UNEAC 2020)

Another important figure is black Cuban comics artist Maikel García Díaz, creator of the character Tito, of the fantasy series *Clío y la mochila mágica*, and of several book-length comics, notably *Memorias de un descamisado* and *Yo soy Tito y Manuelita*. García Díaz is part of a team led by Ernesto González Quesada (*Verde Caimán*) that has been developing a website which will archive and document hundreds of comics creations from Cuba since their emergence in the colonial period. In addition to international collaborations, he served on the editorial board of the independent magazine *Movimiento*, which promoted rap culture in Cuba and drew attention to the effects of discrimination on young artists. Avilés and García Díaz are two examples from different generations of efforts by Cuban comics artists to transcend racial stereotypes and complicate the portrayal of black Cubans, emphasizing the positive historical contributions of Afro-Cubans and, in recent decades, the urgency of a pedagogy of anti-racism, not through didacticism but by the telling of stories with which young generations can identify. Hazel Scull Suárez wrote in 2021: "Currently in Cuba, [...] the representation of black characters is integrated into the conception that race, as it was understood a hundred years

ago, is clearly hidebound, and stereotypes are incomplete ways of seeing human beings" (Scull Suárez).

3. Cuban Comics: Contemporary Scenes

Throughout the first six decades of the Cuban Revolution, comics escaped the grip of censorship to a greater degree than other media, in part because, as Haziell Scull Suárez commented in an interview with us on April 27, 2024, it was often considered a minor art form – and therefore less threatening to the socialist status quo – even during the "grey years" of the first half of the 1970s (Mogno, "Parallel Lives" 230-31). John Lent notes that when the magazine *Dédeté*, a mainstay of Cuban comics, published a caricature of Fidel Castro "running roughshod over the bureaucracy, smashing it to bits" (Lent, "Cuban Political" 211), the Cuban leader intervened to allow its publication on the grounds that the revolution could not be satirized, but he himself could. Aristides Esteban Hernández Guerrero (Ares), when interviewed by Lent in 1991, did complain of pressure to conform in the early "Special Period"; and René de la Nuez, who in *Zig-Zag* in the 1960s invented the popular character "*El Loquito*," a trickster who evaded the censorship of the Batista years, told Lent: "We have a bureaucratic machinery without a sense of humor" (Lent, "Cuban Political" 212). Following the crisis of the 1990s, however, Cuban comic artists have been more open in their treatment of once-taboo subjects such as gender violence, racial discrimination, and melancholia with regard to the revolution's future.

In *Bim Bom: Historias de lucha* by Arturo Infante and Renier Quer Figueredo (Madrid: *Diábolo Ediciones*, 2016), the magnitude of social exclusion, marginality, and despair is depicted through the lens of male prostitution and the urge to emigrate. The graphic novel is laced with explicit homoerotic themes and representations of the widespread, painful phenomenon of *jineterismo* or "hustle" on the margins. Izquierdo and Valera's *Rosa de La Habana*, also published in Europe (France) in 2016 and translated into Spanish in 2018 by Ponent Man, is a metaphor on the impossibility of escaping the fate of

poverty and prostitution. Rosa is a prostitute who turns against a man who falls in love with her when he kills her pimp. The graphic novel contains explicit scenes of oral sex and violence, and it strongly suggests that any hope for a normal life 1990s Cuba was vain. *Crónicas de La Habana: Un Gallego en la Cuba socialista* by Mario Vincent and Juan Padrón (Bilbao: Astiberri Ediciones, 2016) tells more uplifting stories, such as that of a multiracial group of friends denied entry into a restaurant because of their attire while an unkempt and poorly dressed man gets in because he has foreign currency; they decide to let him pass because the revolution has given them international prestige and education. Vincent and Padrón are of the older generation; younger artists are generally more sanguine about the difficulties facing ordinary Cubans.

In *Havana Underwater* by David Velázquez Romero, published in the third issue of *Kronikas*, catastrophic flooding engulfs Havana, and a diver discovers pieces of the Capitol which he attempts to reconstruct as a puzzle, an allegory of decay and destruction of the old city. The theme of prostitution appears in *Turamores* by Saroal González Peñalaver and Jesús Rodríguez Pérez *Crónicas Urbanas* (2010), which tells the story of a young woman in 1994 seeking a better life. She hopes to emigrate thanks to a foreigner whom she believes loves her but is betrayed by a friend. In the seventh issue of *Kronikas*, David Yabor, evoking a building that was the first movie studio in the country, Casa Masia L'Ampurda (built 1919) in Havana's La Víbora neighborhood, comments sardonically, after it is taken over by the revolutionary government and transformed into a school, that he "became charged with this thing that they call the future." Eddislén Escobar Nodal and Laura María Fernández have their character, an urban photographer, exclaim in the comic *Obsesión*: "I don't know if the same history repeats itself time and time again or if I am fantasizing." Pedro Luis Pomares and Raúl Paid, in *Bigote de Gato*, tell a tale of musicians from Santiago who come to Havana seeking opportunity, as thousands did in the aftermath of the crisis, and are robbed by a corrupt promoter. The theme of disappointment is omnipresent in these and other contemporary works.

The issue of race is also present in strips of recent decades. Yassel Bory Arcia produced a comic without words, using imagery of Afro-Cuban drumming in *Yo soy la rumba*—suggesting that sound, subterranean suggestion and cultural marronage can be as powerful as overt speech. In *Alamar hip-hop*, Saroal González, himself a musician of the genre, and Yamila Ricardo display a young rapper who sings about his double life – "by night a delinquent, in the morning a *pionero*" (school child). He would "rather be an MC than a doctor or a hustler" and dreams of "fame, women, money, and travels around the world." Fearing arrest, when another man is sent to maximum security prison, he thanks Jesus. This type of narrative differs from earlier "*costumbrista*" evocations of musicians in Cuban culture, such as the comic *Santana y Limodoux*, published by the Department of Revolutionary Orientation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, a positive take on a black and *mulatto* pair in the 1920s who, after being imprisoned, roam throughout the country spreading elegant, erudite poetry and knowledge of Cuba's heroic past.

Walter Benjamin, whose project was "to educate the image-creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereotypically, into the depths of the historical shade," considered the facts he unveiled in his monumental *Arcades Project* as only one half of the text, and thus of their intention. It befell on the reader to provide the other half of the picture "from the fleeting image of his or her lived experience" (Buck-Morss 292). In sequential art, this is the notion of ellipsis, which offers the reader the possibility of investing their share of subjectivity without the story that unfolds beneath them.

The comic strip [...] never allows one to read all the details of an action, a sentiment, or a setting, and leaves the reader 'free range' so that they can reconstruct for themselves what they read, discover a meaning or an echo specific. Thus, the reader's interpretation is formed not only from what is said and shown, but also from everything that is neither said nor shown. (Mouchard 88)

Furthermore, by its very “equivocity” – the discursive and reflexive distancing from mere representation – the comic genre, equivocal and therefore suspect to proponents of didacticism – lends itself to multiple readings and eludes linear comprehension or axiological simplicity. Jean-Christophe Menu argues that reducing its idiom to either textual or visual messaging – which in comics, cannot be partitioned – artificially reinforces “univocity” or literal reductionism (Menu 483-84). Scott McCloud famously called comics an “invisible art” in the sense that it engages the active participation of the reader, who actively contributes to the meaning as well as the rhythm of the unfolding story (McCloud 1994).

When one looks closely at the history of comics in the United States and in Cuba, the former not only influenced the latter well beyond the onset of the Cuban revolution (magazines did not evaporate from the shelves of homes, nor comics from the minds of creators and readers), they were both deeply affected by a strong patriotic trope. Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, and others worked directly with the U.S. army and their heroes were masked and disguised ordinary people who fought for justice against the fascist enemy (Lafargue 35). Thus, while U.S. comics may have represented the mass dissemination of a colonizing culture in the minds of twentieth-century Cubans anticipating their second independence, the post-war period was marked by censorship and the fading of their bluster. Ramzi Fawaz writes that postwar superhero comics depicted a “mutant generation” that did not affirm or replicate the Cold War ethos of hyper-individualism and middle-class consumption, but rather non-normative, constantly shifting forms of affiliation and solidarity among outsiders and outcasts whose lives were not reducible to traditional family or societal norms (Fawaz 11).

Cuban comics today are heavily influenced not only by Franco-Belgian classics and the once-shunned pre-revolutionary comics tradition in the United States, but by Japanese comic art, which is represented today, for example, in the work of Rocio Cruz Toranzo in Santiago de Cuba, entitled *Mangakure*. Wimar Verdecia Fuentes’ strip *En el bosque* (Editorial Capitán San Luis,

2017), is based on a story by the Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Jesús Ángel Saroal made *Amazonas* (Editorial Abril, 2008) in manga style, as did Oscar A. Lorenzo Calzado and Dayron R. Serpa Valcárcel with the fantasy *Independencia* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2018). *La espada viviente* by Omar Felipe Mauri Sierra and Dick Manresa Arencibia (Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2018) tells the story of malevolent Samurai spirits who haunt world history and control a secret society in Havana robbing museums of Japanese artefacts and fomenting counterrevolutionary conspiracies. Manga aesthetics are by far the most widely referenced today.

In addition to mysteries and architectural heritage strips, science fiction and fantasy are popular in contemporary Cuba. *Abismos* and *Agord la echizera* by Ángel Hernández Llanes (Editorial Gente Nueva, 2005/2006) and *Yakro* by Orestes Suárez Lemus (Sancti Spíritus: Ediciones Luminaria, 2016) are notable examples of the former; *Itgul: El guardian de la jungle* by Jesús B. Minsal and Jesús Rodríguez (Editorial Gente Nueva 2014) and *La Historia de Zoé* by Alejandro Rodríguez Rodríguez and Luis Arturo Aguiar Palacios (Editorial Gente Nueva, 2016) stand out among the latter. The older tradition of Cuban comics has not disappeared, however; it is being re-edited and reinterpreted by younger artists. In addition to anthologies of individual authors, *Ediciones Abril* published the compilation *Historias de Pionero: Tomadas de las páginas de la revista del adolescente cubano* (Editorial Abril, 2005), edited by Gladys J. Gómez Regüelferos and Maikel García Díaz, which chronicled the history of the version of the popular magazine created in the 1980s, cancelled in 1990, and revived in 1999. Older artists – Luis Lorenzo Sosa, Jorge Oliver Medina, Luis Castillo Bárzaga, Roberto Alfonso Cruz, Cecilio Avilés Montalvo, Pedro Péguez González, Juan Francisco Bertrán, and the strips *Matías Pérez*, *Tamal*, *Chico taíno*, *Guaso y Carburo*, *El Laborante*, *Cecilín y Coty*, *El Mago Ahmed*, *Los Momis* are followed by the introduction of new signatures: Roberto Prado, Joseph Rosado Planco, Hendrik Rojas Hernández, Maikel García Díaz, Jesús Rodríguez Pérez, and the comics *Guatini*, *Estudiantes*, *Dilema*, *Fábula del*

Ratón, Escolares, La Mochila Mágica, El Cruce de la Trocha del Júcaro a Morón.

Familiar stories of patriotism remain common, some of them taken up by the younger generation: *Memorias de un descamisado* by Maikel García Díaz (Editorial Abril, 2004) is based on a memoir by Brigadier General Enrique Acevedo and prefaced by none other than Raúl Castro. Leaders of the independence wars and the revolution are regularly chronicled, even ones who suffered marginalization from official history in the past, such as the black general Quintín Bandera. A new anthology of Roberto Alfonso's (Robe) character *Guabay*, the Taíno warrior – created in 1958 and popular in 1964, issued by the *Ediciones de Colores* – celebrates the indigenous contribution to the heroic narrative of Cuban national identity (Editorial Abril, 2018). Another older strip, *El Oro de Oyá* by Omar Felipe Mauri Sierra and Wimar Verdecio Fuentes (Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2016), evokes the quest for an inheritance from the nineteenth-century story *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilio Villaverde, a classic of Cuban literary history, in the 1940s, with glimpses of patriotic agitation by the Revolutionary Federation of Students and the omnipresence of U.S.-based mafias in Havana. Another example of the reappropriation of a classic character is *Yo soy Tito* by Maikel Luis García Díaz (Editorial Abril, 2006), in which a young boy imbued with heroism, a modern incarnation of José Martí, pursues delinquents and counterrevolutionaries to impress his girlfriend. Children are introduced to the Cuban wars of independence in *Jorgito Lee* by Luis Arturo Aguiar Palacios (Editorial Gente Nueva, 2018), and adult audiences to the internationalist accomplishments of Cuban doctors in *Misión Barrio Adentro* by Marcelino Feal and Joel Pernas (Pablo de la Torriente Editorial, 2006), to the internationalist accomplishments of Cuban doctors. Episodes of the Cuban revolutionary epic are told in *La Batalla del Che* by Luis Oscar Duque and Manuel Pérez Álfaro (Pablo de la Torriente Editorial, 2007), *Cuito Carnavale* by Luis Arturo Aguiar Palacios (Pablo de la Torriente Ediciones, 2010) – on Cuban internationalism in Angola – and *La Gran Batalla del Ogáden* by Luis Arturo Aguiar Palacios (Pablo de la Torriente Editorial, 2011) – on Cuba's intervention on

behalf of revolutionary Ethiopia. Finally, a publishing house dedicated to Cuban women emerged in the 2000s that focused on themes of everyday life, romance, and interracial friendship, producing such albums as *Me Cuadra* by Mario Reinaldo Martínez Delgado and Ana Roxana Díaz Olano, *Por amor a dos* by Mario Reinaldo Martínez Delgado and Lea del Valle Fernández, and *Quiérete Mucho* by Aloyma Ravelo García and Haziél Scull Suárez.

During a visit to Cuba in November 2023, the authors of this article met with several generations of Cuban graphic artists and storytellers, from Ana Roxanna Díaz Alano (Black Lady) to renowned illustrator Alexis Gelabert, as well as critics, publishers, and experts on oral traditions in the Afro-Cuban experience. We participated in the workshop *Juegos de libertad: Prácticas de descolonización del universo infantil* (Games of Freedom: Decolonization Practices and the Universe of Children), organized by the *Casa de las Américas* and hosted by Zuleica Romay Guerra, author of *Elogio de la Altea o las paradojas de la racialidad* (2012). This was followed by visits of Havana and Matanzas during which we interacted with the independent grassroots Afro-descendant Neighborhood Network (RBA), the AfroArte Project, and the Yoruba Association. We developed a book project on Cuban comics and graphic art and envisioned a graphic novel in Spanish, English, and possibly German with a Cuban artist on the life of Argelia Fellove, former coordinator of Lesbian and Bisexual Women of Havana and current leader of the AfroDiverso cultural project. The overall lesson of this rich series of encounters was that in an environment of extreme material scarcity and despite a crisis of paper and publication in Cuba, there is a lively, anti-conformist and independent current in the area of comics and graphic art, in which the hardships of everyday life, the challenges of expressing marginalized voices through a medium with a long tradition in the country, and sensitive issues of gender and race are openly addressed by artists and writers young and old, whose connection to transnational networks of youth literature and sequential art are well established but little known, even in the sphere of Latin American comics studies.

In “Cuban Cartoonists: Masters of Coping” (2009), John Lent writes that paper scarcity and the lack of drawing utensils in the Special Period led artists to turn from comics to painting and several artists, such as the Afro-Cuban Emilio O’Farrill Almendariz from Matanzas, is doing both. This, as well as intersectional approaches to gender, race, and class by such young artists as Ana Roxanna Díaz Alano and Haziel Scull Suárez, Director of the *Vitrina de Babylonia* in Havana, will be explored in our project. Scull Suárez told Geoffroy de Laforcade that despite the crises and scarcity that have hampered the dissemination of Cuban comics, many of which have found alternative sponsors in Europe and created new spaces in social media, there is a distinct school of comics in the country that has made its mark on other regions, such as Mexico and Argentina, and can be considered Latin American in style, diversity, and scope. Comics, furthermore, in Cuba itself are not Havana-centric: Camaguey hosts the *Arte Comic* project, and there are groups of productive artists in Pinar del Río, Sancti Spíritus, Santiago de Cuba, and Matanzas, as well as individual creators in Holguín, Santa Clara, and Minas who interact with publishers, participate in workshops and exhibitions, and contribute distinct styles to the evolution of the medium. An Association of Cuban Comics is in gestation under the patronage of the Office of the Historian in Havana, which cooperates with Belgium in the *Vitrina de Babylonia* and the magazine *Kronikas*, and Cuban comic artists eagerly await the approval by the National Assembly of Popular Power of a “Day of the Cuban Comic” – tentatively August 14, date of the first publication of the iconic strip *Elipidio Valdés* in 1970.

The Argentinian critics Laura Cristina Fernández, Amadeo Gandolfo, and Pablo Turnes observe in a recent publication:

The last two decades have witnessed a renewal in the Latin American comics scene. This has been driven by the exchange habilitated by the Internet; by the growing interrelation between scenes previously considered only as “national”; by the experimentation in topics and formats and by the incorporation of authors

that come from different artistic activities (illustration, graphic design, visual arts, advertising, animation, etc.). (Fernández, Gandolfo, and Turnes 5)

The past six decades of Cuban history have been unique in Latin America, marked by internationally renowned artistic creativity in literature, art, and film as well as an inimitable comics tradition birthed by the revolution. Having endured periods of extreme scarcity and socio-political turmoil, it survived the passing of generations and is currently in ascent. [16] Clay Butler writes that “revolution is a poor option for change. Revolutions tend to attract reactionaries who are as lustful for power and control as those whom they attempt to overthrow (Flores Oliver 101). Despite periods of censorship and ideological orientation by the state, the history of Cuban comics and graphic art, adept at humor, satire, surreptitious social criticism, and stylistic innovation, is evidence that in the Cuban case, independence and creativity were never completely contained, and the causes the revolution continues to defend – education and literacy, internationalism, anti-imperialism and anti-colonial liberation – remain present in the corpus evaluated here alongside more critical and ambiguous inclinations among the younger generation. Whatever reservations one might have about the vertical model of communist governance, the pulse of society has always been felt in the production of visual art. What’s more, social media and the increased mobility of the population have generated increased interest in a dialogue with international comic forms and traditions, and a recognition by the intelligentsia and cultural establishment that comics are not a minor art form. Young Cuban artists are present at the grassroots level and in independent cultural initiatives that address controversial societal issues. They continue to produce in conditions of extreme material restriction, amidst a severe economic crisis and undeterred by the ongoing besiegement by a foreign power. It is evident to us that the words of Argentinian comics scholar Pablo Turnes are echoed in the Cuban environment of comics creation:

Perhaps the day when the inverted mirror of the fantastic and the horrifying afflicts upon the world that created them its fatal charge will never arrive. For now, and until then, we will continue to have beautiful stories, furtive pleasures, objects of fading relevance, illuminations of an instant, manuals on the history of the future. The noble reticence of believing that this is all there is, that there is another way of telling, like detectives who are as lost as their readers: in obscure labyrinths where, every once in a while, a gem emerges that gives us a glimpse of this necklace of pearls that we have been unwittingly piecing together all along. (Turnes 143)

Endnotes

[1] Cf. Fernández, Gandolfo, and Turnes: "To write about Latin American history is to face a particular conundrum: while most Latin American countries have experienced similar political and economic processes, these have been filtered by the particular characteristics, history, social qualities and economic realities of each country" (2).

[2] Lent calls these cartoonists "masters of coping" (2009). Fernández, Gandolfo, and Turnes note "the economic reality of Latin American graphic production, made within an increasingly precarious context. The absence of a stable industry, the creation of comics in fragmentary form and the impossibility of artists to live of their trade are key factors" (5).

[3] Cf. Álvarez Amell: "Since the nineteenth century there has been a strong tradition of Cuban comics" (49). Examples of nineteenth-century works include "*marquillas cigarreras*, the illustrated cigarette packets which thrived as a commodity, combining one of the two most distinctive Cuban products, tobacco (the other being sugar) with modern print technology, namely chromolithography," and *La Charanga*, the first Cuban magazine featuring graphic humor, founded by the Spaniard Juan Martínez Villergas (Catalá Carrasco, "From Suspicion" 139).

[4] Cf. Catalá Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer: "some [Latin American] countries have far more developed comics industries [...] than others" (4); Fernández, Gandolfo, and Turnes diagnose an "absence of a stable [comics] industry" (2023); Catalá Carrasco notes difficulties in "develop[ing] a national comics industry" in pre-revolutionary Cuba, when Cuban comics competed with American imports ("From Suspicion" 140).

[5] See also Fernández L'Hoeste and Poblete (2009); Catalá Carrasco, Drinot, Scorer (2017); Fernández, Gandolfo, Turnes (2023).

[6] Cooper (2008) discusses the magazine's stereotypical depiction of gender roles in the first year of the revolution.

[7] Virgilio Martínez Gainza was his generation's most prominent sequential artist from the 1950s onward and is considered the "father of Cuban comics."

[8] See Negrín (2004) for further analysis of the *El Pitirre*.

[9] Álvarez Amell analyzes the "personal trajectories" of Prohías, who left Cuba to start a career in the U.S., and Santiago Armada (Chago), who stayed and coped with "the island's conflictive politics" (44). In both cases, she recognizes "a painful entanglement in their country's politics" (53).

[10] Mogno (2005) provides additional analysis. Ariel Pérez Rodríguez (2020) observes in a blog entry on the history of Cuban comics: "In a universe impregnated with Manga, Marvel, DC comics, including the saturation of heroes and superheroes, a group of good Cubans are increasingly rising these days, like warriors defending our heritage, in the 21st century, trying to bring out of oblivion our own material, our own comics, those that made history, those we read in our youth, or when we were children... a rescue that will highlight the expressive magnitude of comics *Made in Cuba*. Everyone will benefit: fans, researchers, visual arts critics, academics in general."

[11] Citing remarks by Edith García Buchaca (President, National Culture Council) from 1963 and an article titled "Muñequitos: opio preparado por la USIS" (Comics: opium prepared by the USIS) that "stressed the use of comics by imperialism to discipline the masses" (*Revolución*, Oct 16, 1961), Catalá Carrasco discerns "two parallel discourses: one, that of the high-brow intellectuals worried about mass culture, ideology and national independence, and the other embodied by professionals in the visual arts who set out to create a Cuban national comics industry, using this medium effectively to build a revolutionary consciousness and to mobilize the masses" ("From Suspicion" 139).

[12] Published in English as *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*.

[13] On the *mambi* figure, see Padrón (1989).

[14] See also work by Orestes Suárez, whom Catalá Carrasco calls "one of the best comics artists in Cuba over the past forty years." Suárez' realistic style was appreciated in Cuba and in foreign magazines ("Raising" 43). For an overview of graphic storytellers active before the 1990s, see Avilés Montalvo (1990).

[15] <https://ibw21.org/news/cuban-government-promotes-program-against-racism-and-discrimination/>.

[16] As Lent (2001) puts it: "Survival is Name of the Game for Cuban Cartoonists."

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Migración indocumentada y activismo migrante: El activismo de la narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense

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Resumen

*Este artículo estudia las representaciones entrelazadas de la migración indocumentada latinoamericana a Estados Unidos, sobre todo la mexicana, con un enfoque en el activismo en pro de los derechos humanos y laborales de las y los migrantes indocumentados en obras de narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense de reciente publicación. La migración mexicana a EE.UU. y la vida de las y los migrantes en el país han sido temas centrales en las artes y la literatura mexicoamericanas. El gran atractivo de los cómics y novelas gráficas, que gozan de un público amplio, le han asegurado un potencial especial al creciente corpus de narrativa gráfica mexicoamericana para intervenir artísticamente en los discursos públicos sobre estos temas. En nuestro artículo, analizamos cómo la novela gráfica para niños *Undocumented: A Worker's Fight* (2018) de Duncan Tonatiuh y la serie de cómics de superhéroes *El Peso Hero* (2012-) de Hector Rodriguez [2] se posicionan a favor de los indocumentados y sus derechos humanos y laborales en los debates actuales sobre la migración irregular de Latinoamérica hacia Estados Unidos. Mostramos específicamente como estas narrativas emplean elementos apreciables de las culturas visuales y literarias tanto de México como de Estados Unidos para informar al público sobre la migración indocumentada, empoderar a personas migrantes y criticar su explotación en ambos lados de la frontera.*

Palabras clave: migración latinoamericana, Estados Unidos, activismo, novela gráfica, cómic de superhéroes.

Introducción

Las personas mexicanas no solo conforman al grupo de inmigrantes más numeroso del Estados Unidos actual, sino que también han tenido una presencia de largo aliento en el país. Por ende, no sorprende que la migración mexicana a Estados Unidos y la calidad de vida de las y los migrantes en Estados Unidos jueguen un papel importante en la cultura mexicano-estadounidense (Gonzales 114). Con obras que van desde las baladas fronterizas del siglo XIX hasta las obras de narrativa gráfica contemporáneas, las y los escritores, músicos y artistas visuales mexicanos y mexicano-estadounidenses han capturado las experiencias de quienes migran de manera no autorizada. Han escudriñado el nativismo angloamericano y las políticas migratorias restrictivas, toda vez que han validado a los trayectos e identidades

de quienes migran para empoderar a las personas indocumentadas de cara a la represión política y la explotación económica. Entre estas formas de expresión cultural, el atractivo de los cómics y de la novela gráfica entre públicos muy amplios que cruzan barreras sociales, culturales y lingüísticas (Aldama y González 1) le otorgan a la narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense un potencial particular cuando se trata de intervenir artísticamente en el discurso público sobre la migración indocumentada. En este texto, analizaremos la manera en que ejemplares recientes de la narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense han alcanzado este potencial, pues emplean las cualidades narrativas y estéticas de sus géneros para defender a las personas indocumentadas y sus derechos humanos y laborales en los debates actuales sobre la migración latinoamericana irregular hacia Estados Unidos. Mientras que distintas

publicaciones han retratado la manera en que la narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense representa a las y los mexicanos que migran a Estados Unidos sin documentos, así como a la vida en la frontera México-Estados Unidos (Aldama 113; 116; Aldama y González 10-12; Castilleja 3-9; Davies 388; Ramirez), ni una publicación académica hasta hoy ha explorado cómo las narrativas gráficas mexicano-estadounidenses abordan y entrelazan ambos temas.

En este ensayo, utilizamos la palabra “migración” para referirnos al “cambio de residencia permanente o semipermanente, normalmente a través de alguna frontera administrativa” de una persona o grupo de personas. Esto involucraría a uno o varios traslados “de duraciones variadas, a través de numerosas divisiones territoriales”; también incluyo tanto a la migración voluntaria como a la forzada, englobando igualmente a los traslados de personas refugiadas y a los casos en que las personas son orilladas a migrar, como con la migración laboral contratada (Faist 18, 22-25) [3]. Así pues, mientras que la migración puede considerarse una condición de largo plazo, cuando usamos el término “migrante” para referirnos a quienes cruzan fronteras y viven fuera de sus países de origen no buscamos sugerir que esta sea una categoría natural, innata o permanente de la identidad. Asimismo, utilizamos los términos “no autorizada” e “indocumentada” para referirnos a la migración de las personas que se trasladan a un país extranjero y viven en él sin contar con los requisitos de visa o permiso de residencia. El término simplemente describe un estatus legal, sin ánimos de prescribir una identidad.

Entre el corpus rico y diverso de la narrativa gráfica mexicano-estadounidense, este ensayo se enfoca en la novela gráfica para niños de 2018, *Undocumented: A Worker's Fight* (“Indocumentado: La lucha de un obrero”), de Duncan Tonatiuh y en la serie de cómics de superhéroes *El Peso Hero* (2012-) de Hector Rodriguez. No solo son ejemplares recientes que abordan ciertos temas de los debates políticos actuales, sino que ejemplifican dos aproximaciones a nuestro tema de interés bastante divergentes, pues se alinean con dos

tradiciones estéticas distintas mientras tratan aspectos diferentes del activismo por y para personas migrantes indocumentadas. Además, sus públicos solo se traslapan de manera limitada. Después de esbozar la migración de México y Latinoamérica a Estados Unidos y las luchas de las y los inmigrantes, hacemos un recuento de la tradición del arte activista mexicano y el desarrollo y potencial crítico de la narrativa gráfica en Estados Unidos. Discutimos el concepto del activismo como marco teórico para analizar cómo las obras de Tonatiuh y Rodriguez intervienen artísticamente en los debates y prácticas del cruce fronterizo indocumentado para incidir en el activismo en pro de los derechos humanos y laborales de las y los migrantes indocumentados en Estados Unidos.

Al analizar nuestros casos de estudio literarios, examinamos cómo las obras de Tonatiuh y Rodriguez representan dos momentos distintos pero interconectados en las experiencias de las y los migrantes indocumentados en Estados Unidos: el viaje que implica el cruce de la frontera con Estados Unidos y la posterior lucha por los derechos civiles y laborales de las personas indocumentadas en Estados Unidos. Mostramos cómo estas narrativas emplean distintos elementos visuales de las culturas mexicanas y estadounidenses para educar a sus públicos diversos sobre la migración indocumentada, criticar al racismo y la explotación y empoderar a migrantes en Estados Unidos. Específicamente, proponemos que la narrativa en primera persona de *Undocumented* permite que las y los lectores puedan empatizar con las personas indocumentadas, toda vez que las imágenes validan a las y los mexicanos indígenas en específico y la trama puede inspirar al activismo migrante multiétnico en pro de los derechos laborales en Estados Unidos. De manera similar, demostramos cómo *El Peso Hero* apropia a las imágenes, personajes y tramas de los cómics estadounidenses de superhéroes para escudriñar el maltrato de las y los migrantes indocumentados latinoamericanos en las tierras fronterizas de México y Estados Unidos. Con este ejercicio, afirmamos que la serie de cómics utiliza estas experiencias para validar a las vidas de las y los inmigrantes latinoamericanos

en Estados Unidos mientras que, de manera similar a *Undocumented*, la serie se posiciona a favor de los derechos humanos y laborales de las personas indocumentadas, los cuales se han visto cada vez más vulnerados en los últimos años.

La migración mexicana y las luchas y activismos migrantes en Estados Unidos

Cuando Estados Unidos anexó el norte de México tras su victoria en la guerra mexicano-estadounidense (1845-1848), la población mexicana de la región de repente se vio convertida en una minoría étnica dentro de otro país. (de Genova 162-65; Gonzales 79-298). A pesar de su presencia histórica y residencia mayoritariamente legal dentro del país, el discurso público estadounidense se suele referir a las personas mexicanas como otredades recién llegadas e inasimilables que ponen en riesgo el *modus vivendi* estadounidense (De Genova 161-62, 168). Esto se relaciona con un discurso global que se ha vuelto más discriminatorio en las últimas décadas y que busca restarle legitimidad a las migraciones no autorizadas que transitan de países más pobres a los comparativamente más ricos. Efectivamente, se presentan a las personas indocumentadas como amenazas socioeconómicas que le arrebatan trabajos a los demás, reclaman apoyos no justificados, cometen crímenes y no logran integrarse a las sociedades de llegada (Anderson 3-5).

La migración mexicana a Estados Unidos se ha visto afectada por las condiciones económicas, sociales y políticas de ambos países. En general, los salarios más altos y la demanda persistente por la mano de obra en Estados Unidos, por un lado, así como las inequidades socioeconómicas y la creciente violencia en México, por otro, han incentivado a la migración mexicana (de Haas y Vezzoli 1049-51; Capps et al. 4-5; Feldmann et al. 1-3, 9). Tras los años 60, la ley inmigratoria estadounidense ha impuesto condiciones más estrictas para las y los mexicanos que buscan migrar a Estados Unidos de manera autorizada, toda vez que las personas que migran de forma indocumentada se ven criminalizadas y tratadas de “ilegales” (De Genova 160-65, 169-77). Desde los años 80, las

autoridades estadounidenses han militarizado a la frontera México-Estados Unidos para hacer ver su control sobre la línea fronteriza de cara a la continua migración irregular latinoamericana y el mayor nativismo que ha marcado a Estados Unidos (de Haas y Vezzoli 1050; Feldmann et al. 3). Asimismo, las autoridades federales y estatales han detenido, procesado y deportado a cada vez más personas por cruzar la frontera de manera indocumentada, incluyendo a solicitantes de asilo y menores de edad, en un intento de, por un lado, proyectar su fuerza ante las y los votantes estadounidenses y, por otro, disuadir a otros migrantes de intentar cruzar (Davies 383-84). Esto no solo afecta a las personas mexicanas sino también a quienes, huyendo de la pobreza, la violencia y/o la represión política en Centro y Suramérica, el Caribe y Asia, pasan por México en su trayecto hacia Estados Unidos (de Haas y Vezzoli 1050-51; Feldmann et al. 2, 7-8, 13-14; Capps et al. 1-2, 16).

Su deportabilidad y su falta de acceso a un mercado laboral formal hacen que personas migrantes no-documentadas devengan particularmente susceptibles a la explotación económica y a la vulneración de sus derechos (De Genova 161, 168, 178-79). La población latinoamericana indocumentada en Estados Unidos está sobrerrepresentada en los trabajos manuales, al laborar en sectores como los de transporte, agricultura, atención a la salud y servicios (Capps 11; Gonzales 231). Estos trabajos implican esfuerzos físicos extenuantes, salarios y niveles de sindicalización bajos y restricciones al acceso a la seguridad social. Además de ver limitados sus derechos civiles, políticos y laborales, las y los migrantes no autorizados suelen desconocer sus derechos y sienten miedo a reclamarlos ante la posibilidad de ser deportados si se conoce su estatus de indocumentados (Robinson y Santos 3, 6-7). El activismo inmigrante y laboral ha estado respondiendo a esta situación. Las organizaciones activistas para las y los migrantes mexicanos y latinoamericanos, a veces en conjunción con luchas sociales más amplias, les han informado sobre sus derechos y apoyado en su lucha por exigirlos. Un ejemplo destacado de esto fue el movimiento Chicano

(mexicano-estadounidense) de los años 60 y 70 (Gonzales 194-225). Al educar a públicos cada vez más amplios y abogar por las personas ante los medios y los encargados de tomar decisiones, las y los activistas buscan fomentar un discurso público más informado e inspirar acciones políticas para mejorar la calidad de vida de las personas migrantes, sobre todo las indocumentadas (Gonzales 181-90; Robinson y Santos 8-12).

El activismo mexicano-estadounidense y la narrativa gráfica

Además de tomar acciones políticas o legales, el activismo mexicoamericano laboral y migrante se ha manifestado a través del activismo, neologismo que combina las palabras “arte” y “activismo”. Nutriéndose de varias vanguardias artísticas y movimientos contraculturales del siglo XX, el concepto del activismo emergió en los años 2000. El término concibe al arte como un tipo de activismo sociocultural que opera a través de la intervención en la esfera pública. Las formas activistas de la expresión creativa suelen ser comunales, antielitistas y anticomerciales. Por ejemplo, pueden organizarse caminatas urbanas, espectáculos públicos tipo *performance*, murales y grafiti, aunque también, en años más recientes, se han creado obras digitales. Al aprovechar las cualidades estéticas del arte y la estetización de prácticas diarias como el caminar, el activismo suele interpelar a poblaciones y sitios específicos para empoderar a las personas ordinarias, incidir en el discurso público e inspirar cambios sociales (Aladro-Vico et al. 10-16; Sandoval y Latorre 81-84, 87).

El activismo artístico mexicano-estadounidense contemporáneo emergió a partir del movimiento chicano. Dicho movimiento, por su parte, se nutrió de las letras mexicano-estadounidenses que venían escribiéndose desde finales del siglo XIX, así como del muralismo mexicano políticamente comprometido que surgió a partir de la Revolución mexicana y del teatro socialista *agitprop* (Gonzales 251-60; Latorre 87-90). Siguiendo esta tradición, el activismo contemporáneo usa imaginarios reconocibles entre las personas mexicano-estadounidense y aborda temas de su cultura para validar a las

identidades, historias y experiencias mexicanas en Estados Unidos. Intenta convertir a individuos y comunidades en sujetos protagónicos y, en ocasiones, los hace también (co)creadores de intervenciones públicas y otras producciones culturales. Al poner en primer plano ciertas historias y perspectivas subrepresentadas, humaniza a los grupos marginados, incluyendo a migrantes indocumentados o a juventudes poco privilegiadas, para así empoderarlas (Latorre 91-100).

El potencial del activismo emerge de la capacidad del arte de contar historias y presentar imágenes que se oponen a las narrativas hegemónicas sociales y a las representaciones mediáticas de grupos marginados, como el de las personas migrantes, para validar sus identidades y experiencias (Burge 10-14). Muchas obras de literatura, cine, teatro y visuales nos “ofrecen un espacio importante para relatar las narrativas de la migración, no necesariamente como testimonios de experiencias personales, sino como manera de abordar ciertos desafíos contemporáneos, como las implicaciones de las fronteras y de la ciudadanía o las preguntas e imaginarios que emanan de ellas” (Sellman 756). Dado que atraen públicos amplios y suelen darles voz a aquellos temas que conciernen a la sociedad actual, los géneros literarios populares y otras maneras de contar cuentos, como bien los cómics o la narrativa especulativa, pueden fungir como herramientas poderosas para forjar el discurso público. Desde los años 90, un corpus creciente de narrativas gráficas de varias regiones del mundo ha abordado a los peligros y privaciones que enfrentan las personas refugiadas y migrantes laborales indocumentadas al buscar seguridad y oportunidades (Burge 16-19; Davies 385-86).

Al igual que otras y otros artistas de color (Nehrlich y Nowotny 224), desde los años de la posguerra, las y los artistas latinx (es decir, de origen latino y de géneros diferentes) han contribuido a la industria del cómic desde la escritura, la ilustración y la producción. Sin embargo, las perspectivas, experiencias y narrativas de dichas y dichos creadores se mantuvieron invisibilizadas en las corrientes dominantes del cómic y la novela gráfica estadounidenses hasta finales del siglo XX

(Aldama y González 15). Desde entonces, los cómics de autoría latina o enfocados en lo latino no solo han proliferado, sino que se han diversificado temáticamente y ahora podemos encontrar ejemplares como las narrativas de superhéroes de *El Gato Negro* de Richard Dominguez, la ciencia ficción *Love & Rockets* por Los Bros Hernandez, el relato *noir* detectivesco *Sonambulo* de Rafael Navarro y la autobiográfica *Cuba: My Revolution* por Inverna Lockpez. Estas obras, entre otras, “utilizan una gran variedad de dispositivos de la narrativa, desarrollan personajes complejos y se desarrollan en un abanico de ambientes ricamente plasmados” (Aldama 113) al retratar a personajes latinxs e integrar elementos fantásticos o metanarrativos que retan a las convenciones del género y apelan a un público cada vez más educado y diverso (Aldama 113-25; Aldama y González 1-10, 16-17).

Las obras de novela gráfica frecuentemente no suelen considerarse artistas, pues no intervienen en espacios públicos físicos. Sin embargo, siguiendo estudios recientes (Salzbrunn y von Weichs 113, 116-18; Shaltout 1-5), argumentamos que las narrativas gráficas sociopolíticamente comprometidas pueden caracterizarse como tal cuando aprovechan su potencial estético y apelan a públicos amplios para intervenir en el espacio social del discurso público. La narrativa gráfica que aborda a la migración suele ofrecer contranarrativas de cara a las concepciones hegemónicas de la migración no autorizada como amenaza a las fronteras y al cuerpo del país de llegada. Mientras que algunas de estas obras buscan provocar cierta simpatía por las crisis que enfrentan las personas indocumentadas entre lectoras y lectores más convencionales (Burge 16-17), otras buscan empoderar a públicos marginalizados o inspirar activismos en pro de los derechos de las personas indocumentadas. En lo que resta de este ensayo, discutiré dos obras recientes de narrativa gráfica: la novela gráfica para niños *Undocumented: A Worker's Fight* (2018) de Duncan Tonatiuh y la serie de cómics de superhéroes *El Peso Hero* (2012-) de Hector Rodriguez, ambas de las cuales cumplen con esta función. Nuestro análisis se centra en el modo en que estas obras abordan

el viaje a través de la frontera que emprenden las y los migrantes no-autorizados mexicanos y latinoamericanos, así como su posterior lucha por sus derechos civiles y laborales en Estados Unidos. Mostramos cómo las narrativas de Tonatiuh y Rodríguez recurren a aspectos de la cultura literaria popular y visual mexicana y estadounidense para validar la migración laboral y los derechos de las y los trabajadores, empoderar a personas migrantes vulnerables y criticar su explotación a ambos lados de la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México.

Undocumented: A Worker's Fight (2018) de Duncan Tonatiuh

En su nota de autor para *Undocumented*, Duncan Tonatiuh señala la condición paradójica de la migración que tanto su obra como la de Hector Rodriguez critican: “Las personas inmigrantes [indocumentadas] son vistas como criminales que tienen que ser echadas o frenadas en sus intentos de entrar [al] país. Pero son una parte importante de la fuerza laboral ... una fuente de mano de obra barata”. Tonatiuh nació y se crio en México, pero estudió la preparatoria en Estados Unidos para después graduarse de la Escuela de Diseño de Parsons en Nueva York. Desde entonces, ha escrito e ilustrado libros y narrativas gráficas infantiles enfocados en la historia, cultura y vida cotidiana mexicano-estadounidense. Con frecuencia, sus libros también retratan la lucha por la justicia social como parte de la experiencia mexicana y estadounidense (Tonatiuh, entrevista 241-43). Dado que las obras de Tonatiuh han sido publicadas por Abrams, editorial neoyorquina especializada en libros ilustrados de alta calidad, podrían ser inasequibles para quienes presume retratar, lo cual debilita, en cierto grado, su compromiso con el cambio social. Al mismo tiempo, al apelar a una creciente clase media latinxs y a otras y otros lectores de la literatura latinxs (243), sus libros validan a la cultura mexicana y generan empatía entre públicos cada vez mayores cuando se trata de los retos que enfrentan las personas menos privilegiadas.

Inspirada en las historias de activistas en torno al trabajo indocumentado en Nueva York, *Undocumented*, de Tonatiuh, pone en primer

plano las vulnerabilidades generadas por la marginalización económica, social y étnica pero también enfatiza a la contrafuerza que representa la acción comunal y la solidaridad. Desde la primera persona, narra la historia de un migrante mexicano joven e indocumentado que vive en California, posiblemente generando empatía entre las y los lectores por el protagonista y las dificultades que enfrenta debido a la pobreza, la violencia policiaca y fronteriza y la explotación laboral. La narrativa retoma un cuento de 2013 de Tonatiuh de tema animal, *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* ("El Conejo Pancho y el coyote: la historia de un migrante"). Al igual que *Undocumented*, *Pancho Rabbit* retrata tanto al trayecto como a la vida laboral de las y los migrantes mexicanos indocumentados en Estados Unidos, así como su vulnerabilidad ante la explotación durante y después del cruce. El formato del cuento, sobre un conejo pequeño, es especialmente apto para conectar con lectoras y lectores jóvenes. Los protagonistas animales no solo suscitan empatía, sino que hacen que el argumento se vuelva más abstracto, pues el conejo viaja a "los campos de zanahoria y lechuga" al norte de una frontera no especificada (*Pancho Rabbit* 2). Los peligros del reino animal que enfrenta Pancho Rabbit, como el ser comido por un coyote, hacen que la narrativa sea digerible y poco amenazante para las infancias (21-23).

En el caso de *Undocumented*, a pesar de que emplea el formato de un libro infantil con texto y se dirige a un grupo incluso más joven que *Pancho Rabbit* (de cinco a siete años, en vez de ser para niños de seis a nueve años), el ambiente real en que se desenvuelve la trama de *Undocumented* y la mayor complejidad de su argumento implican más dificultades de lectura. Para suavizar los retos y la violencia retratados ante las infancias y sus padres, el libro combina elementos visuales y textuales similares a los del libro anterior con otras estrategias gráficas de la narrativa. Al igual que *Pancho Rabbit*, *Undocumented* emplea un registro lingüístico sencillo que integra ciertas expresiones en español dentro del texto en inglés. Además, muchas de las palabras en español que aparecen en el texto sí se entienden en Estados Unidos, como "niño" o "compañero", o bien se

pueden interpretar a partir de las ilustraciones, en el caso del "palo" o del "piquete" de huelga (*Undocumented* 2-3, 19). Estos aspectos permiten que las y los lectores jóvenes, así como los públicos con conocimientos limitados del español, puedan comprender el relato, toda vez que se valida el español como elemento importante de la cultura mexicoamericana. Para quienes no dominen al español y el inglés por igual, los cambios de código entre ambos idiomas reflejan la experiencia de batallar con una lengua extranjera o menos conocida, lo cual genera una cierta empatía por Juan, el protagonista de *Undocumented* que habla mixteco y, por lo tanto, debe aprender tanto español como inglés tras haber migrado a Estados Unidos.

Haciendo eco con el trabajo previo de Tonatiuh (Tonatiuh, entrevista, 242, 245), *Undocumented* recurre a las tradiciones de la representación visual mexicanas. En su frecuente uso del collage, por ejemplo, subraya el patrimonio mexicano de algunos de los personajes, pues las cobijas que usan en realidad son sarapes (*Undocumented* 6). Asimismo, las facciones, los cuerpos y los movimientos de todos los personajes nos remiten a los códices mixtecos, que son manuscritos pictóricos mexicanos de las eras coloniales y precoloniales. Los códices también abordan temas históricos y culturales y pueden "adoptar la forma de una tira continua, ser enrollados o doblados en acordeón" (Castilleja 3), como lo hace el volumen de Tonatiuh. El estilo visual de *Undocumented* también evoca al muralismo mexicano posrevolucionario, sobre todo a las obras de Diego Rivera, las cuales se vieron fuertemente influenciadas por las tradiciones artísticas indígenas y combinan un cierto orgullo cultural con la agenda política de empoderar a las personas indígenas y de las clases trabajadoras (Kettenmann). El giro visual mixteco de *Undocumented* y sus pliegues del acordeón, combinados con la historia de un cruce fronterizo indocumentado narrado desde la perspectiva de un protagonista del estilo de Diego Rivera (es decir, un joven indígena de la clase trabajadora), nos remiten a *Migrar* (2011), otro ejemplar de narrativa gráfica reciente, esta vez de José Manuel Mateo y Javier Martínez Pedro (Mateo y Martínez Pedro; Castilleja 3-4). Aunque no es necesario identificar

estas referencias para poder entender a *Undocumented*, al nutrirse de estos modelos visuales, la novela gráfica valida a la cultura mexicana, incluyendo el patrimonio indígena de Juan, y a su tradición de articular a la justicia social con el arte visual público.

Llama la atención que, aunque la mayor parte del relato no requiere una familiaridad con la cultura mexicana o con la migración mexicana de parte de las y los lectores, las escenas que narran el cruce fronterizo de Juan sí la exigen. En estas escenas, el texto emplea coloquialismos mexicanos como “migras” para referirse a los agentes de control fronterizo y “coyote” para denotar a quienes guían a migrantes en su cruce indocumentado por la frontera México-Estados Unidos, sin proveer explicaciones (*Undocumented* 3). La palabra coyote, de hecho, se refiere a un canino nativo de Norteamérica, pero también se utilizaba en la época mexicana precolonial para referirse a una persona embaucadora. Las habilidades de los coyotes modernos para navegar espacios marginalizados han hecho que este nombre se vuelva apto para describir a quienes trafican a humanos de manera consensuada hoy en día (Sánchez 415-16). Como el coyote depredador de *Pancho Rabbit*, el traficante de humanos de *Undocumented* se retrata como el canino llamado coyote (*Undocumented* 3; *Pancho Rabbit* 12-26). Esta selección de imágenes recalca la posible amenaza que los coyotes representan para sus clientes (Sánchez 414), por lo que *Undocumented* no glorifica al coyote ni minimiza los peligros de cruzar la frontera de manera no autorizada, aunque sea con un guía. A su vez, las referencias textualmente neutrales a esta figura rechazan a la demonización, a menudo racializada, del coyote retratado como “traficante abominable de vidas” (Sánchez 413). En Estados Unidos, esta demonización es común tanto en los discursos convencionales como en los latinxs que buscan desacreditar a la migración indocumentada o escudriñar la explotación de las personas más vulnerables (413-14, 419, 421-22). Sin embargo, la narrativa de Tonatiuh reconoce la realidad vivida del tráfico consensuado de personas a lo largo de la zona fronteriza México-Estados Unidos, pues representa una manera de satisfacer

las necesidades de las personas migrantes mexicanas pobres que no cuentan con rutas autorizadas para acceder a Estados Unidos (Sánchez 414, 417-18).

Al sostener el libro y desplegar sus páginas oscuras, *Undocumented* llega a evocar al “muro”, alto y fortificado, que se yergue a lo largo de varios tramos de la frontera México-Estados Unidos, lo cual refuerza la imagen de Juan al momento de escalar la barda para cruzar a Estados Unidos. En la parte baja de la misma página se muestra el tipo de violencia que pueden enfrentar las personas que cruzan la frontera sin autorización cuando las autoridades fronterizas buscan disuadir a su entrada en Estados Unidos. Acá, Juan retrata cómo, el día anterior al cruce, dos oficiales de la patrulla fronteriza detienen y golpean a él, sacándole sangre en la frente. Sin embargo, dado que los oficiales optan por un palo en vez de una pistola y hieren a Juan mínimamente, la escena mitiga el tipo de fuerza que se despliega, haciéndola apta para el público joven al que va dirigido el libro. Otros paneles de *Undocumented* se valen del humor para suavizar a la violencia y vulnerabilidad que las y los migrantes pobres e indocumentados como Juan experimentan en Estados Unidos. Por ejemplo, Juan describe al pequeño departamento que comparte con su tío y tres primos como un “bachelor pad,” término que describe la vivienda de un hombre profesional soltero (*Undocumented* 6). Al apropiarse de este término, el narrador le resta importancia a las dificultades y peligros que las personas indocumentadas enfrentan en Estados Unidos. Más allá de las escenas sobre el cruce fronterizo de Juan, las descripciones de su calidad de vida no solo llevan a las y los lectores a entender su situación, sino que le brindan un cierto nivel de agencia para representar sus experiencias a través de la narrativa.

La lucha por la agencia y derechos de las y los trabajadores domina la segunda mitad de *Undocumented*, en la cual Juan llega a conocer sus derechos, lidera una lucha exitosa por mejorar sus condiciones laborales y las de sus compañeras y compañeros y se convierte en un activista laboral. Mientras que esta sección del libro incluye pasajes textuales largos y complejos, llama la atención la manera en que las imágenes

refuerzan los mensajes del texto. Por ejemplo, en la página en que Juan conoce a otras personas migrantes en un centro para trabajadores, el texto aparece emanar, como la luz que brilla, de una bombilla en el techo para sugerir que las personas se ven iluminadas al aprender sobre sus derechos laborales. De manera similar, en una doble página que retrata el momento en que Juan confronta a su jefe, este último es ilustrado como una calavera, una imagen culturalmente mexicana que representa a la muerte con un cráneo. Así, se ilustra el carácter explotador del jefe y también la ilegalidad de su intento de sobornar a Juan para que retire los cargos en su contra (13, 19-20). Estas formas visuales facilitan el entendimiento de la historia y además marcan un claro posicionamiento a favor de los derechos laborales. Sobre todo, *Undocumented* enmarca a la lucha de Juan dentro de una más amplia por asegurarles condiciones laborales justas a las y los trabajadores migrantes con experiencias diversas, con y sin papeles. De hecho, en la historia, es una colega china quien informa a Juan de sus derechos legales, mientras que el narrador también reconoce que las luchas de las y los trabajadores chinos y latinxs son compartidas. El centro de trabajo en que se conocen funciona como espacio utópico dentro de la narrativa y le permite a las y los trabajadores encontrarse y cruzar fronteras étnicas y ocupacionales. La realización de que su lucha es solo una pieza dentro del engranaje de una lucha más grande también lo inspira a convertirse en activista más allá de su causa personal. Esto se percibe en el doble pánél que lo plasma en una huelga multiétnica de trabajadores, quienes muestran sus pancartas tanto en inglés como en mandarín. Los colores recurrentes de negro, café, azul y verde que se perciben en la vestimenta de los trabajadores y sus posturas corporales similares también subrayan su solidaridad compartida, que cruza fronteras étnicas y lingüísticas (17-18).

***El Peso Hero* (2012-) de Hector Rodriguez**

Mientras que la novela gráfica de Tonatiuh sobre todo se enfoca en los retos de Juan como migrante indocumentado en California, la serie de cómics de Hector Rodriguez, *El Peso Hero* (2012-

), se centra en las condiciones que enfrentan las personas migrantes indocumentadas al cruzar la frontera México-Estados Unidos y vivir entre las sombras. Nacido en Eagle Pass, Hector Rodriguez III creció en College Station, Texas, y trabaja como instructor bilingüe en una escuela orientada hacia estudiantes latinos en Dallas. El autor creó *El Peso Hero*, un cómic de superhéroes con quienes sus estudiantes y otras y otros lectores latinxs como él se podrían identificar. El aspecto y las acciones del superhéroe sirven para validar las propias vidas y culturas de las familias, frecuentemente inmigrantes, de la zona fronteriza México-Estados Unidos ("El creador"). Para asegurarse de que sus obras sean accesibles para públicos amplios que incluirían a sus estudiantes latinxs, Rodriguez publica sus cómics con su propia editorial independiente, Rio Bravo Comics.

El Peso Hero se nutre de las historias e imágenes de los cómics de superhéroes y de la cultura fronteriza texana-mexicana. Tanto los cómics de superhéroes alternativos como los convencionales suelen relatar historias sobre individuos con poderes sobrehumanos que trabajan para subsanar injusticias, luchar contra el crimen y proteger a los inocentes. Sin embargo, mientras que los cómics ponen en primer plano al individualismo heroico y a los valores hegemónicos de Estados Unidos (Nehrlich y Nowotny 226-27; Espinoza 183-84), las narrativas latinxs que han emergido a partir de los años 90, como *El Gato Negro* de Richard Dominguez o la nueva serie del *Blue Beetle* de DC Comics, suelen rechazar a la asimilación cultural, luchar contra la discriminación racial y defender a las comunidades (Aldama 113; Aldama y González 5-6, 10-12; Espinoza 181-92). El protagonista de la serie *Peso Hero*, un joven mexicano llamado Ignacio Rivera, se dota de fuerza sobrehumana, se vuelve invulnerable de manera desconocida y después usa a sus poderes para luchar contra el crimen y la injusticia social en las zonas fronterizas de Texas y México. Ignacio, descrito como "metahumano" (Rodriguez, 10), nos remite a ciertas figuras de superhéroe como la de Superman, que viene del espacio, o la de Capitán América, soldado estadounidense cuyas habilidades se intensificaron con intervenciones médicas.

Gracias a una portada de 2015 en que *Peso Hero* tumba a Donald Trump al suelo (reimpreso en Rodríguez, *Eagle Pass* 22), incluso se establece al personaje como heredero de Capitán América, pues hace referencia explícita a la primera portada de dicho cómic, de 1941, en que Capitán América le da un puñetazo a Adolfo Hitler (Rocha). En la portada de *Peso Hero* el pie de la imagen dice “en contra del racismo” y un mapa de la zona fronteriza México-Estados Unidos, con el pie “sueños fronterizos” en la esquina, contextualizan a las acciones del superhéroe mexicano, quien lucha en contra de la creciente militarización de la frontera: una de las promesas de campaña y eventuales políticas presidenciales clave de Trump para reducir a la migración mexicana. Un aspecto paralelo que comparten *Peso Hero* y *Supermán* es que los dos son extranjeros que ingresaron a Estados Unidos de manera clandestina. Aunque *Supermán* es un extraterrestre que viene de un planeta ficticio, su “ilegalidad” en Estados Unidos ha sido señalada por la cultura popular mexicoamericana. Una corrida norteña mexicana bromea que *Supermán* debería ser deportado de Estados Unidos en vez de ser tan celebrado, pues no solo es un inmigrante “ilegal,” sino que “le hace al judicial” y “no tiene mica ni permiso pa’ volar” (Los Hermanos Ortiz, ll. 9, 17-18).

Mientras que Ignacio Rivera y Capitán América comparten cierta identidad como humanos que, súbitamente, se ven dotados de superpoderes, además de haber entrado a Estados Unidos de manera no autorizada, el nombre del superhéroe *Peso Hero* es más ambivalente de lo que lo son *Supermán* o Capitán América. En el cómic, las autoridades estadounidenses lo acuñan así para restarle importancia a sus superpoderes, al sugerir que “no vale ni un peso devaluado” (*Borderland* 4). Así, el nombre *Peso Hero* da cuenta de la poca apreciación que existe para mexicanos como Ignacio entre la mayoría de la sociedad estadounidense. El nombre también nos remite al peso, o importancia, del héroe en la comunidad latina y su identificación con ella. Además, otro aspecto que distingue a Ignacio o *Peso Hero* de *Supermán* y otros superhéroes de cómics es que jamás cambia su aspecto al transformarse de civil en superhéroe. Otros

superhéroes podrían ponerse ropa especial o adoptar personalidades distintas e incluso no humanas para encubrir sus identidades civiles y destacar entre las personas ordinarias. En contraste, el que Ignacio siempre vaya de mezclilla, con una playera o camisa, botas de vaquero y, en ocasiones, sombrero, lo hacen pasar desapercibido entre la cultura fronteriza texana-mexicana, pero también refleja a la misma. Esto no solo le permite ayudar y defender a personas fronterizas (*Borderland* 16) desde el anonimato, sino que también lo conecta con sus pares en la región. Solo la hebilla de su cinturón grabada con las iniciales “PH” revela su identidad de superhéroe. Sin embargo, como lo explica su abuelo al obsequiarle el cinturón a Ignacio, aquellas son las siglas de *patronus humilis* (o “patrón humilde”). Con ese gesto, el abuelo le hereda a su nieto la vocación de ayudar y proteger a las personas vulnerables de la región fronteriza (21).

Además, en contraste con algunos de sus pares estadounidenses, *Peso Hero* no pelea contra villanos que buscan el poder, sino que lucha contra las fuerzas de un régimen fronterizo estadounidense militarizado e inhumano, así como contra la economía capitalista de ambos lados de la frontera, que prospera con la explotación de las personas más vulnerables. Por ejemplo, los volúmenes de *Border Stories* (2016) e *Eagle Pass* (2024) plasman los sufrimientos de quienes huyen de la violencia endémica de Centroamérica en búsqueda de cierta seguridad en Estados Unidos, donde devienen indocumentadas e indocumentados. Durante el trayecto, enfrentan distintas adversidades, como tener que viajar sobre trenes de carga o dentro de camiones de mercancías, o encontrarse con pandilleros mexicanos y guatemaltecos que buscan robarles antes de que si quiera alcancen la frontera México-Estados Unidos. *Eagle Pass* enfatiza un punto crucial sobre el motivo principal de la migración no autorizada de Centroamérica a Estados Unidos. Cuando rescata a una madre y a su hija que se estaban ahogando en el Río Bravo, *Peso Hero* confronta a un agente fronterizo estadounidense por haberse rehusado a ayudar y le aclara que “ellas vienen buscando *asilo*” (16, énfasis original).

El Río Bravo, que acuerpa a toda la frontera

entre Texas y México, y las regiones áridas aledañas son los terruños que más nos remiten a esta región fronteriza y a la migración no autorizada en particular, pues la militarización de la frontera ha forzado a las personas sin permiso de entrar en Estados Unidos a cruzar por alguno de los desiertos del norte de México y a nadar o vadear por el río. Estas condiciones normalizan a las muertes migrantes en la frontera, presentándolas como consecuencia de un terreno hostil y no de una política antagónica del gobierno estadounidense (Doty 603-8). Los paneles en tonos terráqueos de *El Peso Hero: Border Stories* nos presentan a la doble amenaza del paisaje desértico de la frontera: el sol ardiente que ilumina y los pandilleros mexicanos cuya ropa hacen camuflaje con el paisaje. Ambos representan amenazas para las vidas migrantes. En la misma línea, tanto los *Border Stories* como *Eagle Pass* retratan cómo Peso Hero lidera a migrantes en su cruce por el Río Bravo. De hecho, *Eagle Pass* enfatiza aún más los peligros del trayecto al ilustrar a diferentes migrantes que batallan con las corrientes pesadas y peligrosas del río (Rodríguez, *Border Stories* portada, 6; *Eagle Pass* 3-4, 13-14, 17). Por recurrir a la iconografía estereotípica de la frontera, por un lado, y por enlazar a la hostilidad del terruño con las amenazas del crimen organizado y la patrulla fronteriza estadounidense, por otro, tanto las *Border Stories* como *Eagle Pass* siguen los pasos de otras series de cómics de superhéroes de la frontera enfocadas en lo latinx, como *El Gato Negro* o *Blue Beetle* (Aldama 112-13, 116; Aldama y González 5, 10-12). Enfocándose en la juventud y vulnerabilidad que caracterizan a las y los migrantes frente a un paisaje inhóspito y adversarios humanos, los dos volúmenes de *Peso Hero* hacen que las y los lectores empaticen con las personas indocumentadas y sus retos, validando así su búsqueda de la seguridad en Estados Unidos. Esta narrativa le resta autoridad a los discursos estadounidenses convencionales que criminalizan a las personas indocumentadas, como si fueran un peligro para la sociedad estadounidense. Presenta a las acciones del superhéroe como actos humanitarios que ameritan su uso de la fuerza e infracción de las leyes inmigratorias

estadounidenses.

En esta línea, *El Peso Hero: Borderland* (2019), se alinea con otros cómics fronterizos centrados en lo latinx, como *Border Town* (2018) de Eric Esquivel o *Home* (2021) de Julio Anta, el cual trata del encarcelamiento de migrantes indocumentados en Estados Unidos, cerca de la frontera con México (Anta; Esquivel). De esta manera, *Borderland* refleja ciertos acontecimientos recientes, pero sin abordar sus dimensiones políticas. Retrata a la detención masiva de migrantes no autorizados en la frontera, incluyendo a niñas y niños, como parte de una campaña gubernamental estadounidense que busca deportar a personas indocumentadas y disuadir a otras de llegar (Davies 383-84; Ramírez 106, 119-21). *Borderland* capta cómo Peso Hero se infiltra en un campamento de detención fronteriza en Texas para rescatar a las personas detenidas. En contraste con *Border Stories*, la historia tiene lugar de noche, durante una tormenta. Este ambiente simbólico recalca cómo Peso Hero interviene a pesar de las condiciones siniestras. Los paneles del volumen emplean colores oscuros para articular a la noche y las condiciones climáticas con el encarcelamiento inhumano de las personas migrantes, incluyendo a bastantes niñas y niños. Los tintes rojos de dos páginas de paneles retratan un corte de luz que Peso Hero ha provocado y acentúan a el momento culminante en que el superhéroe libera a las personas detenidas, una escena que recuerda a su guía de emigrantes a través del Río Bravo en *Border Stories*. De manera interesante, cuando interpela a los guardias del campamento para que no le disparen a los niños y niñas inocentes, uno de los guardias decide ayudarlo a liberar a las personas migrantes (*Borderland* 2-7). El guardia desobedece a las órdenes que le son dadas y, en este sentido, difiere de otro oficial de la patrulla fronteriza retratado en *Eagle Pass*, quien quiere ayudar a una mujer migrante que se está ahogando en el Río Bravo, pero al final se deja llevar por el consejo de otro oficial, quien le dice que no se involucre (*Eagle Pass* 14). Así como Tonatiuh no demoniza al coyote de *Undocumented*, este guardia amable de *Borderland* matiza a la imagen negativa de la patrulla fronteriza que suelen proyectar los

cómics fronterizos que defienden a la migración (Ramírez 119-23).

Como la novela de Tonatiuh, *El Peso Hero* también integra términos mexicanos y en español dentro de esta narrativa de lengua predominantemente inglesa, de manera que las y los lectores puedan entender el relato sin saber español necesariamente. El protagonista, Peso Hero, habla español consistentemente, mientras que sus interlocutores angloamericanos y latinxs revelan lo dicho con sus respuestas en inglés. Dado que el protagonista solo utiliza el español, esta serie de cómics establece su mexicanidad y valida a las identidades y culturas mexicanas y latinoamericanas y, en especial, al español como lenguaje de comunicación dentro de la sociedad y narrativa gráfica estadounidenses. A su vez, como el *Undocumented* de Tonatiuh, los textos de *Borderland* emplean coloquialismos mexicanos, como “coyote” o “migra”, para apelar a un público familiarizado con estos términos y con las experiencias migrantes relacionadas con ellos (*Borderland*, 12, 18).

Como serie de cómic de superhéroe, *El Peso Hero* solo promueve el activismo laboral organizado de las y los migrantes vulnerables cuando este activismo es asistido por un superhumano. Es típico del género el proporcionar soluciones individualizadas —en este caso, las intervenciones del superhéroe Peso Hero solucionan casos individuales— ante problemas estructurales, como los peligros que se enfrentan las y los migrantes latinoamericanos cotidianamente, tanto durante su trayecto a Estados Unidos como después de haber ingresado al país. Sin embargo, uno de los volúmenes más recientes de la serie, *El Peso Hero: The Essentials* (2020), cambia de enfoque. En vez de centrarse en los retos que conlleva la migración a Estados Unidos para las y los trabajadores extranjeros, pone la mirada en las condiciones laborales injustas. Tanto es así que, cuando Peso Hero utiliza sus superpoderes mientras cubre a alguien que faltó al trabajo por enfermedad, también le ayuda a un activista laboral a entregar cubrebocas quirúrgicos a las y los trabajadores agrícolas, quienes fueron categorizados como “trabajadores esenciales” durante la pandemia por COVID-19 (6, 10-11). En la portada, vemos a

Peso Hero con un cubrebocas puesto, plantado sobre la línea fronteriza México-Estados Unidos. Su pose segura señala que apoyar a las y los “esenciales” es una tarea digna de la intervención de un superhéroe. Como las *Border Stories*, *The Essentials* aprovecha el relato para alertar al público sobre los retos de las personas indocumentadas en Estados Unidos, en especial aquellas con trabajos precarios y sin protecciones salariales, seguro médico y acceso a las medidas de protección personal ante el COVID-19 (Chishti y Bolter). Estas condiciones han expuesto a las y los trabajadores a la pobreza y a la enfermedad, además de la siempre presente amenaza de ser deportados. El relato cierra con una gran apreciación por las y los trabajadores migrantes indocumentados al llamarles héroes americanos (*The Essentials* 11). En este sentido, vemos que la narrativa va más allá de las intervenciones previas de la serie en pro de las personas indocumentadas. Mientras que *El Peso Hero* es menos propositiva que *Undocumented* cuando se trata de su potencial político, pues no empodera a las personas indocumentadas al mismo grado que la narrativa de Tonatiuh, por lo menos *The Essentials* reconoce sus contribuciones al país y no las retrata como receptoras pasivas de ayuda humanitaria.

Conclusión

Geert Vandermeersche y Ronald Soetart observan que obras recientes de narrativa gráfica han re trabajado “temas, técnicas ... y argumentos literarios”, además del género (2; ver también, ibid. 4). Mientras que leer estos textos requiere de entendimientos visuales y culturales (Pedri pár. 111-12), la apertura estilística de las narrativas gráficas y la cada vez mayor diversificación de sus mundos narrativos crean oportunidades nuevas para validar identidades, experiencias y conocimientos previamente marginalizados. A través del artivismo, la novela gráfica *Undocumented*, de Duncan Tonatiuh, y la serie de cómics de superhéroes *El Peso Hero*, de Hector Rodriguez, ejemplifican este desarrollo. Emplean elementos de la narrativa visual mesoamericana y del cómic de superhéroes estadounidense, respectivamente,

para intervenir en los discursos socioculturales sobre la migración indocumentada a lo largo de la frontera México-Estados Unidos y sobre en el activismo en pro de los derechos migrantes en Estados Unidos. Utilizan el género de la narrativa gráfica para articular críticas sociales sobre la política migratoria estadounidense y la explotación laboral migrante, para darles voz a las experiencias migrantes indocumentadas y, finalmente, para inspirar el activismo. Ambos autores presentan sus historias desde el punto de vista de migrantes indocumentados y sus aliadas y aliados. Como hemos mostrado, la narrativa en primera persona, el uso del lenguaje y las imágenes de *Undocumented* suscitan un entendimiento sobre las personas indocumentadas entre las y los lectores y validan a la cultura mexicana y a la vida migrante, brindándoles cierta agencia social a quienes migran. Asimismo, hemos enseñado cómo *El Peso Hero* se apropia de las imágenes, personajes y tramas de los cómics de superhéroes multiétnicos estadounidenses para generar empatía por las y los migrantes indocumentados y escudriñar a su maltrato en manos de las pandillas y los gobiernos de ambos lados de la frontera México-Estados Unidos. Las obras de Tonatiuh y Rodríguez van más allá de las fronteras espaciales: *Undocumented* alerta a las y los lectores sobre los derechos de las personas migrantes trabajadoras y aboga por un activismo laboral multiétnico en Estados Unidos. Sin llegar a promover el activismo laboral organizado, *El Peso Hero* critica a la política de detener a las personas indocumentadas y hace una labor de concientización sobre las condiciones laborales peligrosas de las y los migrantes indocumentados que trabajan en Estados Unidos. En uno de los volúmenes más recientes de la serie, *El Peso Hero: Ucrania* (2022), el superhéroe mexicano suma su voz a las de las víctimas civiles de una Ucrania asediada por la guerra para criticar al gobierno mexicano por rehusarse a apoyar al país. Al establecer conexiones entre las fronteras espaciales, políticas, económicas y socioculturales, validar las experiencias e identidades de las y los migrantes indocumentados y abogar por temas de justicia social, estas narrativas demuestran el potencial del arte como vehículo de intervención

social.

Traducción: María Cristina Fernández Hall

Notas

[1] Una versión inglesa de este artículo, "Undocumented Border Crossing and Migrant Activism: The Activism of Mexican American Graphic Fiction," aparece en *Border-Crossings and Human Rights in Graphic Narratives*, editado por Olga Michael y Laurike in 't Veld, número especial de *Image [&] Narrative*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2025.

[2] Este artículo mantiene la ortografía de los nombres propios de los autores latinos tal y como aparecen en sus publicaciones, incluso cuando se apartan de las convenciones ortográficas españolas.

[3] Todas las citas tomadas de fuentes no-hispanas son traducciones nuestras.

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Old perils, old fears: The (still) vulnerable creole body in *Selva Misteriosa*

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Abstract

In 2019, the Peruvian comic strip Selva Misteriosa was republished in the format of a graphic novel, reintroducing one of Peru's most important comic referents to a contemporary audience. An icon of the early 70s, Selva Misteriosa is an adventure comic that follows Javico, an adventurer and family man making a living in the Peruvian Rainforest. The main focus of this article is tracing back the corporeal representation in the comic as a remnant of the anxieties the Spanish colonizers faced when confronted with the new environment of the Americas. This paper argues that, although the understanding of the body has changed dramatically, the underlying anxieties the Spanish conquistadors faced have remained with the Peruvian creole elite, and Selva Misteriosa shows a new expression of these anxieties in the, at the time, still unknown environment of the rainforest. In this regard, Javico's idealized body and subjectivity is contrasted with the vulnerability the creole body still shows in the character of "El Finado". As such, the ambivalent portrayal of the creole body shows the lack of resolution for the possibility of contaminating and changing the purity of the creole body and subjectivity.

Keywords: graphic novel, adventure comic, creole body, *Selva Misteriosa*

1. Introduction

The early colonial experience in what would become Spanish America was defined by its own instability. According to Rebecca Earle (2012),

Far from being an enterprise based on an unquestioning assumption of European superiority, early modern colonialism was an anxious pursuit. This anxiety is captured most profoundly in the fear that living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of settlers. (3)

In this regard, the mutability of bodies and the danger the new American environment posed for the Spaniards arriving to the New World became a topic to be addressed to guarantee the success of what would become the Spanish colonial empire. It could be argued, and indeed I will argue, that this anxiousness remained in the

republics that sprang from the Spanish colonies. Once those nation states emerged and began to crystallize, it became a matter of state to preserve the creole nation against the perceived danger of the indigenous populations and their environments. Modern economic and cultural nationalism was founded upon this colonial regime of indigenous segregation (Franco 20). In particular, I will focus on the case of Peru, specifically how this fear of transformation or mutation into the indigenous manifested in the comic *Selva Misteriosa*.

This article examines how the creole body is shown in danger in its representation in the comic. My hypothesis is that the narrative arc called "El Finado" shows the harmful effects of the still foreign environment of the Amazonian rainforest. This effect, this transformation, is not conceptualized through the humoral theory that informed the colonizers during much of the Early Modern period, but one can see traces of how that original fear and conceptualization of body and climate still influence Creole perception.

Thus, the environment is still a source of danger to the body and the whiteness of the subject, but it can also be tamed and lessened, as seen in the case of the protagonist. While more than 400 years separate these different understandings of body and climate, the same guiding principle applies: the foreign environment is a dangerous influence on the European/Creole body, which must be protected lest its transformation lead to its demise. In this regard, the indigenous bodies in the comic are to be read in opposition to the Creole ones, as these also foreign bodies are part of this dangerous environment waiting to be tamed, an aspect highlighted by the graphic register employed in the comic.

Even more so, the context of the original comic's publication is significant for this endeavor. It not only coincides with profound transformations in Peruvian society by the so-called "Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces", but also coincides with the end of the Amazonia's integration into the Peruvian nation and the beginning of an oil boom in the region. This entailed a sharp increase in the state's presence and an economic development that would not sustain itself in the long run. In a way, *Selva Misteriosa* functions as a tale of this optimism regarding modernization and the economic possibilities of the rainforest. However, while its protagonist embodies the ideal creole subject, strong, knowledgeable, quick-witted, and capable, who can make the jungle his home, the lurking danger present in the unknowable jungle is ever-present. Even though he survives, many others die, victims of the treacherous environment. It is quite symptomatic that there is no satisfactory narrative resolution to this conflict with the environment, as it mirrors the conflictive relationship the Peruvian state and society at large still has with this geographical space and the populations that live there.

2. The historical basis of the creole body

One of the key aspects of the Spanish colonial experience was the confrontation with the unknown and the implications said encounter had for the European colonizer. Almost right from the beginning, the encounter with the American environment elicited as much wonder as fear.

This fear would manifest in many venues, but one of the more recurring ones was the fear that the American environment would change or damage the European body. For example, Columbus believed, as Earle points out, that "the damaging effects of an unfamiliar climate and inadequate and inappropriate foods posed a serious threat to his settlers" (2). This was rooted in a particular conception of body, its function, and its relationship with what was understood at the time as the climate. This does not mean that this relationship remained stable as the discourse about both elements evolved quite dramatically, in part because of the American experience. Rather, what becomes clear is that this early conception of the body and the climate would influence the future understanding of both, if not on a scientific level then definitely on a discursive one. Specifically, what I wish to show in this section is that one can detect the imprint of these Early Modern ideas of the body and environment far into the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, these first conceptualizations will be fundamental to understanding how the bodies of *Selva Misteriosa* are conceived and understood.

2.1. From the Spanish body to the Creole bodily identity

What constituted the Spanish, or European, body at the onset of the colonial period is not the same as what constituted the Creole body. Nor is the Spanish identity equal to the later Creole one. However, there is a lineage to follow, as the Creole body and identity are heavily related to this first Spanish conception of themselves in relationship to their new environment. The key aspect is the instability that rooted the bodily understanding as "the early-modern body was not a well-enclosed space designed to remain stable over generations" (Cañizares 314). The body was the site of much anxiety, particularly the anxiety of transformation, which can be characterized as the anxiety of transformation in the Other. In the Spanish case, this was a significant problem given its liminal situation after the *Reconquista*. This is crystalized in the idea of blood purity:

The differences [...] between individuals with an unblemished heritage of religious orthodoxy and those with heretical or unconverted ancestors, were articulated through a language of blood purity, or *limpieza de sangre*. From the mid fifteenth century, individual Spanish towns and institutions began drawing up statutes that made proof of 'clean blood' a requirement for occupying certain positions. (Earle 9)

In this sense, not having this clean blood can be understood as losing one's standing in society or being in a precarious situation.

Of course, it is not a simple process in which residing in the Americas would immediately transform the Spanish into this non-Christian. Rather, a humoral understanding of the body built upon a complex and ancient set of medical and philosophical ideas, explained the possibility of this change:

Humoralism provided the framework that shaped Spanish understandings of how all bodies functioned [...] good health required a balance of the four humours that governed the body: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile [...] Each person was born with an individual complexion, but a *variety of external forces could alter their humoral makeup* (Earle 26, my emphasis).

As can be gleamed, altering the balance of the humours is not an immediately negative process but, during the first colonial expeditions, this understanding of the body met with the foreign bodies of American natives and their environment. Although the process by which these different bodies would be understood and categorized would still take some time to coalesce into a coherent discourse, the threat of difference and becoming the native would appear fairly early in the period.

This can be observed in other colonial contexts, such as the English, where the danger to the body manifested clearly: "Promoters of colonization had therefore to combat the apprehension that new climates would damage or destroy English bodies [...] Water was of particular concern because, according to Hippocratic theory, it could impart its region-

distinct qualities to people, with disastrous consequences if they were not adapted to these properties" (Chaplin 239). In this case, as in the Spanish one, the first identified threat was quite simply that the body would suffer because of the different characteristics of the environment. However, even in this context, the threat of being like the Indian appeared, as "colonists explained permanent adaptations as behavioral, not physical, similarities to Indians. To have asserted a physical adaptation would have made them, paradoxically, not proper inhabitants of America, but inferior" (Chaplin 244). And while this inferiority is explained in terms of the perceived fragility of the Indian body to diseases, brought from Europe but thought at the time as being of American origin, this perceived inferiority would be more poignant in the Spanish American context as the complex relationship established between the indigenous and colonial populations developed further onwards.

Related to this, how the body could change became an ever-pressing question for the settlers and their descendants, as they seemed to be most in danger to change in the new environment. For, "to be 'creole' in this early American world was not necessarily to be born in America, but simply to be physically and culturally acclimatized to it" (McFarlane 311). As such, the rhetoric developed to protect themselves from the potential inferiority of living in America became a key element of creole identity. In essence, they had to rhetorically guard their bodies to maintain their status, but this also distinguished them from their European counterparts. Cañizares explains this thusly:

Learned colonists articulated a form of scientific racism that claimed there were innate bodily and mental differences separating peoples from one another. They maintained that although constellations and climate could in fact render white colonists more intelligent than the Europeans, bodies remained impervious to environmental and/or cultural influences. (35)

However, as Cañizares points out, "none of the ideas created in Spanish America later

proved influential in Europe” (36), and, although constant reformulations of this argument would remain part of creole rhetoric throughout the colonial period, it would not cancel the fears and instability at the core of creole identity. This would manifest in the racial anxiety that developed in the independent republics that succeeded the colonial administration.

To understand this, we must understand how Creole identity became the basis of these republics as it took shape during the colonial period. On the one hand, before independence, “the underpinnings of Creole patriotism were, then, those of an *ancien régime* society. An aristocratic conception of society and a Hispanocentric conception of ethnic hierarchy gave the Creole elites a sense of themselves as a ruling class by reason of their noble, Spanish descent” (McFarlane 313). This becomes the point of view through which Creoles understood themselves and thus,

in all the late eighteenth-century rebellions, Creole coalitions with lower-class rebels soon foundered, as fear of Indians and other people of color outweighed Creole dislike of Spaniards and Spanish policies. Creoles involved in the rebellions saw the rights of ‘Americans’ as the rights of Creoles within the Spanish ‘nation’, and were still far from framing a cultural identity which embraced all the populations of their territories, envisaged as potentially unified nations. (McFarlane 322)

Nonetheless, as Spanish control over America crumbled and the new nation-states appeared, the Creole outlook came to dominate this process:

Post-independence political leaders invariably reflected the outlook of social elites which, while they proclaimed a shared national identity, continued to see the social order as an ethnic hierarchy. Their idea of a nation was based in the identity which the white elites had formed under colonial rule. (McFarlane 334)

In this context, the Peruvian case is significant as its elites saw themselves as the natural

descendants of the Incan Empire but wholly different from the native populations that were most of the country at the time of independence. This would mean that “the Creole nation-building project would have to invent one nation - the ‘Peruvian Nation’ - where formally two nations - the ‘Spanish’ and ‘Indian’ —had existed” (Turner, “‘Republicans’” 295). This can be summarized in Cecilia Mendez’s *dictum* as “Incas Sí, Indios no”. In the article of the same name, Mendez shows how, during the short-lived Peru-Bolivian confederation, creoles, in particular writer Pardo de Aliaga, construed themselves as the heirs of the Inca in opposition to the contemporary Indians, exemplified by the Confederation’s leader, Santa Cruz. Through this rhetoric

the Indian is accepted, therefore, insofar as he represents a scenic milieu and distant glory. He is ‘wise’ if abstract and long-departed, like Manco Capac. He is a brutish or ‘stupid’ (*estolid*) and ‘impure’ and ‘vandal-like’ if present, like Santa Cruz. The memory of the Incas is invoked in order to spurn and segregate the Indian. (Mendez 210)

What remains fundamental in this operation is that the protection of the nation becomes a protection of Creole identity. The danger that Santa Cruz posed to the Peruvian nation the creoles conceived was not only political but ontological as their creoleness, their own whiteness, was at stake.

This helps explain what Mendez finds as the crucial paradox in Pardo’s rhetoric:

It is not just any Indian who is despised, but one who has not remained in his ‘rightful’ place. And Indian subjection is necessary for the preservation of ‘national integrity’. [...] This fact would not be so paradoxical were it not the case that Indians comprised the majority of the population of that nation whose integrity Pardo and his followers claimed to be defending. (219)

In the Creole ideology that formed the basis of the country, the Indian is undesirable but becomes a danger once they go beyond their supposed place. This danger can be understood

as the fear of contamination and change of the country, and by metonymy the Creole constitution, which would happen because the racial classification of people was not as stable as can be observed in other contexts. For example, for the Peruvians of the 1920s, race was not so clearly discernable, as the color of the skin become uncertain because of the racial mixtures of the population (Araujo 59). Although it is not a direct persistence of the earlier mutability of the body, it is possible to see how the body can still be a site of instability for the Creole elite.

Even in the present day, the fears of becoming like the Indian are part of Peruvian society. As Nugent points out, what is considered most authentically Peruvian is at the same time in the lowest of socially and publicly recognized places, but the core of meaning is given by the effort to not just stop looking like the Indian, but the others who are considered a generalized Indian (56). As much as the racism of the 19th century can explain the contours of the racial ideology that was established in modern Peruvian society, the anxieties, fears and beliefs regarding the body that were at the core of earliest colonial experiences left an imprint in the way Creoles understood themselves, the Nation and the Other. This will be one of the key aspects of my reading of *Selva Misteriosa*, because, as the understanding of the American environment shifted during the colonial period, the danger of change focused on what can be understood as the environment that belonged to the Indian.

2.2. The perception and appropriation of the American environment

If the body was the site of many anxieties for Europeans at the beginning of the colonial period, the environment was perceived as the source of danger. However, the first encounters with the American climate were still somewhat surprising for Europeans as they expected a far more unforgiving situation given its location in the torrid zone. Explaining the whole set of beliefs regarding the climate division of the globe would surpass considerably the scope of this article, so a sufficient summary would be that the torrid zone was the tropic belt of the globe that should be uninhabitable because of its high temperature.

Columbus found a different situation that would challenge this view as “contrary to the conventional wisdom about the torrid zone, the territories he had found in the high Atlantic were not only admirably productive and populous but also more generally temperate than even he had dared anticipate” (Wey Gomez 53). This first contradiction set the stage for the complex relationship that would develop with the American environment both as a desirable territory full of resources and a dangerous territory that could threaten Europeans. This complex relationship shaped creole understanding of their territories and what can be seen in *Selva Misteriosa*.

As seen before regarding the body,

many aspects of early modern colonial expansion proved unsettling for its European protagonists. The encounter with entirely new territories and peoples raised doubts about the reliability of existing knowledge and also posed theoretical and practical questions about the proper way for Europeans to interact with these new peoples and places. (Earle 3)

In short, the American environment was a challenge not just on a physical-survival level, but also on an intellectual level for the Europeans. They would rise to this challenge, however, and by the middle of the 16th century they would have an answer:

As conquistadors discovered large river basins, lakes, and tropical forests, a sense that America was a temperate yet humid continent came to dominate the imagination of European scholars. [...] The Torrid Zone was temperate because it lay below sea level and attracted waters from the poles, which were the highest continental masses over the globe. (Canizares Esguerra 38)

In the hierarchy of European thought, that meant America was in a disadvantageous position, as the humidity was understood as a weakening force over the whole continent.

This was further emphasized as the scientific thought of the time developed. For example,

in Buffon's writings the inferiority of American nature is conceptualized first by the inferiority of its animals (Gerbi 3) and moreover "this weakness of nature is confirmed by the fate of such domestic animals as were introduced into America by the Europeans. It is one long story of failure. In the new continent all of them dwindled, shrank, became reduced to dwarves, caricatures in miniature of their prototypes" (5). Thus, the pernicious effect of the environment and the land seemed obvious and unavoidable. Even after these ideas were discarded, the whole region of the tropics was reconstructed as a site of biological danger for human beings as "Disease remained in the European mind one of the defining characteristics of the tropical world [...] for Europeans, just living in the tropics was thought to be a physical and mental torment" (Arnold 153). This evident inferiority was one of the dangers that haunted Europeans in America and forced them to either defend themselves and their bodies or embrace the new American environment and rhetorically defend it.

This defense was a task that many Creoles took as it became imperative to maintain equality with their European peers to sustain their privileges. This would lead to what Cañizares calls a "patriotic astrology in which the heavenly influences on America were consistently cast as having soothing and beneficial effects, revealing God's providential design for Spanish America" (50). I believe this can be understood as an attempt to reappropriate the American space and is also one of the core elements that shaped Creole understanding of their place in the Spanish Empire and, later, the Republics they founded. Although this particular genre of defense would be abandoned, the spirit of it remained. For example, Hipólito Unanue, a Peruvian naturalist and intellectual of the late colonial period and early Republic, explicitly defended Peruvian nature against European denigration. On the one hand, he rhetorically deployed the name of the country as bonded with its soil and nature, thus making its environment a quality that provided many riches (Turner, "El nombre" 133). On the other hand, he partially accepted the idea that the environment affected the characteristics of a population, in reference to Montesquieu's ideas about the effect on the

nerves, but stated that this imbued those who lived in warmer, southern climates with a greater political and social imagination (134).

This, however, would not solve a greater issue that appeared from the beginning of this defense: the environment of the native population. If Peruvian nature could be defended, rescued, and even reappropriated, the uncomfortable reality for Creoles was that they were inadvertently defending the Indian population they wished to control through denigration: "To sustain the notion that the New World was a temperate Paradise implied, of necessity, arguing that the Indians were superior to Europeans" (Cañizares Esguerra 38). This was, and in some ways still is, the stumbling block of the whole Creole identity, which still manifests in *Selva Misteriosa*. It is a contradiction at the root of the whole endeavor:

The 'creole patriotism' reflected in the literature and culture of colonial elites reflected a cultural effort to resolve the dilemmas faced by whites who felt both Spanish and American: it was a quest for an identity which would reconcile the 'civilized' world of Europe with the 'barbarism' of the New World. (McFarlane 315)

The barbarism that Creoles identified with the native population and the spaces they inhabited would not cease threatening their ideological constructs and would require more rhetorical and technical developments to combat. In this regard, national geography is a site of contention and many conflicts not yet solved, of which *Selva Misteriosa* is a just a particular testimony.

3. The creole body in *Selva Misteriosa*

One of the main reasons it can be fruitful to work with a comic like *Selva Misteriosa*, especially regarding the topic of this article, is that, unlike other types of text, the comic form introduces a pictorial register in the narration. This allows for a subjective representation of both the body, "what we are confronted with from the very first until the very last panel is not the character *thinking* [...] but the character's *body*,

more specifically the character's *face*" (Baetens and Frey 174), and the space, "drawing a character often implies also drawing the setting in which that character will evolve" (167), wholly different from the written word. As such, the ideologies and beliefs explored in the previous section are materialized almost literally in the pages of the comic. This is not to devalue the written aspect of the comic, as it plays a crucial role in the narrative, but rather to explain how the comic form takes shape by employing both at the same time.

Another important thing to note is the publication history of *Selva Misteriosa* as well as the different formats and contexts in which it has been read. First, it appeared as a serialized comic strip in *El Comercio*, one of the most important newspapers in Lima. This original run lasted between November 1971 and October 1974, the month in which the newspaper was seized by the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces and nationalized. I will explain this context in the next sections, but for now it will suffice to say that one of the reasons the comic stands out is this production context. The Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces brought many radical changes in Peruvian society, some which are contested to this day.

After the end of its original run, the comic languished as a somewhat mythical text which was recognized at the time and long after as one of the best comics produced in Peru. In 2019, almost 50 years after its original publication, the comic strips were published in a book format, including a canonical ending to the last narrative arc that wasn't completed at the time. This new format recontextualized the strip as a graphic novel. This term can, and indeed has been, controversial as its many meanings can be retooled to fit basically any comic published as a book. While I will not contest the labelling or get into that debate, I find it important to point out how the denomination has cemented its historical significance in the history of the Peruvian comic. This is also why it becomes significant as a historical, albeit fictional, document that has been given new life and new authority in this book format.

3.1 The Peruvian "amazonía" of the early 70s in *Selva Misteriosa*

The space being represented in the *Selva Misteriosa* is put front and center right from the title. Not only is the reader localized geographically in the rainforest, but this location is characterized by its mystery. It could be puzzling for some that the rainforest, from now on Amazonía, can be attributed this unknowability at the beginning of the 1970s, but this is symptomatic of the complex nature of its integration into the national space and mentality. Even though the Amazonía has nominally been part of Peru since its founding as a colonial viceroyalty, it is only at the end of the 19th century that Peru consolidated its image as an Amazon country because of the importance of the rubber trade (Garay Vera 109). This does not mean that the Amazonía had no relationship with the political or state structures that have existed in the rest of the country, but it does mean that the colonial and later Republican state had little interest in the region because of the many challenges it posed. In general, the many new South American nation-states had little control over the Amazon territories, so they would lease the land for private exploitation, which would in turn cause conflicts with the native populations and thus the "colonos" would be protected by the army (Pinedo 8).

This relationship with the Amazonía would frame how it was understood by society at large and in particular by the governing elites. Overall, the geographical space proved challenging and conflictive, but profitable as the rubber boom was helping to pay international debts, which were further encouraged by the ideological drive for material progress at any cost (Pinedo 9). However, this required a violent process of integration both within and outside the country's border. For the indigenous population, this would be an absolute debacle as, just in the first ten years of the rubber exploitation, around 50% of the native population died (Rodríguez 130). This also led to the growth and development of cities like Iquitos, as it became the keystone in the exportation of the rubber. Thus, urban development coupled with economic growth secured a more stable presence of the non-native population as well as the consolidation of

a local elite (Rodríguez 135).

This last element would be key in the other significant event in the Amazonía: the war between Peru and Colombia in 1932 and 1933. While explaining this conflict falls well outside the scope of this article, the main aspect to highlight is how its origin stemmed from the wish to reintegrate the town of Leticia back into Peru after President Leguía relinquished it in the 1922 treaty with Colombia. For the men that seized the town, this was a disgraceful treaty that was worth even seceding from the country in order to reject (Camacho Arango 347-348). This justification shows how the Amazonía had become a part of the national space for the population in Iquitos and how they identified with the territory they now inhabited. This is clear as most of the invaders came from Iquitos, where the seizure was first announced and celebrated (Camacho Arango 356-357). While the conflict would result in the same territorial boundaries as before, with Leticia remaining in Colombian hands, the ideological meaning of the war points towards the consolidation of the Amazonía as part of the country, even if not yet entirely integrated.

Now the question becomes: what happened in the context of the 1970s and how does *Selva Misteriosa* represent the region? To answer

the latter question, it is evident that the comic creates a space fraught with danger and wonder, reminiscent of an inaccessible frontier land. This is of course inscribed in the way that Latin-American literature of the 20th century has employed the rainforest as a foreground that facilitates uncontrollable and risky situations (De Llano 389). Thus, in *Selva Misteriosa*, the Amazonía appears as a space of potentiality, both positive and negative, nurturing and dangerous. This can be seen in the narrative arc “Otorongo”, in which the protagonist, Javico, must capture said animal for the zoo in Lima. This action is framed in the context of ecological efforts to prevent its extinction, by emphasizing that its hunt is forbidden, but is allowed in this case for the zoo. The narrative arc is interesting in that, unlike the other ones, there is no human antagonist to defeat: it is quite literally a fight with nature itself. This leads to a more ominous depiction of the action, with the hunt beginning in the middle of the night and the trees darkening and framing both the truck and the makeshift encampment (Fig. 1). The miniscule figures at the beginning of strip 81 are overwhelmed by the vegetation through which they have to hack with a machete, after which they discover a black jaguar that will threaten the party.



Fig. 1. (Flores del Águila 42)

This particular sequence introduces the rainforest in terms of challenge and danger. Securing the otorongo is presented to the reader as a mission that requires entering the proverbial heart of darkness, with even the animal to capture depicted presenting its fangs. The adventure itself reenacts the extraction of a valuable resource, the otorongo, from the environment. Thus, the relationship with the rainforest is still framed in the colonial terms of extracting value, which is worth braving the dangers for. The Amazonía then functions in similar terms to Arnold's description of the tropics where "they became complementary economies and ecologies, designed to serve needs and desires that the temperate lands could not satisfy" (Arnold 162). In this case, Lima as the capital is fulfilling the role of the temperate lands, as it is where the temperate creoles reside.

After this first confrontation with the black jaguar, they find the otorongo hunting and fighting with a crocodile. After the former's victory, it feasts on its prey under the gaze of the rest of the animals. The narration frames this as the otorongo not caring about the witnessing of its banquet, which Javico doesn't find particularly appetizing (Fig. 2). This act of consumption appears as a contrast with the party's more humane expedition to merely capture the animal. The otorongo is presented as a danger even in its natural habitat, a mighty hunter that appears superior to the rest of the animals, in open, if perhaps not conscious, defiance of Buffon's judgment of American animals.

Nonetheless, Javico and his men triumph as they will capture the otorongo by setting a trap, which the animal evades the first time (Fig. 3). This triumph should be read in the context



Fig. 2. (Flores del Águila 49)

of the hierarchy established in the previous sequence. If the otorongo appears as king of the jungle, Javico achieves superiority over it and by extension over the jungle. This type of optimistic representation of the creole character should be read in relationship with the context of the time, at a national and local level.

swaths of the country into the state and not just under petty lords in a quasi-feudal system. An example of this is the assimilation of the Indian communities, renamed as agrarian communities and citizens in tandem with the revalorization of indigenous languages, especially Quichua (Pinedo 10).



Fig. 3. (Flores del Águila 52)

At the national level, the most significant change was the progressive reforms of the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces. In contrast to the other military dictatorships that established themselves in Latin America, this government led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado sought to radically change the country without siding with the USA or the USSR and favored a collectivist integration of the country from top to bottom. The most significant action was the "Ley de Reforma Agraria", one of the biggest land reforms and land transfers in

the region and a watershed moment for the indigenous population. While the economic results are contested and remain controversial to this day, the return of many communal indigenous lands seized by landlords during the tail end of the 19th century meant the end of a century-long exclusion that effectively put most of the Indian Quichua-speaking communities of the southern Andes under the management of these landlords. It is hard to overstate the significance of this reform as it also came with other electoral and social reforms that formally integrated vast

This was not limited to communities in the Andes, as in 1974 the Decree Law 20653 ("Ley de comunidades nativas") was proclaimed. This law recognized the indigenous settlements as *comunidades nativas* (native communities) and conferred, for the first time in republican history, legal ownership of the land, which meant the native community became the first law subject in the Amazonía (Pinedo 10). Although this of course happened in the period corresponding to the end of *Selva Misteriosa's* run, it helps to illustrate how during this time the core elements of the creole state regarding the exclusion of the Indian were being eroded. These changes are neither criticized nor contested by that comic, which more often than not tries to be sympathetic to the native population, but, as we will see in the next section, this cannot mask the fears and anxieties that run through the pages.

Finally, the last significant development in this time period was the acceleration of oil exploration and drilling in the region, because of the first oil well in Trompeteros (San Román 231). This is directly referenced in the comic as Javico's party arrives at this well after capturing the otorongo (Fig. 4). The graphical representation of this appears in stark contrast to the first images of the rainforest (Fig. 1) as the oil tower seems like an obelisk that parts the vegetation. Instead of the darkness of the hunt, this endeavor is marked by its brightness; the black gold, says Javico, tints the heart of Peruvians with pride. With this we come full circle, with the personal pride and achievement of capturing the otorongo giving way to the national pride of the discovery. The possibility of exploiting this resource to its full potential would signal the ultimate conquest of the Amazonía, its final integration into the nation



Fig. 4. (Flores del Águila 53)

and the end of the danger that it posed. If Javico can be the typical hero of an adventure comic, the paternalist white man possessed of superior intelligence and morals to the other cultures he finds (Merino 39-40), the oil well of Trompeteros merely confirms the superiority of his people, capable of braving the rainforest to exploit its resources. However, this optimism must be reined in, as the creole body and constitution still haven't completely dominated this environment, and one can risk a destiny such as "el Finado", where one is lost to the transforming powers of the Amazonía.

3.2. The dangerous transformation of the creole body

The transformation of "el Finado" is a grim warning of what can happen to the creole body in a foreign environment surrounded by dangers. It is also the first narrative arc of *Selva Misteriosa*, preceding the one previously analyzed, which I find telling as it is not a story about Javico, but a story he retells. Here I will reorganize the narration, which is told out of order in the comic, as it simplifies the task of explaining this character's situation and ultimate fate.

instruct them under the Peruvian flag. However, this idyllic life will be cut short by Buchisapa, who functions as Manuel's antagonist and target of revenge. He and his underlings murder Manuel and his wife, leaving them for dead. What brings him to life once again is the intervention of an unnamed and unknown Indian character (Fig. 7), after which his only objective is to chase and murder Buchisapa.

In a similar way to Javico, Manuel embodies a particular ideal man. He seems aligned with the new individual conceived during the 1920s among the creole elites, an idea influenced by positivist and evolutionist ideals, who would be a strong, healthy, moderate, active, and hard-working individual (Araujo 69). To this we can add the patriotic nature of his job as an educator, which, while highly valued in society, has never been seen as a particularly prestigious station. Thus, he is not really a member of the elite, but by bringing progress, knowledge, and modernity, he acts as a representative of said elite and the nation as a whole, especially given that teachers were often one of the few ways the state was present in these faraway communities.

Of course, Buchisapa is Manuel's murderer and his actions are punished at the end, as

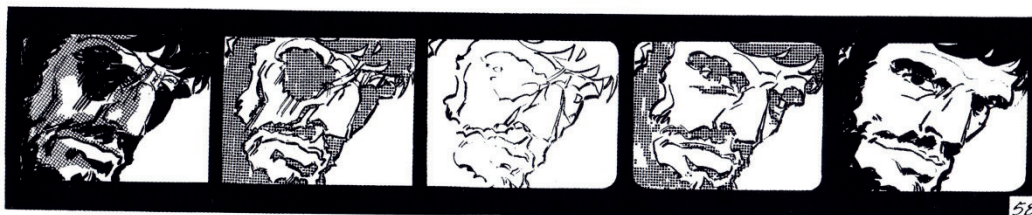


Fig. 5. (Flores del Águila 22)

El Finado is a supernatural being, some kind of undead man searching for revenge (Fig. 5), that Javico was searching for with a group of men for some unclear reason. Originally, he was a teacher named Marcelo who worked in an indigenous community (Fig. 6), married and seemingly content with his work. The graphic depiction suggests the patriotic nature of his job as he teaches the young kids about the geography of the Peruvian Amazonía and later seems to

Manuel gets his revenge. However, Buchisapa's actions are framed as only being possible in this frontier space and are thus part of the danger inherent in this environment. Moreover, Manuel's transformation is the work of an indigenous character and, while one can interpret this as an act of mercy or assistance, his new visage as a grim vengeful spirit is not framed as positive, merely a means to murder Buchisapa in return. Finally, the complete mimesis between the

¿ES ASÍ LA MUERTE?... ESA TERRIBLE SENSACIÓN LA TIENE UNA VEZ MÁS "EL FINADO"... AHORA "RECORRE" SUS PASOS Y NUEVAMENTE VIVE SU PASADO...



EL "RACCONTO" DE "EL FINADO"... CALEI-DOSCÓDICAMENTE SU PENSAMIENTO VUELA EN EL TIEMPO Y SE SUMERGE EN EL PASADO... "EL PASADO" DE "EL FINADO"... Y ESE PASADO LLEGA AHORA A NOSOTROS...



NOS PERDEMOS EN EL TIEMPO... "EL FINADO" NO ES "EL FINADO"... AHORA ES MARCELO, EL MAESTRO DE UNA MODESTA ESCUELITA ENCLAVADA EN MEDIO DE NUESTRA AMAZONIA.



ELLA ES FERNANDA, SU ESPOSA.



¿Y ÉSTE?... ME PARECE CONOCIDO... DE RO... ¡CLARO!... ES EL III "BUCHISAPA"!!!



¿QUÉ HACE AQUÍ?

60

Fig. 6 (Flores del Águila 34)



Fig. 7 (Flores del Águila 38)

Finado and the rainforest, which is represented as a haunting environment at first and after becomes an overwhelming ghostly figure that attempts to grasp Buchisapa in its hand (Fig. 8). This complete identification with the environment, reminiscent of a gothic setting, is the complete opposite of the positive development shown in the previous section where the land is exploited. Instead, the fusion of the Creole subject with the environment leads to a nightmarish and haunting situation, which is caused by the nature that surrounds the characters. This possibility

seems to be an ever-present danger from which Javico will not be free as he will combat other supernatural foes. The fusion of the creole with the untamed environment would only allow him to destroy and be destroyed. While the body is no longer seen as a porous humoral construct and nature is not governed by the airs and influence of the stars, the body is in no less danger of change because of the environment and those with the power, namely the Indian, to alter it or imbue it in the Creole.



Fig. 8 (Flores del Águila 26-27)

4. Conclusion

Although the concepts related to the understanding of the body and the environment have been discarded for more scientific explanations, the anxieties informed by them have merely mutated and still manifest themselves in the Creole imagination of the 1970s in *Selva Misteriosa*. As Nicolás Wey Gomez eloquently remarks,

the geopolitical paradigm that Columbus and his contemporaries inherited from classical antiquity remains alive and well in the West. To the extent that five hundred years after Columbus's death we continue to wrestle with the divide between the "developed" nations of the north and the "developing" nations of the South, we too are heirs to an intellectual tradition whose ancient notions of place paved the way for recent colonialism. (57)

The ways in which this paradigm remains are not that dissimilar from the way the dangers explained by the humoral understanding of the body remained in the Peruvian Creole. Even more so, the graphic depiction of this body in danger is not merely an echo of colonial anxieties but rather an evolution and reinterpretation of said anxieties. The comic seeks to stabilize an idealized creole subject and body by focusing on a character such as Javico, as he can overcome the challenges of this environment. However, the ever-present possibility of failure, as the narrative arc of "El Finado" shows, reminds the reader of the vulnerability the creole still faces. While the comic tries to bridge this ambivalence by later showing the good relationship Javico has with indigenous communities and his adaptability to the environment, the danger persists and remains unsolved. This creole anxiety remains evolving but unchanged, both in 1979 and currently.

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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

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