

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

GEOFFROY DE LAFORCADE (NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY, USA)

DANIEL STEIN (UNIVERSITY OF SIEGEN, GERMANY)

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 Gaínza 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 Gaínza 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 Gerrero).

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 Regüefuros 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."

Works Cited

Álvarez Amell, Diana. "A Tale of Two Cuban Cartoonists." *Boom! Splat! Comics and Violence*. Ed. Jim Coby and Joanna Davis-McElligatt. UP of Mississippi, 2024, pp. 44-55.

- Avilés Montalvo, Cecilio. *Historietas: Reflexiones, proyecciones*. Editorial Pablo de la Torriente, 1989.
- . *Historieta cubana: Sesenta narradores gráficos contemporáneos*. Editorial Pablo de la Torriente, 1990.
- Barrero, Manuel. "El origen de la historieta española en Cuba: Landaluze, pionero de un nuevo discurso iconográfico latinoamericano." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 4, no. 14, 2004, pp. 65-97.
- Blanco de la Cruz, Caridad. "Cuadros." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, pp. 31-45.
- . "Salomón, un mutante perturbador." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la historieta*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, pp. 108-18.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. MIT Press, 1989.
- Catalá Carrasco, Jorge L. "El humor gráfico revolucionario en Cuba: El camino hacia un arte militante." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 8, no. 29, 2008, pp. 3-20.
- . "From Suspicion to Recognition? 50 Years of Comics in Cuba." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2011, pp. 139-60.
- . "Raising the Cuban Flag: Comics, Collective Memory, and the Spanish-Cuban-American War (1898)." *Comics and Memory in Latin America*. Ed. Jorge L. Catalá Carrasco, Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017, pp. 33-58.
- Catalá Carrasco, Jorge L., Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer. "Introduction: Comics and Memory in Latin America." *Comics and Memory in Latin America*. Ed. Jorge L. Catalá Carrasco, Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017, pp. 3-32.
- Contreras, Delia. "El cómic cubano a lo largo de la historia: su papel en la consolidación del poder político y como instrumento de subversión." *Historia y comunicación social*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2020, pp. 15-26.
- Cooper, Sara E. "Humorismo en Cuba: Bohemia Comics from the Year of the Revolution." *Kunapipi*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2008, Web. Accessed 29 April 2024.
- Díaz Pino, Camilo. "Cartooning Pre-revolutionary Cuba: The Animated Exoticism of Time and Place in *Vampiros en la Habana* (1985) and *Chico and Rita* (2010)." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, pp. 234-45.
- Dorfman, Ariel, and Armand Mattelart. *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialism and the Disney Comic*. London: Pluto, 2019.
- Fawaz, Ramzi. *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*. New York UP, 2016.
- Fernández, Laura, Amadeo Gandolfo, and Pablo Turnes. "Burning Down the House – Introduction." *Burning Down the House: Latin American Comics in the 21st Century*. Ed. Laura Fernández, Amadeo Gandolfo, and Pablo Turnes. Routledge, 2023, pp. 1-16.
- Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor, and Juan Poblete, eds. *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Flores Oliver, Jorge. *Apuntes sobre literature barata, Cómics, novela gráfica, y literature visual*. Fondo Editorial Tierra Adentro, 2012.
- García Canclini, Nestor. "Para una teoría de la socialización del arte latinoamericano." *Revista Casa de las Américas*, no. 89, 1975, pp. 99-119.
- Hernández Guerrero, Arístides Esteban. "Breve historia de la caricatura en Cuba (1). Antes de 1959." *Revista Latinoamerica de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, no. 22, 2015, pp. 57-78.
- . "Breve historia de la caricatura en Cuba (1). Después de 1959." *Revista Latinoamerica de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, no. 23, 2015, pp. 121-43.
- Hernández, Roberto. "Dispositivo didáctico para la formación de una cultura integral en la historieta cubana." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2002, pp. 13-22.
- Knowlton, Sean Patrick. "The Role of Comic Books in the Civic Formation of Cuban Youth." *Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, Inc. Meeting, Popular Culture: Arts and Social Change in Latin America University of the West Indies*, 2014, pp. 53-64.
- Lafargue, Jean-Noël. *Entre la plèbe et l'élite: Les ambitions contraires de la bande dessinée*. Atelier Perrousseau, 2012.
- Lent, John A. "Survival is Name of the Game for Cuban Cartoonists." *The Comics Journal* 233, May 2001, pp. 41-42.
- , ed. *Cartooning in Latin America*. Hampton Press, 2005.
- . "Cuban Political Social Commentary Cartoons." *Cartooning in Latin America*. Ed. John A. Lent. Hampton Press, 2005, pp. 193-215.
- . "Cuban Cartoonists: Masters of Coping." *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*. Ed. Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 81-95.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. William Morrow, 1994.
- Menu, Jean-Christophe Menu. *La Bande Dessinée et son double: Langage et marges de la bande dessinée: perspectives pratiques, théoriques et éditoriales*. Ph.D. Dissertation Université de Paris I – Sorbonne. L'Association, 2011.
- Merino, Ana. "Visiones cubanas del comic a través de sus revistas." *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 127, no. 234, 2011, pp. 225-34.
- Mogno, Dario. "Dibujando por la revolución Charla con Virgilio Martínez Gaínza." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 3, no. 11, 2003, pp. 178-92.

- . “A propósito de la historieta en Cuba después del 1959: Charla con Roberto Alfonso Cruz.” *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 5, no. 19, 2005, pp. 61-70.
- . “Parallel Lives: A History of Comics and Animated Cartoons in Cuba.” *Cartooning in Latin America*. Ed. John A. Lent. Hampton Press, 2005, pp. 217-40.
- . “La historieta cubana.” *La Historia de la Historieta Latinoamericana*. Ed. Hernán Ostuni. 4 vols. La Bañadera del Cómic, 2008, pp. 5-44.
- Mouchard, Benoît. *La Bande dessinée*. Le Cavalier Bleu, 2009.
- Müller, Christoph. “La historieta cubana como medio popular para la (re)construcción de historia e identidad (siglo xxi).” *Historias e historietas: representaciones de la historia en el cómic latinoamericano actual*. Ed. Katja Carrillo Zeiter and Christoph Müller. Vervuert, 2018, pp. 135-47.
- Negrín, Javier. “El Pírrre Humor revolucionario (1).” *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 3, no. 12, 2003, pp. 193-228.
- . “El Pírrre: Humor revolucionario (2).” *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 4, no. 13, 2004, pp. 1-36.
- Padrón, Juan. *El libro del mambí*. Editorial Abril, 1989.
- Pérez Alfaro, Manolo. “©Línea ¿Una experiencia válida y actual?” *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2003, pp. 57-66.
- . “Para un diccionario de la historieta en Cuba: Charla con Miguel Bonera Miranda.” *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, vol. 6. No. 22, 2006, pp. 51-66.
- Pérez Cano, Tania. “Athena: nuevas armas para una diosa antigua, o los nuevos territorios de la historieta cubana.” *Cuadernos del Sur - Letras* 50, 2020, pp. 123-45.
- Pérez Rodríguez, Ariel. “Al rescate de la historieta hecha en Cuba.” *Cubadebate* 6 November 2020, Web. Accessed 29 April 2024.
- Planes, Justo. “El reverso mítico de Elpidio Valdés.” *El cine, el crítico y el espectador que vino a cenar: Memorias del XVIII Taller Nacional de Crítica Cinematográfica*. Ed. Armando Pérez Padrón. Instituto Cubano del Libro/Editorial Oriente, 2009, pp. 84-98.
- Porbén, Pedro P. “Revolución ‘cómica’: historietas y políticas de afectos en Cuba posrevolucionaria.” *Iberoamericana*, vol. 15, no. 57, 2015, pp. 117-30.
- Rojas Mix, Miguel. “Centenario del comic.” *Revista Casa de las Américas*, no. 27, 1997.
- Scorer, James. “Latin American Comics Beyond the Page.” *Comics Beyond the Page in Latin America*. Ed. James Scorer. U College London P, 2020, pp. 1-28.
- Scull Suárez, Hazel. “Un acercamiento al cómic cubano y la cuestión racial.” *Cuba Now*, 27 November 2021, Web. Accessed 29 April 2024.
- Scull Suárez, Hazel, and Francesca D’Andrea. “El cómic cubano: de los orígenes de la Revolución a la Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta en el sueño de una red transnacional.” *Quaderni Culturali IILA*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2023, pp. 37-45.
- Turnes, Pablo. *El exilio de las formas. Alack Sinner, de Muñoz y Sampayo*. Tren en Movimiento, 2017.
- UNEAC/Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba. “Cecilio Avilés: La historieta tiene que ser precisa.” 21 March 2020, Web. Accessed on 29 April 2024.

Author’s Biographies

Daniel Stein is Professor of North American Literary and Cultural Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Siegen, Germany. He is a member of the Collaborative Research Center 1472 “Transformations of the Popular” and author and editor of many publications on graphic narratives, including the monograph *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (Ohio State University Press, 2021).

Geoffroy de Laforcade is Professor of Latin American, Caribbean and World History at Norfolk State University (Virginia) and the International Representative of the Afro-descendant Neighborhood Network in Cuba. He was a Georg Bollenbeck Fellow in 2021 and 2022 at the University of Siegen for research on “Race, Nation and Historical Memory through the Prism of Graphic Art: Blackness and Civic Agency in the Cuban Comic Tradition from the Republic to the Revolution”.