

The Splendorous Critical and Creative Landscape of 21st Century Latinx Comics

By Frederick Luis Aldama

I began the research for *Your Brain on Latino Comics* a decade-plus ago. Planes, trains, automobiles shuttled me all over the country to excavate the living, breathing archive of Latinx comics. I never imagined then that in a decade-plus later I'd be putting together a special journal issue focused on the many, multipronged *approaches* developed and practiced regarding Latinx comics. Indeed, this is exactly what I'm doing here—and exuberantly so.

Indeed, in the last decade-plus we've seen Latinx comics floodgates open, in their Indy and mainstream publishing, curatorial showcasing, and scholarly investigating. With herculean effort and feverish intentionality, many of us pushed into motion what has become a veritable paradigm shift in the visibility of Latinx comics. Simultaneous with the publishing of *Your Brain on Latino Comics* was my founding (with copilot Christopher González) of the series *World Comics and Graphic Nonfiction*. And while the purview of the book series was worldly, with me and Christopher at its helm, the undergirding force was Latinx. Quick on the heels of the series launch, to cover quickly as much Latinx comics ground as possible, I published *Multicultural Comics and Graphic Borders* (co-edited with González). Later the scholarly book series would add Jorge Santos's foundational *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement*—among numerous titles focused on comics generally.

Of course, a mid-sized university press can only handle so much thrown its way. Impatient for more *approaches* to Latinx comics—and more scholarly work on BIPOC comics generally, one after the other, I continued to publish books as well as to launch a handful of additional scholarly series to publish the work of others. In my Latinx and Latin American Profiles series (University of Pittsburgh Press) I published Enrique García's groundbreaking *The Hernandez Brothers*. With Latinx Pop Culture (University of Arizona) I published my Eisner award-winning *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* and Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo's *Growing up in the Gutter: Diaspora and Comics*. Patrick Hamilton's *George Pérez* just dropped in my Biographix series (University Press of Mississippi). And, my Critical Graphics series (Rutgers) will be publishing *Undisciplining Latinx Comics*, the first scholarly volume focused on comics by and about Latinas.

Of course, I'm not the only show in town. University Press of Mississippi's long (longest?) track record of publishing comics scholarship has consistently been pushing doors open to Latinx comics, including titles like my *Graphic Indigeneity* and Héctor L'Hoeste's *Lalo Alcaraz: Political Cartooning in the Latino Community*. And, in addition to García's work on Los Bros, we also have Marc Sobel's seminal scholarship published in the trade-press, Fantagraphics, including his most recent, *Reading Love and Rockets*.

Right before my eyes, the Latinx comics scholarly space is expanding rapidly and bountifully. And with this growth, emerges a splendorous spectrum of new approaches. We see this especially in the proliferation of articles and chapters published, and dissertations filed by new gen scholars, some of whom you'll read in this special issue. Topics covered include borderlands; ecocriticism; aesthetics; transmedia; feminist; LGBTQ+; fandom; intersectionality; pre-Colombian mythology;

regionalism; youth, among others. Indeed, in this last bout of qualifying exams and dissertation defenses, students delivered approaches as exciting and different as Latinx graphic medicine and COVID comics and decolonial theory of the hyphen in YA Latinx comics.

Scholarly approaches, however, run out of vital air to breathe if we don't have a healthy, growing, and proliferating Latinx comic book scene that spins anew wondrous and different characters, experiences, storyworlds and worldviews. Fortunately, we're seeing more and more Indy and mainstream comics published by and about a huge range of Latinx identities and experiences. I think back to that mid-2000s period when I could count on one hand Latina comics creatives. There were the *veteranas* like Deborah K. Vasquez's *Citlali* (only shown as a curated art show), Laura Molina with her *Cihualyaomiquiz*, *The Jaguar* (1996) and Roberta Gregory with her Bitchy Bitch comics. And, there were newbies like Liz Mayorga, Gabrielle Gamboa, Grasiela Rodriguez, Crystal Gonzalez, shaking up shaking up a still largely male-dominated Latinx comics scene.

Indeed, this was just the beginning of a Latinx comics scene we're seeing grow day by day. Relative to the mid- 2000s and before, the overall number of Latinx comics creatives is massive. Mainstream, Indy, and academic publishers are working overtime to publish Latinx word-drawn stories. In addition to the big names like Scholastic setting sights on Latinx stories publishing, there are academic publishers like Penn State among others that have entered the fray. I think, too, of my series *Latinographix* (OSU Press) and *Brown Ink* (FlowerSong Press) that are continuously spinning out new, exciting Latinx comics.

So much so that when the American Library Association recently decided to generate a master list of Latinx graphic novels for librarians across the country, they had to create a task force—a small army of readers to do so. I'm on this committee. I've read nearly one hundred graphic novels, and I'm far from the end. Thankfully. For this list, we're reading Latinx comics in all genres: autobiographical, biographical, historical, fantasy, superhero, sci-fi, cli-fi, coming of age, and adaptation. You name the storytelling mode or genre, and Latinx comics creatives are working within and against their respective graphic arts storytelling frameworks and conventions.

Many of the Latinx comics creators I'm reading for the ALA list, for work—and for pleasure—first began to grow their readers at comic-cons, festivals, and expos—and not just the big ones. Latinx creatives grow their Latinx reading publics at those cons and expos specifically framed as Latinx. We saw this with Latinas like Crystal and Liz mentioned above who first showcased their work at Javier Hernandez and Ricardo Padilla's Latino Comics Expo (or LCX)—first launched in 2011 at the Cartoon Museum in San Francisco. The LCX has since grown so large that it barely fits in Long Beach's monumentally huge MOCAA. Ditto for other annual Latinx and BIPOC comics dedicated spaces such as the Latinx Comics Arts Festival (LCAF), the Black and Brown Comics Arts Festival (BCAF), and my BIPOC PoP: Comics, Animation, Video Game and Multimedia Arts Expo & Symposium. Not surprisingly, many of the contributors to this special issue are also those on the ground actively creating these spaces for Latinx creators to amplify voices and grow their Latinx publics: fans, scholars, industry folk, and new gen creators.

More and more, throwing the spotlight on Latinx comics in curated shows, big and small, has also played a role in shifting the mainstream purview and paradigm. Framed and displayed in museums across the country, critics and laypeople alike begin shift their pre-set cognitive schemas from

Latinx comic as ephemeral or the stuff of children, to the highbrow merits of museum art. Notably, too, with curated shows like “Tales from La Vida” that I curated for OSU’s Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, they all include important educational components—and not just for college students, but also for K-12.

The role of Latinx comics is rapidly evolving as the Latinx comics landscape expands in various critical and creative directions. Although we’ve made progress in throwing open doors, gatekeepers remain. These gatekeepers include not only mainstream agents and editors obsessed with finding the next YA graphic novel that fits their formula for success, often overlooking other extraordinary works, but also the gatekeeping that takes place in college classrooms.

A lot has changed since the late ‘90s when I was advised against writing a dissertation on comics if I wanted to lasso a job. Nowadays, many grad students are writing dissertations on Latinx comics. However, comics are still rarely taught, and when they are, such as in English departments, it’s often limited to one or two graphic novels in a sea of traditional novels. This is gradually changing. Every year, I teach Intro to Comics, Comic Book Media/Identities, and Latinx Pop Culture courses, with comics being the gravitational center to my curriculum. However, a quick Google search reveals that college courses dedicated to comics are still rare, and the inclusion of Latinx comics in Latinx literature courses is even less common.

The why isn’t obvious. There are a lot of factors at play here, including the need for university approval of curricula and course materials, and the discomfort some faculty experience when teaching narratives built by visual (dominant) and verbal (subordinate) shaping devices. So yes, more work needs to be done to open the scholarly space and its approaches to the study of Latinx comics study.

In the Latinx Pop Lab that I created and direct at UT as well as my classes, I help students develop a critical toolbox to analyze how Latinx comics are built, enriching their understanding *and* enabling them to create their own comic book stories. For instance, in my “Intro to Comics” course, teaching Latinx comics has significantly influenced the revision and reconstruction of core concepts in comics studies. For instance, many Latinx comics use the I/We narrative perspective and voice, connecting to the long tradition of the Latin American testimonio. Learning this complicates students’ understanding of the autographic concept, moving beyond the singular “I” as the only possible entity that can perceive, act, and do in the storyworld. When teaching how comics *geometrize* the story, a concept that I develop in *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*, I guide the students through an exploration that focuses on both Latinx representation *and* the dynamization of space (the objects, clothing, and character placement within the panels) and the spatialization of time (the layout and angles used to show the so-called *mise-en-panel*). This approach helps students see more clearly the importance of intersectional and interdialogic engagement within what I call the ethnoracial pause in Latinx comics, for instance.

Approaches to Latinx comics are multiform and multitudinous. They include the formal aspects (like shaping devices used to *geometrize* the story) and contextual elements (such as reading communities and fandoms). These approaches span historical and archival studies, as well as political perspectives, including feminist, decolonial, and queer lensings. They aim to challenge hierarchies, such as highbrow versus lowbrow, visual versus alphabetic narrative, childhood versus

adulthood, creator versus creators, individual versus collective, and self versus otherness. These approaches also often lead to creative practices. The making of Latinx word-drawn stories create mirrors and portals that shake readers from habituated states. As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, regardless of the approach, each one enriches understanding of how Latinx comics inspire new ways of perceiving, thinking, and feeling about the world we live in. They spur us to action.