

## My America Is Brown, Latina, Queer, & Powerful: Teaching America Chavez

By Natalia Colón Alvarez

In 1956, in a post-war America, queer Jewish American poet Allen Ginsberg wrote his famous poem “America,” in which he declares “It occurs to me that I am America” (line 46). Right after this powerful and evocative line, he ends the stanza in disillusionment—the realization that his voice within and of America is not heard, represented, or valued: “I am talking to myself again” (line 47). At the time Ginsberg was mulling over what America means to him (and what he might mean to it), there were no superheroes of color in mainstream American comics. It would be another ten years before the appearance of T’Challa as Black Panther in 1966. The superhero genre “is widely understood to be ideologically freighted: a mirror, and perhaps a shaper, of cultural and moral values” (Hatfield et. al. xiv). If it is a mirror, the genre was doing a poor job of it: there was no representation of diverse voices and stories in mainstream comics, one of America’s most accessible forms of popular culture. Brittany Tullis explains, in her chapter in *Comics Studies Here and Now*, that mainstream comics production and distribution institutionalized the “privileging of white, male, heterosexual, middle-class characters and perspectives” (253) from its inception. Consequently, when I was creating my first Introduction to Comics Studies class, I was suddenly, in line with Tullis’s claims, faced with The Canon.

With a background in literary studies, I was not unfamiliar with canonic literature: the collection of works that have been historically and academically deemed *important*. Not just important, but *more important than the rest*. (Now in the twenty-first century, Ginsberg’s “America” poem is part of the canon of post-war American Literature—when it was written, it would not be taken seriously by the academic establishment.) Being a Latina in a predominantly white university, I inherently chafed against these canonical constraints. However, simultaneously, any deviation from the supposed canon of Comics Studies felt *wrong*. *Of course*, I had to include Archie and Superman and Batman and Charlie Brown and Little Nemo. *No*, I probably would not have time for *Negro Comics* or Los Bros. Hernandez. These were my first instincts—so ingrained was the white canon of comics work in my mind. It’s not lost on me that in the fight for the legitimization of comics studies, many scholars chose to focus on matters of form instead of issues around representation and diversity<sup>i</sup>—academic spaces often decenter these conversations to privilege “objective” discussions around theory and form. My first hurdle, then, was my own self-imposed limitations, validated by years of systemic erasure of works by and for people of color. I first had to decolonize my own mind.

Once I gave myself permission to say *Yes*, to build a class that could consider these foundational and popular white Anglo comics while also including works by people of color, that I could trust myself and my students to have these necessary conversations around race, ethnicity, and representation, the class took shape. The first Latinx comics I included on the syllabus was Gabby Rivera’s *AMERICA Vol. 1: The Life and Times of America Chavez* (2017). America Chavez, created by Joe Casey and Nick Dragotta in 2011 as part of the *Young Avengers*, *A-Force*, and *The Ultimates* for Marvel Comics, is the first queer Latinx character to get her own title series. Bringing in a queer Latinx young adult novelist such as Gabby Rivera meant that America was written with care to her identity and heritage. I remember being very excited when the series was first published, and I wanted to share that excitement with my students. They knew I was Puerto Rican—it’s something I lead with in my self-introduction on the first day of every semester. It’s an intrinsic aspect of my personhood, and I proudly announce my name in Spanish, with no Americanized

pronunciation: “Good morning, my name is Natalia Colón Alvarez. I am from Puerto Rico, born and raised, and I study and teach comics and graphic narratives.” So, when Gabby Rivera writes, in her introduction to the first volume of *AMERICA*, that America Chavez is “a powerful and confident strong brown girl” who “has every right to be front and center in her own comics series” (2), I felt seen, heard, and represented. Most importantly, Rivera addresses us, as the readers: “And all of you know this. Even with all the haters shouting and doubting, you believe in her” (2). I believe in the power of comics to illustrate, to represent, to exclaim, to explain and, most of all, to teach.

America Chavez is an intergalactic alien, coming from a dimension called the Utopian Parallel—she is decidedly *not* human, so how can she be Latina? When she arrived on our planet, she found family and belonging in the Bronx, New York: “spaces on Earth where little brown girls blended into the scenery and became part of the family. . . . Didn’t even know what a Puerto Rican was, I just knew these folks looked like me and let me in” (47). Enrique García cautions us that “America’s portrayal as an alien who chooses to be Latina is interesting and problematic at the same time. I appreciate that Rivera is portraying the idea of ethnicity as a construct, as America Chavez identifies with a cultural ethnic community and not necessarily their nation-state” (174), but he takes issue with the identification based on her biological body—the vagueness of a “brown” phenotype visually marking her as Latina. Of course, we could also see this representation as an attempt by Rivera and the illustrators to speak to a larger transamerican *mestizaje*, as Tullis posits of the rich Latinx world of the Hernandez Bros’ *Love and Rockets* series. Tullis articulates that *Love and Rockets* blends and merges “traditions from US comics production alongside Latin American literature, history, and culture” to form “the graphic narrative depictions of Latin/x America [which] work to collapse national borders within the symbolic imaginary of *latinidad* to posit key connections between the Americas” (264). We can use Tullis’ reading of *Love and Rockets* to see *AMERICA* as collapsing strict divisions and preconceived notions around what truly makes someone Latinx. In the comics studies field, even thinking of ethnicity and *latinidad* creates (useful) tension. I thought it would be important for a story like this to be read and discussed in my class—posing the question to my students: where could America, the *brown alien*, looking for a home and a people in an unknown land, have fit in and belonged, if not in a Latinx community?

Of course, even with the love and acceptance she received from the Puerto Rican Bronx community she landed in, America still felt like she didn’t belong in a grander sense. Her feelings of imposter syndrome (very relatable to Latinx people throughout the US) eventually led her to crimefighting. In her narration, she says: “Still I was a tourist everywhere. Lifting language and culture from the love of people who weren’t my kin but held me as their own. Dove fists first into being a superhero ‘cuz it felt right” (47). The kinship she felt for the brown Americans in her community spurred her on, and she created a sense of herself by becoming a superheroine, vowing to protect them. Valerie Estelle Frankel tells us that “The heroine’s journey, like the myths that created it, offers a template for how to grow up” (4). In my classroom, I have students at different levels of their undergraduate education, but they, as I, are still growing up. America’s overall story is *about* growing up and choosing who and how to be when you look and feel different. The questions around heritage, family, belonging, and identity belong in the comics studies classroom, and a Latina superheroine’s story can provide us with productive ground to navigate those questions.

The week we read *AMERICA* we had already discussed the beginnings of superhero comics as a genre and the legacy of superheroes as embodiments of American ideals. I wanted them to reflect on how America Chavez is a continuation, and a subversion, of that legacy. My lesson plan

was as follows: to start, we connected superheroes and color as iconography, parting from Scott McCloud's assertion in *Understanding Comics* that "Many see the superhero as a form of modern mythology. If so, [the symbolization] of color may play a part. Symbols are the stuff of which gods are made" (188). McCloud's insistence on the mythologization of superheroes, through color, can lead us then to think about the deliberate erasure of superheroes of color. I gave my students a historical overview of these non-white superheroes in the American comics tradition, starting with Lion Man from *All-Negro Comics* (1947), the first Black hero, T'Challa from *Black Panther* (1966), the first Black superhero in mainstream comics, Héctor Ayala from *White Tiger* (1977), the first Latinx and Puerto Rican superhero main character, to more recent additions like Echo (1999), Miles Morales as Spiderman (2011), and Kamala Khan as Miss Marvel (2013). Once we had established this timeline, attuned to the ways that American superheroes reflect (and uphold) American values through symbolization, we reviewed America's first iteration: Miss America from 1943. As we moved through Miss America's publishing history, we saw her beginning as a white, blond character, then her transformation into a brunette teenage love interest, until her hiatus and her reworking into America Chavez. Only then, after we had talked through this history of superheroes of color and of America in particular, did we hunker down in class for a close-reading and conversation around the first three chapters of the 2017 *AMERICA* volume.

It seems like a lot of backstory, but I find it important to give historical contexts in these types of introductory courses. Additionally, when we decide to teach Latinx comics in the classroom, we have to work from the ground up. Students come in with vague cultural knowledge around Anglo heroes such as Superman and Batman, their stories told and retold in a myriad of way. Teaching Latinx comics means laying the groundwork for students to know and consider other stories. America Chavez didn't just appear from nowhere—and I felt like I'd be failing my students, and my own teaching philosophy, if we just focused on a close reading of the text and not the historical precedents, political, social, and publishing structures, and complicated heritage that she is a part of.

In late 1943, Madeline Joyce Frank made her debut as wartime heroine Miss America in *Marvel Mystery Comics #49*, as publishers attempted to tap into new reader markets and turned to young female readers by introducing new female superheroes like Wonder Woman, Sheena Queen of the Jungle, and Miss America. But, in the post-World War II era, as the fanaticism for superhero stories was dying down (the end of the so-called Golden Age of comics), many comics publishers felt they needed to change tactics. The publishers' indecision around marketing Miss America was apparent by the sudden genre shift in her second issue, which began focusing on teenage romance and relegating the superhero aspect to the background. The newly titled *Miss America Magazine* did not just publish comics, but also included articles on makeup and fashion. The emphasis on strict gendered expectations and material for female readers remained throughout the original series' run. Madeline Joyce could be midcentury America's superpowered, lovestruck, teen beauty queen, but as we saw in my class, America Chavez would (and could) not be ours.

Instead, our America would come onto the scene brash and bold, weaving English and Spanish seamlessly, wearing her curly hair natural, and being unabashed in her queer sexuality. It was important to me that my students see this shift in the superheroine: as Enrique García says, Latinx superheroines are important "because they normalize the presence of the underrepresented in the epic stories of "Americans" saving the world" (169). With the quotation marks around "Americans," García reminds us that this is a porous and unstable denomination. America herself—alien, Latina, immigrant, Puerto Rican—illustrates these unstable boundaries around Americanness. While this is not mentioned in the comics, the Puerto Rican identity that America

Chavez chooses is laden with political tensions and contradictions—while Puerto Ricans are American citizens, they experience alienation from the Anglo mainstream by way of their *latinidad* and their colonial status. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans in New York City, colloquially known as Nuyoricans, have their own cultural heritage as a diaspora. In America, we see a representation of diasporic and inherited culture—she claims this identity not because of her biological ethnicity, but because of kinship and cultural ties. It matters that America Chavez *chooses* this fraught identity and wears it proudly—it matters that with a Puerto Rican identity and a brown body she decides to fight for *all* of America.

While I had some students of color in my class, the majority of students enrolled were white. During the class when we looked at America's story more closely and were able to highlight cultural representations around: Latinx music, Black/Afro culture, ancestral knowledge, and the celebrations (both textually and visually) of Black, Brown, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples, my students expressed surprise. They were unexpectedly engaged and enthralled by what we were reading. Students got excited when they recognized references to Beyoncé and Sonia Sotomayor, to hip-hop and fashion; but it was also heartening to see them get excited to learn new references, to see a story that deviates from their experience of mainstream American (white) culture.

I was proud of the class, and I was happy with the discussion. Then, a white male student raised his hand and asked, "Why did they need to change her race? What was wrong with her being white?" For every educator, teacher, professor, and instructor, moments like these can be tricky to navigate. I didn't want to respond to him from a place of hurt and disappointment—the sinking feeling in my gut that whispers "I don't belong here" whenever I'm faced with my own difference, or the panic and insecurity around not having taught this material *well enough* for him to even ask that question—and I wanted to give space to tackle the question as a class, as a *community*. After all, I had wanted to foster a safe environment to talk through these issues, and this was the moment to see if my effort had borne fruit. So, I took a step back, looked out at my students, and said: "Who wants to respond first?"

Many times, throughout my teaching career, I have stood in awe and amazement at my students and their abilities to read, analyze, and engage in insightful ways. They responded to their classmate right away: students pushed back against this student's assumptions that this change in America was "unnecessary" or that there even needed to be a concrete reasoning around why Marvel had made this decision. Many asked, "Why not?" Some asserted, "We have enough white superheroes." One said, "Because America isn't white." *America isn't white*. This nation, against all odds, against a racist, classist, and xenophobic system, against the representation of mainstream media, *isn't white*. And what do we get, harkening back to Scott McCloud and the importance of color theory, when we mix all the colors together? Brown.

My America is brown. My America is Latina, and queer, and powerful. She's in my classroom, in my lectures, in my students' voices, in their thoughts. Teaching Latinx comics is not and should not be a fringe or surprising concept. It's an imperative. That day, my students reminded me that I am America, that we are America, and we are not just talking to ourselves.

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<sup>i</sup> Ellen Kirkpatrick and Suzanne Scott explain how an example of this trend came up in the first In Focus section of *Cinema Journal*, edited by Bart Beaty in 2011, to focus on comics studies. Particularly, they point out comments made

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by Scott Bukatman, in a roundtable included in the section, who dismissed “representation of” studies (the “what” of comics) as a problem for the emerging field, instead wanting to privilege the “how” of comics.

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