

LATINOGRAPHIX: THE VITAL PULSE THAT BEATS AT THE HEART OF WORLD STORYTELLING TODAY!

Frederick Luis Aldama

Back in the mid-2000s when I first thought to bring some scholarly rigor to my otherwise scattershot seeking of pleasure (and pain) in the word-drawn Latinx storyworlds, I had no idea that the study of Latinx comics could be a thing. It is—and swiftly and robustly so. When Jorge (Newcastle University, UK) and Kiko (Instituto Franklin at the Universidad de Alcalá, Spain) invited me to write the Foreword to this special issue of *CAMINO REAL: Estudios de las Hispanidades Norteamericanas* on US Latinx comics, I jumped up and down—and at the chance. I wanted to celebrate. Latinx comics and their study have become mainstays in learning spaces in the US. And, their study is being shouted from the proverbial rooftops of a journal published in Spain. Wow!

But why such a blazing interest in US Latinx comics, as I'm often asked. And, relatedly, is there something about the word-drawn hybrid form that can do something better (deeper?) to pleasure and wake our brains to new ways of understanding the very varied identities and experiences that make up Latinoness? To at least begin

Frederick Luis Aldama (also known as Professor Latinx) is an academic and award-winning author of over 45 books, including the International Latino Book Award and Eisner Award for *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. He is editor of the trade press, Latinographix, creator of the first documentary on the history of Latinx superheroes, and co-founder & director of SÓL-CON: Brown, Black, & Indigenous Comix Expo & Symposium. This fall, Aldama will publish a Spanish translation of his kid's book *The Adventures of Chupacabra Charlie* (2020) as well as join UT Austin's English Department as the Jacob & Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities and launch his Latinx Pop Lab—a creative and knowledge generating incubator focused on Latinx pop narratives that will bridge campus with community in Austin.

to answer these questions, let me properly step us into contexts of creating, distributing, and consuming US Latinx comics.

It's no wonder that we've been *drawn* to shaping our stories (autobiography, biography, memoir, history, mythic) in the comic book form. When largely locked out of other narrative spaces (film, TV, novel, for instance), Latinxs have gravitated to Bristol Boards, pencils, and inks. Since veteranos like Gus Arriola (*Gordo*), Judge Garza (*Relampago*), Los Bros Hernandez (*Love and Rockets*), Laura Molina (*The Jaguar*), Rhode Montijo (*Pablo's Inferno*), Carlos Saldaña (*Burrito*), Richard Dominguez (*El Gato Negro*), Frank Espinosa (*Rocketo*), Ivan Velez (*Blood Syndicate*), Lalo Alcaraz (*La Cucaracha*), Héctor Cantú and Carlos Castellanos (*Baldo*), and Javier Hernandez (*El Muerto*) cracked open word-drawn storytelling spaces, legions of us have gravitated to the comic book narrative form to tell our stories—and to imagine stories distant from our proximate experiences as Latinxs. Indeed, with new gen LGBTQ+ Latinx and Blatinx creators vitally and powerfully entering the fray, this is where the real revolution is happening within Latinx storytelling spaces. The vitality and abundance of Latinx comic creations today has my head perpetually in a joyous spin.

In many ways, that we've become legion as comic book storytellers is not surprising. Telling and shaping our stories in the ways that we choose and control is easier when on our own; the more establishment (i.e. money) is involved, the less control we have. Think: film and TV. This creative control is important as it allows us to willfully and skillfully *geometrize* word-drawn narratives in ways that breathe dignities and complexities into our subjectivities and experiences. (I first formulate the concept of *geometrizing* in in *Latinx Superheroes and Mainstream Comics* where it becomes a shorthand of sorts to identify the significance of the visual shaping devices in the making of narratives that move and to creating protagonists that pop.) By this I mean that it is the comic storytelling spaces where we can most freely and vitally give visual shape (layout, line, color, perspective, balloon shape and placement, lettering, and gutter size and width, among others) to characters, spaces, themes, and plots that furnish the universe anew with complex Latinx entities and worldviews.

And, with comics we can create without the gatekeepers. You know, those establishment venues controlled by legacies of

disconnected whiteness that largely don't see us and when they do, it's in stereotypical ways: buffoon, hypersexualized lover, lazy, and as "bad hombres." As long ago as the 1940s when Gus Arriola began publishing his nationally syndicated strip, *Gordo*, there was already in place the establishment's idea of what stories and types of character Latinx creators could give birth to. And so for Gus, the only way he'd get his Latinx protagonist to see the light of publishing day was as a rotund, lazy, heavily Spanglish accented, *sombrero* wearing *campesino*. And while Gus managed to breathe a certain quixotic complexity into *Gordo*, the character remained largely straightjacketed by white newspaper editor-room expectations—and this for the over 40 years of newspaper syndication.

For the past several decades and especially today, Latinx comic creators are able to resist more and more being forced to fall into line. We're not sitting on our hands waiting for the doors to open, either. I think readily of *Latinxgrapeurs* such as: Jason "Gonzo" Gonzales (*La Mano del Destino*), Oscar Garza & Rolando Esquivel (*Mashbone & Grifty*), Jaime Crespo (*Tortilla*), Elvira Carizzal-Dukes and Ronnie Dukes (*A.W.O.L.*), Kat Fajardo (*La Raza Anthology* and *Bandida Comics*), Eric J. García (*Drawing on Anger*), Javier Hernandez (*El Muerto*), Crystal Gonzalez (*In the Dark*), and Alberto Ledesma (*Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer*). I think, too, of: Breena Nuñez, Candy Briones, Dave Ortega, Rafael Rosado, Juan Argil, John Gonzalez, José Alaniz, Vicko Alvarez, Mark Martinez, Rafael Rosado, Victor *Ávilla*, Fernando Rodriguez, José Cabrera, Mark Campos, Cristy Road, Sebastian Kadlecik, MÖM, Alberto Morales, Mike Centino, Jaime Cortez, Federico Cuatlacuatl, Richard Dominguez, Chris Escobar, Eric Esquivel, Kelly Fernandez, Jandro Gamboa, Jenny Gonzalez-Blitz, Raúl González, Roberta Gregory, David Herrera, Juvera, Jeremiah Lambert, Mayra Lara, John Jota Leños, Liz Mayorga, Rafael Navarro, William Nericcio, David Olivarez, Daniel Parada, Zeke Peña, Carlos "Loso" Pérez, John Picacio, Lila Quintero Weaver, Theresa Rojas, Jules Rivera, Grasiela Rodriguez, Héctor Rodríguez, Stephanie Rodriguez, Miguel Angel "Miky" Ruiz, Ilan Stavans, Santiago Cohen, Samuel Teer, Ivan Velez, Andrés Vera Martínez, Stephanie Villarreal Murray, Roberto Weil, and Ray Zepeda, Terry Blas, Jordan Clark, Eliana Falcón, Joamette Gil, among many others.

We're telling our word-drawn stories. And, we're getting them into the hands of our readers—Latinx or otherwise—through the internet (social media and its funding platforms). And, when possible as in my case with Latinographix (OSU Press), we're amplifying the voices and moving into educational curricular spaces with trade-press publications specifically focused on the Latinx creators and their stories.

As the scholars in this special issue amply demonstrate, Latinx comics not only tell our stories, they actively decolonize our perspectives, thoughts, and feelings; they powerfully peel back the cloudy films over our eyes, to see the ways that our families and communities have been shamed by mainstream media and sociopolitical policies. The scholarship herein shows us how Latinx comics can and do create palimpsests in our minds, overlaying the past (US occupations and imperialist invasions of the Americas and Hispanophone archipelagos) with today's xenophobic, neoliberal practices. They wake us to our collective trauma as targets of US imperialist practices at home and across the Americas. Latinx comic book narratives crack open the perceptual, imaginative, and feeling systems. They tell stories to Latinx readers primarily, and secondarily inviting all others to learn to step into our shoes to experience the bountiful ways that our experiences, cultures, identities enrich, shape, and transform the world we all inhabit.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Aldama, Frederick Luis, editor. *Graphic Indigeneity: Comics in the Americas and Australasia*. University of Mississippi Press, 2020.
- . editor. *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*. University of Texas Press, 2010.
- , editor. *Tales from la Vida: A Latinx Comics Anthology*. The Ohio State University Press, 2018.
- . *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. University of Arizona Press, 2017.
- . *Latinx Comic Book Storytelling: An Odyssey by Interview*. San Diego State University Press, 2016.
- . *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez*. University of Texas Press, 2009.

- Aldama, Frederick Luis & Christopher González, editors. *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future*. University of Texas Press, 2016.
- Aldama, Frederick Luis & Ilan Stavans, editors. *¡Muy Pop! Conversations on Latino Popular Culture*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor D. *Lalo Alcaraz: Political Cartooning in the Latino Community*. University Press of Mississippi, 2017.
- Santos, Jorge. *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement*. University of Texas Press, 2019.