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David William Foster. *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of David William Foster. *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

Keywords

Comics, Brazil, Argentina, Latin American studies, history, sexuality, gender, semiotics

David William Foster. *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016. 155 pp.

If you type “popular graphic novels” into Google, you are immediately bombarded with websites claiming they have “the” definitive list of the best graphic novels and graphic novelists “of all time.” Authors such as Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Art Spiegelman are probably included. While there is an overwhelming U.S. presence in these lists, very few authors from outside of the U.S. tend to make the cut (with English-born Moore being a key exception). The concept of the graphic novel becomes part of white, Western culture, and that is where David William Foster’s *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil* breaks the anglocentric mold. His work brings Latin America into the conversation, highlighting the decades-long publication history of graphic narratives in pre- and post- dictatorship Argentina, as well as the more recent development of a graphic narrative inventory in Brazil. By focusing on Argentina and Brazil, Foster demonstrates how graphic narratives manage to “articulate interpretations of individual and collective lives” (xiii), merging the social, political, and historical tensions with the everydayness of a person’s lived experience.

Foster’s work is divided into two primary sections, the first focusing on Argentina’s long tradition of graphic narratives both before and after the dictatorship. The second centers on more contemporary Brazilian narratives that “show little interest in dealing with the sociopolitical issues of dictatorship and redemocratization in Brazil. Rather, they are very much tied to the aggressive culture of modernity that has characterized Brazil in recent decades” (xii). Despite the difference in emphasis, both parts highlight the connection between society and the individual and the shared struggles associated with being human. Foster manages this analysis by focusing each chapter on a particular life issue: death, corruption, patriarchal oppression, the burden of living, and feminine resistance (clearly a very cheerful collection of works). Foster approaches these issues by setting two very specific goals for himself, the first being to better understand how the works are framed by the socio-political and historical contexts in which they were written and the second being to focus on “linguistics issues,” specifically, “how specific linguistic features intersect with semiotic and ideological dimensions of cultural texts” (xiii).

The primary strength of *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond* is Foster’s ability to interweave seemingly disparate works. Despite not having a formal concluding chapter, and only a brief preface, Foster manages to interconnect the narratives without such traditional features, thereby establishing a cohesive dialogue across the works he analyzes. Foster’s analysis underlines those elements that set graphic narratives apart from regular comics, since graphic narratives

manage to “promote reader introspection and the sustained contemplation of a complex and ambiguous aesthetic object. Over-the-top WHAM! BANG! KERPOW!, often tied to fanciful action images of raw physical experience, yield to the often highly nuanced and multiple ambiguous sequencing of lived human events, often with no conclusive sense of THE END” (83-84). The various graphic narratives that Foster analyzes in the book show how the difficulties that characters face make them representative of society in general, given that even the allegedly extraordinary is merely an exaggeration of the “plain ordinariness of human existence” (45). Foster grounds the narratives in their socio-political context, which allows him to then move from the local to the global, converting the often hyper-localized narratives into texts that promote universal themes.

Despite the strengths of his work, I would argue that one weak point of his analysis is his treatment of entrenched gender issues. Foster begins part I with an analysis of what he refers to as “the most beloved and even revered of Argentine cultural texts” (3), H. G. Oesterheld’s *El Eternauta*. Here Foster’s analysis focuses on the overarching androcentrism of most graphic narratives, which is especially evident in *El Eternauta* given that “the struggle against Evil in all of the manifestations that give narrative substance to *El Eternauta* can only be executed by male characters” (14). I would argue that Foster in fact perpetuates this same androcentrism through his analysis of primarily male texts. Of the ten chapters that comprise his book, eight focus on the graphic narratives created by Argentinian and Brazilian men, with only one example each of works by women. Foster acknowledges, however, that Patricia Breccia, one of the two women whose work he analyzes, comprises “the best of a rather miniscule inventory of women engaged in graphic narrative or in the broad arena of comics” (58). Despite his acknowledgement of the limited female presence in graphic narratives (and in his defense, it is not easy to find graphic narratives written by Latin American women in general, much less specifically Argentinian or Brazilian women), Foster is almost too quick to dismiss the importance of such an oversight, stating that “this is not the place to explore the masculinism of the genre” (58), a claim that left me to wonder: why is this not the place? While Foster is willing to discuss the issues that women face in excessively patriarchal societies, he is seemingly unwilling to question the genre itself for perpetuating the same heteronormative standards where women are minority players in a “masculine” field. What is missing is further discussion of the genre, specifically, what is it about graphic narratives that bars women from entering that space? But despite my misgivings, by not referencing these issues directly, Foster leaves the door open for future analyses on the subject.

El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil opens the discussion on a rarely analyzed area of Latin American literature: the graphic narrative. By marking the social, political, and historical framework in which the works are written, Foster manages to situate the graphic narratives within

the larger literary canon of Latin America, revealing how they are on par with “traditional” narratives. Foster demonstrates how graphic narratives, through a combination of graphic visuals and literary texts, are “the” medium for the telling of human stories, for they succeed in transforming everyday situations into visual works of art.

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