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Frederick Luis Aldama. *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2017.

Danielle A. Orozco

The Ohio State University, orozco.37@osu.edu

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Frederick Luis Aldama. *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*.
Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2017.

Abstract

Review of Frederick Luis Aldama. *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. Tucson: Uof Arizona P, 2017.

Keywords

Latino, Latina, superheroes, comics, animation, film, television, history

Frederick Luis Aldama. *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2017. 232 pp.

In an age of never-ending superhero comic books, movies, and television shows, it is apparent that superheroes have come to dominate popular media. We frequently see strong, muscled-up heroes in chiseled body suits and buxom heroines in skin-tight spandex—overused images, but figures that still prevail in Hollywood blockbusters. But what is even more notable is that these “super” bodies are overwhelmingly white, straight, and cisgendered. While people of color and queer individuals are starting to occupy roles in mainstream superhero media, their presence is still marginal at best. The need for Latinx superheroes is even more dire, as Latinx communities struggle to see realistic representations or positive portrayals of themselves in popular culture. At a time when the United States has an estimated total of 51 million Latinos, this lack of diversity in superhero culture is difficult to understand. This is where Frederick Luis Aldama’s work steps in to save the day. His new book, *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*, aims to uncover and promote those Latinx superheroes who have been slowly but steadily changing the faces—and bodies—of the comic book industry.

In this extensive archival text, Aldama builds off his previous work in *Your Brain on Latino Comics* by considering Latinx superheroes in comic book storyworlds (including print, filmic, and televisual means). Aldama chooses to study these mediums because of their accessibility to a variety of audiences. By analyzing historical and contemporary Latinx superheroes, Aldama is interested in how shaping devices (like panels in comics, camera placement in films, and voice-acting in animation) can distill and reconstruct *Latinidad* in complex ways. Sometimes these representations are created in manners that revise our perceptions about Latinos, while at other times such portrayals fail by falling into racist stereotypes rooted in hyper-sexuality or hyper-violence. Even worse, there are texts that simply erase *Latinidad*, such as Christopher Nolan’s re-imagining of Bane’s character in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Ultimately, Aldama’s work illuminates how comics’ creators (artists, writers, animators, and filmmakers) have constructed specific images of Latinos in popular media. As audience members respond to these representations of Latinx communities, they work with the comic’s creators to create a unique viewing experience.

Aldama begins his text with a foreword from John Jennings, a UC Riverside professor specializing in media studies, and ends his book with an afterword by Javier Hernandez, the independent comic. Through their unique contributions, the book becomes an effective interdisciplinary exercise as academia and artistic activism merge. The Preface outlines the purpose of the text (to provide an analytical archive of Latinx superheroes) and offers a detailed

acknowledgments list that demonstrates how careful scholarly work is achieved through a network of passionate *gente* ‘people.’ The Prologue, “Kicking Some *Culo!*” (Kicking Some ‘Ass’) not only provides important historical context for how Latinos are seen in media, but also delineates the contents of *Latinx Superheroes*. The book opens with chapter 1, “Excavating a Latino Superhero Print-Comic Archive,” in which Aldama begins his impressive archive of Latinx superheroes from the 1940s to the twenty-first century. His research is enlightening—even validating—when one considers the significance of *Latinidad* in a space such as the mainstream comics industry, where Latinos have been historically marginalized.

Chapter 2 focuses on providing a theoretical understanding of comics, while chapter 3 continues an archive of Latinx superheroes. Chapter 2, “Toward a Theory of Latino Comic Book,” discusses how creators and audiences co-create the comics experience. Here, Aldama considers how visual shaping devices give form to the final comic’s product in order to elicit certain cognitive emotions from readers. In chapter 3, “Multimediated Latino Superheroes,” Aldama analyzes contemporary filmic culture—primarily animation, television, and cinema—to understand how contemporary, modern Latinx superheroes are configured. While animation and television provide room for creative expression and feature more positive representations for Latinos in mainstream media, Hollywood blockbusters still struggle to overcome the pitfalls of damaging stereotypes. Nevertheless, Aldama’s epilogue, “Up, Up . . . and *Away!*” ends on an optimistic note, as he reflects on recent sociopolitical changes and how the entertainment industry will continue to change and grow with each generation of Latinx-ers.

By providing a rare and extensive archive of Latinx superheroes, Aldama delivers groundbreaking work to Comics Studies. His text pulls together a collection of diverse voices from critical theory, film studies, queer studies, and Latinx literature. He engages with distinguished theorists like Liam Burke and Karin Kukkonen, scholarly critics such as Jared Gardner and Adilifu Nama, and pop culture *aficiandos* like *Washington Post* writer David Betancourt. The inclusion of John Jennings’s Foreword and Javier Hernandez’s Afterword allows academics and artists to be in dialogue with one another, which is not always an easy or feasible task. With these decisions, Aldama gives shape to a text that celebrates a wealth of perspectives through both scholarly and public discourses.

What is most profound about Aldama’s *Latinx Superheroes* is that it unflinchingly guides readers to evaluate the hard truth about Latinx populations and how they are marginalized within mainstream media, even as Latinos are becoming a majority group in the U.S. While his text is thought-provoking and provocative, it is also a genuine pleasure to read. His language is intellectual but not inaccessible; his use of “I” and “we” reinforces his personal investment in this project. At the same time, his casual tone fosters an instant connection with the

reader. Ultimately, Aldama's distinct voice propels the book forward as generations of young Latinx individuals, like myself, eagerly learn about old and new images of Latinx superheroes. By providing visibility to the invisible Latinx figures in comic books and comics-related media, Aldama ultimately becomes the very superhero about which he so energetically researches and writes.

Danielle Alexis Orozco
The Ohio State University