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Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher M. González, eds. *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

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Abstract

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Keywords

Latino/a Studies, cultural studies, race, ethnicity, gender

Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher M. González, eds. *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016. x + 295 pp.

Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher M. González, is the fifth offering in the World Comics and Graphic Nonfiction series for which Aldama and González also serve as editors. Admittedly, when offered the opportunity to review this text I simultaneously experienced great excitement and a pang of anxiety. As an avid reader in my youth, my current engagement with comics is restricted to the summer, when I am able peruse the wonderful selection collected by the library at my local institution and take home collected runs of Spider-Man, *Love and Rockets*, and the occasional Batman graphic novel (no apologies to Superman). And so, although I recognized some of the artists and characters discussed in *Graphic Borders*, I initially worried about my ability to authoritatively review it until I read the award-winning artist Frank Espinosa confess as much in his foreword to the collection: “So delicate is this new Latino symbolization that much of it is unknown, even, dare I say, to some of the artists who write, draw, and create our new stories” (xi). Thus, as Espinosa (and I) can attest after reading *Graphic Borders*, “[w]ith every page turned, the bounteous symbols of our great Latino visual literature become known to you” (xi). What’s more, the authors included operate as Mappers akin to Espinosa’s Rocketo, given that through their sparkling essays, they map and measure the constellations that comprise the expanding universe of Latino comics.

The collection, which is comprised of thirteen essays and an interview, speaks to the vitality of the Latina/o (and Blatino) experience as represented in comic form. But perhaps that puts it too mildly, for these essays boldly step beyond to comment on issues of comic theory, reading practices, and industry politics. Aldama and González’s introduction, aptly titled “Latino Comics Past, Present, and Future—A Primer,” briskly yet thoroughly historicizes the emergence of Latino comics, providing an overview of the themes prevalent therein. Additionally, it familiarizes the uninitiated with the formal features of the genre and points toward foundational scholarship in the field. Separated into five sections, the essays culled here represent a wide variety of critical approaches and engage with both independently produced comics and mainstream offerings from the Big 2 (Marvel and DC). Given the (at best) historically ambivalent engagement the latter has had with Latinos in terms of the industry and subject matter, it is quite fitting that the first section, “*Alternativas*,” makes the work of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez its object of analysis. Focusing on comics that defy generic convention, the section begins with an essay by Patrick L Hamilton, which calls into question the “conflation” of temporality that occurs when reading panels sequentially. By using beautifully reproduced examples from Los Bros Hernandez’ *Love and Rockets*,

Hamilton explains how panel arrangement and juxtaposition can work to create a nonsequential and nonlinear temporal simultaneity between panels (39). This attention to formal matters continues in Aldama's meditative piece that considers how an author's *geometrizing*, or use of verbal and visual devices, shapes a text's mood, essentially taking us all back to school. In the following section, "*Cuerpo Comics*" ('Body' Comics), the authors look to how notions of race and gender are complicated by an artist's reconfigurations of the body. While not as surreal as Wilfred Santiago's evocative work on Roberto Clemente (on which González wonderfully writes), Ellen Gil-Gomez's essay looks to how the *luchador* 'male wrestler' and *luchadora* 'female wrestler' figures in Rafael Navarro and Jaime Hernandez's respective texts challenge gender norms. In "Tortilla Strips," a tongue-in-check description of the Latino comic strips section, the section's authors meditate on the complexity of the Latino experience and how an artist's background and/or political leaning may influence their work. Hector Fernandez L'Hoeste's contribution is particularly striking in its attention to the problematic assimilative politics of Hector Cantu and Carlos Castellanos' light-hearted comic *Baldo*. These politics become all the more glaring when the essay is read alongside Juan Poblete's analysis of Lalo Alcaraz's long-running satirical strip, *La Cucaracha*, which often ruminates on the racial politics of the day.

The next section, "A Bird, a Plane . . . Straight and Queer Super-Lats," turns its attention to superpowered Latinos to explore how these characters reconfigure ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. Mauricio Espinoza's insightful essay identifies how the dual deployment of otherness (ethnic difference and superpower/alienness) both asserts Latino specificity and, as representatives of their communities, demonstrates their value to the nation. Richard T. Rodriguez's careful analysis of queer characters throughout narrative, images, and fan reception reassesses the various efforts at queer representation. Lastly, in "Multiverses, Admixtures, and More," the considerable intellectual powers of Kathryn M Frank, Adilfu Nama, Maya Haddad, and Brain Montes are brought to bear on Latino characters amidst pop culture trends. Understandably then, these authors' attention is focused on the ever-popular yet recently controversial figure of Spider-Man, namely the emergence of Blatino Miles Morales as potential heir to Peter Parker's throne and the forces that stand in his way (for example: Marvel and Sony, comic writer Brian Bendis, and, until recently, the Multiverse). "Simply put," Aldama and González's explain, "the mainstream DC and Marvel publishers are not interested in innovation—unless it sells" (15). Yet as the attention to Latinos as a demographic and their representation in comics grows (9-10), perhaps in the future we can look forward to concomitant efforts in media and merchandise as indicated by the Multiverse colliding video game, *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions*, which saw the inclusion of the futuristic Miguel O'Hara as Spider-Man 2099. Or at least this optimistic Latino fanboy hopes as much.

In conclusion, the essays in *Graphic Borders* do not fail to amaze, and the marshalling of such a wide variety of topics and comics by Aldama and González is nothing short of breathtaking. Whether for the comics novice or aficionado, this collection will introduce the reader to new modes of graphic narrative analysis and will shine as a lodestar for future scholarship in the years to come.

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