

Aldama, Frederick Luis and Christopher González eds.
Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future.
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Reviewed by
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Like a cunning dynamic duo spun from the pages of a comic book, Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González, whether in tight shiny spandex or not, have come up with one hell of a book. One part academic tome, one part gossipy fanboy backstory, one part magic, these Latinx denizens of the Ivory Tower, working with the University of Texas Press (full disclosure: UT Press published my *Tex[t]-Mex*) have published an anthology that is already receiving rave reviews—the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* lauds the text as “a meaty and expansive read.” The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* concludes that the book “is a thorough look at Latino culture and comic books that engages subjects like borders, gender, history, politics, and sexuality in a cohesive collection of essays.” And my fellow critics are right—I am right there with them. But my favorite advance blurb on *Graphic Borders* (what the publishing industry calls a “pull-quote”) has to be that of Santa Clara University’s Cruz Medina whose “understated” cluster of bon mots concludes “Aldama, González, and their scholarly superhero team hurl psionic pulse waves of cognitive, historical, and formal analyses to vitally reconfigure today’s comic-book *borderlandia*. Dare to enter! Dare to be masked!”

The first mistake would be to read these words as hyperbole—they are not. Excited they are, yes! But accurate too.

The excitement derives from at least three direct sources: 1. The sustained quality of the essays, interviews, and illustrations that make up this compelling volume; 2. the range of topics covered in a volume that might be perceived at first glance to constitute a niche topic; and lastly (and most importantly), 3. The relief!

The relief derives from us never ever having to again justify the intellectual sophistication, the semantic depth (and the semiotic complexity) of comic books, comic book authors, and comic book criticism. For writers like myself (I published one of the

first mainstream piece on comics for *MELUS* back in 1995¹), who for years published critical pieces on “graphic narrative,” “sequential art,” camouflaging our writing on comics with fancy theoretical nomenclature (“popular, urban semiotic fabrications”), calling comics *comics* is a tad exhilarating.

And the elation of this freedom grows as a reader makes their way from piece to piece in this collection. Patrick Hamilton’s essay, “Out of Sequence: Time and Meaning in Los Bros Hernandez,” is a PMLA-style essay that harangues comic book critics for their focus on form, on “narrativity” and “sequence”—this focus, he argues, has led to the “neglect of the comic image” and he spends the next of his pages attending to the complexity of these images in Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez’s work.

Next up in the collection is Frederick Luis Aldama’s “Recreative Graphic Novel Acts in Gilbert Hernandez’s Twenty-First-Century Neo Noirs,” one of the treats of the anthology. Aldama, though relatively young himself, is an old hand when it comes to close comic book analysis—with his slew of essays and book length studies focused on comics, the comic book industry, and, of, in particular Latinx artists and storylines in comics, Aldama emerges as our Latinx Harold Bloom, of sorts, for a Mexy 21st century—a prolific and erudite sleuth (and, no offense to Harold, a much more guapo profe) whose eye for the political and semiotic intricacies of comics leaves him in a class of his own. This essay, in particular, is useful as it adds to our understanding of Gilbert’s work in new and evocative modes of engagement. Though often touted together as “Los Bros Hernandez,” Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez march to the beat of distinctive *timbales*, move in ways that are distinct and singular. To be sure, there is much to be gained from studying the publishing impact of their universes in concert, but it is also just as necessary, as Aldama accomplishes with this article, that the individual achievements of these related artists are brought out in relief.

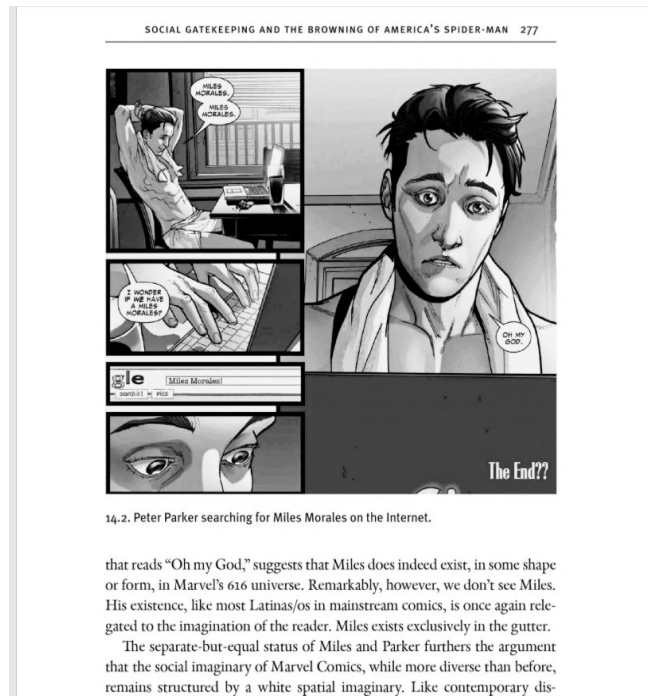
I do not intend in this review to remark on all of the pieces collected in this volume, but I would be remiss to leave out what for me, is the centerpiece element of the book—Christopher González’s wide-ranging conversation with Gilbert and Jaime: “Three Decades with Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez: An Odyssey by Interview.” González’s revelations-laden interview with the thoughtful brothers is comprehensive and filled with surprises for comic book fans and scholars of sequential art alike. In particular, the exchange that begins on page 71 with Gilbert chiding Jaime of not being aware of the dark side, of his being both “Jekyll and Hyde” is exciting—as exciting for comic book fans intrigued with regard to the relationship of the brothers, but also for hermeneutics-heads dying to parse the deep, subterranean unconscious at work in the narrative universes of Los Bros (Freud, Lacan fanboys take note—Kristeva mavens, also, though the latest on her suggests she was a Soviet/Bulgarian spy in addition to being a matriarch of psychoanalytic theory!).

¹ William A. Neruccio, “Artif[r]acture: Virulent Pictures, Graphic Narrative, and the Ideology of the Visual.” *Mosaic: Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 28.4 (December 1995): 79-109. No surprise that even in 1995 it was Los Bros Hernandez that were at the heart of the piece.

The most impressive quality that emerges from a careful reading of this collection is the range of topics—with Ellen M. Gil-Gómez outing the meanings of Mexican wrestlers (Lucha Libre) in Latinx comics to Juan Poblete probing Lalo Alcaraz’s bracing and provocative political cartoons focused on immigration, to Ilan Stavans moving homage to Rius, the Mexican Hogarth of the 20th century, whose *Marx para principiantes* (*Marx for Beginners*) sent this reviewer through a metamorphosis with its revelations regarding Marx (of course) but also enlightenment as to the power of graphic narrative, of comic books, to be a source of knowledge, a “medium is the message” revelation (thanks McLuhan!) regarding the possibilities for pedagogy woven into the fabric of comic books themselves.

One of the more persuasive and engaging compartments of the book—it is a veritable rabbit hutch of knowledge—is cleverly entitled “Part IV. A Bird, a Plane... Straight and Queer Super-Lats.” Sometimes the problem of anthologies is their specificity—so you might expect to run into an anthology focused on Latinx practitioners and criticism; another focused on Queer comix, and yet another focused on race. Aldama and González mix it all up—avoiding a grocery-store aisle mentality, their work reveals and marvels at a growing Latinx diaspora (one that is diasporic geographically, but also with regard to sexual practices, orientations, and politics). This is NOT disorganization! It is the revelation that our comic book universe is as diverse and complex as the peoples who make it. This section’s trio of compositions: Mauricio Espinoza’s “The Alien Is Here to Stay: Otherness, Anti-Assimilation, and Empowerment in Latino/a Superhero Comics,” Isabel Millán’s “Anyá Sofía (Araña) Corazón: The Inner Webbing and Mexicanization of Spider-Girl,” Richard T. Rodríguez’s “Revealing Secret Identities: Gay Latino Superheroes and the Necessity of Disclosure,” all come with revelations that deepen our understanding and that act as provocations for further research and discovery.

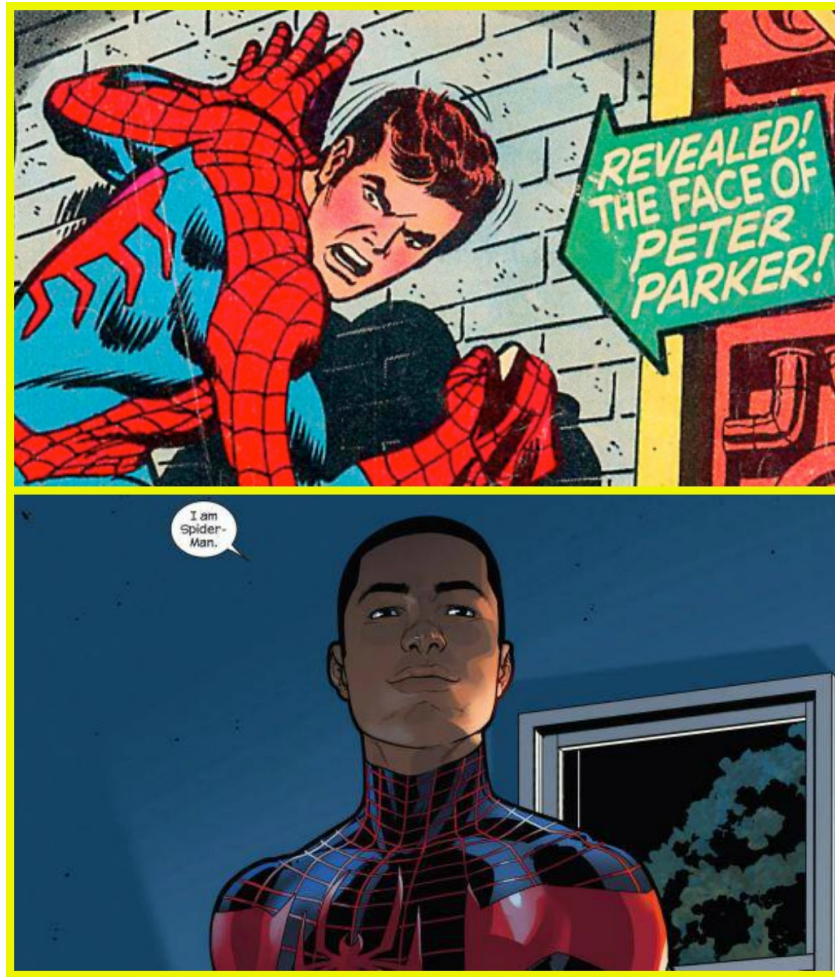
The closing piece of the book is given over to Brian Montes, an Assistant Professor in Latin American and Latina/o Studies at John Jay College, City University of New York.



A snapshot of Montes’s essay (from the digital photography collection of the author).

Montes’s essay, “The Paradox of Miles Morales: Social Gatekeeping and the Browning of America’s Spider-Man” prowls the ethnic and racial intrigues afoot in Marvel Comics decision to pursue an Afro-Latino alter-ego for a new (improved?) Spider-Man, Miles Morales—Morales first appears in *Ultimate Fallout #4* (August 2011), following on the heels of Peter Parker’s death (Parker, for the uninitiated, is OG² Spider-Man. Montes’s compelling close-the-collection-essay explores the paradox of a Marvel Universe that embraces a mixed-blooded, hybrid subjectivity (African/Latino & Spider!) but only so much, not going all the way with its revisioning of the character, ultimately finding a space “in the gutter” from which to evolve.

² OG, aka Old Gangster or old school, that is to say, vintage, Peter Parker.



Peter Parker, top; Miles Morales, bottom panel.
 (From the digital collection of the author)

The richness of Montes’s composition derives from it being every bit as strong with regard to comic book history (what some might consider “fanboy lore”) as it is persuasive and timely, Montes emerges as an up and coming American Studies scholar of race and ethnicity with particular regard to the history of U.S. popular entertainment—and Aldama and González’s anthology rides off into the sunset.

Scholars like me write reviews like this to convince our colleagues that volumes like this are worth adding to our bibliographies—adding new well-researched tomes to the shelves of our libraries (and onto the internet clouds as more and more of Borges’s dark warehouses of paper go digital).

And to be sure, there is no doubt about it in this regard, that Frederick Luis Aldama's and Christopher González's *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future* is a necessary addition to the readings lists of folks who prowl the corridors of literature, mass media, popular culture, and ethnic studies.

But in addition to this, I would add that this beautiful volume is deserving of a broader audience. Back in the day when I was first coming up the ranks, Ramón Saldívar, my mentor at the time, led me to the revelation that in the 80s, Los Bros Hernandez were the widest read Mexican-American authors in the United States. As their fictions were the stuff of indie comic book legend, it was quite likely at that time that more literal eyes were tuned to the semiotically adept gyrations of *Love and Rockets*, than say, the short stories of Rolando Hinojosa or even, the poetry of Sandra Cisneros. But comics being comics, pointy-headed exegetes of the Ivory Tower, just were not as likely to countenance the revolutionary narrative innovations of the sequential art seers. But we know how all that ended up: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won a Pulitzer, and the comics-based geniuses of Chris Ware, Dan Clowes, Jessica Abel, Charles Burns, along with Los Bros Hernandez ignited a fire that changed the face of literature in the late 20th century and early 21st century.

So I end this brief review with a hope and a prayer—that *Graphic Borders* finds a wider audience outside academe; that it become a best-seller too at Manhattan's *Midtown Comics* and *Forbidden Planet*, Chicago's *Alleycat Comics*, and LA's *Golden Apple Comics*. That this magnificent constellation of scholarly findings worm its way into the eyes of comic book fans the world over.

Postscript: (not an afterthought)—they say you can't judge a book by its cover, but they, whoever *they* are, are wrong. My mother used to say to me when I was a boy in Laredo, Texas, that you must *always* look a gift horse in the mouth. I would go to the trouble of trying to correct her saying “no, Mamá, it's *never* look a gift horse in the mouth.” Older now myself, I realize that she was right. Human beings being what they are, the ostensibly generous giver of gifts ought always to be viewed with some healthy skepticism. Same with books, you can, in this instance, *judge a book by its cover*. Aldama and Gonzalez turned to graphic wizard “Gonzo,” aka Jason Gonzalez, whose “The Quetzalcoatl Print,” ©2015, semiotically prepares readers for the image-driven critical treatments in store for them in this volume. It is anything but an afterthought—in fact, Gonzo's design, blending 21st century, spandex-sporting superhero with a pre-colombian, Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl underscores a hieroglyphic lineage that ties together like pictographic DNA Latinxers past, present, and future.

