Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez. By Frederick Luis Aldama. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2009. viii + 331 pp. $60 cloth, $24.95 paper)

The virtue of this volume is its collection of useful information for anyone interested in Latino/a comics studies. Additional merit goes to the fact that it eradicates the notion of Latino/a comics as a nascent medium, providing solid evidence that, while Latino/a cartoonists have failed to become mainstream, they have established an undeniable presence in the market, contesting and questioning many of the prevailing constructs of Latino/a identity sanctioned by the comics industry.

The text is divided into three sections. Guided by a concise sketch of theoretical concerns, the first part proposes a brief overview of the field, endorsing a periodization that, while far from comprehensive (principally in its coverage of Latino/a representation by mainstream publishers, perchance motivated by dislike), provides a broad context for Latino/a comics. Ratifying the author’s identification with a particular sector of the industry, this segment emphasizes the key role played by independent and alternative cartoonists in their efforts to expand possibilities for Latino/a representation.

The second section suggests critical approaches for the topic. It is, by far, the most traditionalist one, relying on conventional literary analysis to examine a medium that clearly demands fresh, resourceful frameworks, better equipped—notionally and methodically—to deal with its ingenious graphic content. For the most part, Aldama concentrates on the narrative side of the stories through a taxonomy of three types of tragicomedy (romantic, heroic, and sacrificial) at the expense of more detailed examination of visual elements. Other volumes by the author substantiate expectations of well-grounded arguments; beyond considerations of narrative nature (techniques, devices, styles), however, little in this section proves innovative.

The author is at his best in the final part of the book, which includes interviews with many influential Latino/a cartoonists. He possesses a keen ear for relevant information and is adept at extracting juicy tidbits from his subjects. Without a doubt, this is the portion of the text that will justify its inclusion in many libraries, since it manages to synthesize and make concrete many of the challenges and strategies of Latino/a cartoonists within the contemporary cultural environment. As novelty, it includes a few Filipino authors.
Regrettably, at the heart of this volume, there seems to be a blatant contradiction. In its early pages, Aldama claims he does not “ascribe here to the position that comic books are shapers of history; that they are a discourse that construct thought, action, and our sense of self; or that their value as an area of scholarly study lies in their uncovering of so-called discursive (historical, cultural, social) forces that intersect to shape the self and society” (p. 4). Yet, on more than one occasion, he is quick to admit, “Latino comic books or comic strips do not exist in a vacuum” (pp. 14, 77). If Latino/a comics emanate from a certain context, it is only sensible to argue that they exert noteworthy impact on our overall sense of imagination. Thus, it becomes imperative to recognize their influence—as eminent cultural products—in the way we conceive and understand the cultural dynamics of our surroundings, bringing about social change and providing new opportunities to imagine multiple identities. If anything, this book clarifies, in more than one sense, that comics qualify as undervalued agents of history.

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