

LATINX COMIX: GRAPHIC MEMOIRS AND COMIC BIOGRAPHIES

AS COUNTER HISTORY

by

JENNIFER CAROCCIO MALDONADO

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Jason Cortés

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

LATINX COMIX: GRAPHIC MEMOIRS AND COMIC BIOGRAPHIES AS COUNTER HISTORY

By: JENNIFER CAROCCIO MALDONADO

Dissertation Director: Jason Cortés

My dissertation is the first study of Latinx graphic life stories. I address the gap in scholarship on graphic memoirs and comic biographies by and about Latinx people. I compare four graphic narratives, two biographical comics, *Who is Ana Mendieta?* (2011) by Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, and *Ghetto Brother: Warrior to Peacemaker* (2015) by Julian Voloj and Claudia Ahlering; and two graphic memoirs, *Spit and Passion* (2012) by Cristy C. Road, and *Darkroom: A Memoir* (2012) by Lila Quintero Weaver. As Latinx cultural products, I explore how all four narratives deal with social movements that have taken place throughout the United States, spanning the 1960s-1990s. I contend that each comic is deeply situated in various social moments of U.S. history. *Latinx Comix* further explores how each of these graphic narratives uses the genre of life writing to reflect the cultural and societal flux of the time.

I participate in the shift in comics studies scholarship that engages in gender studies and critical race theory. The narrative capabilities of Latinx graphic memoirs and comic biographies reclaim a Latinx subjectivity in the United States that presents the multiplicity of Latinx stories. My project places Latinx identity and subjecthood formation within a cultural, literary, and visual context. I argue that a comparative examination of these graphic narratives reveals how they

contest dominant histories that either erase U.S. Latinx communities from social movements or characterize them as passive participants of history. Reading these four books together reveals how they present a counternarrative of Latinx experiences in the United States. The counternarratives that they offer are significant because they show the variety of Latinx identities while also speaking to the specificity of each group's struggle.

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Lastly, I want to take time and space to acknowledge the current social moment happening as I finish this dissertation. The Covid-19 pandemic has killed 100,000 people in the United States, and globally over 371,000 people have died to date. In the middle of this devastating pandemic, police officers in the United States have continued to disproportionately murder Black Americans: on March 13 Louisville Metro Police opened fire on the home of where Breonna Taylor was sleeping and killed her; on May 25 Minneapolis police knelt on the neck of George Floyd, asphyxiating him; on May 27 police in Tallahassee, Florida shot and killed Tony McDade. For the past several days protests have happened all over the country demanding justice and dismantling of the police.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Virginia “Sissy” Bermudez. You gave me a second chance in life and I’ve been running with it ever since. I learned from you that it is more important to be kind than it is to be smart. I strived to make everything I write as kind as it is smart. All that I have accomplished is because of you.

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INTRODUCTION

What happens to a person's story if they die before they can tell it? The act of remembering is an act of defiance when systems of oppression use forgetting to erase the stories of those they seek to subjugate. That is why the untold stories of the dead are important. That is why we remember. How does the medium of comics contribute to this process? Visual-verbal devices of the comic form reinterpret life story writing, while also challenging the assumption of who has the authority to write history. When I use the word form, I mean to say: how the images, words, and panels come together to tell the story. By style, I refer to the aesthetic choices and allusions used in the word-image relationships. Who is involved when it comes to remembrance, forgetting, and erasure as they operate in the mapping of Latinx lives? Of the many possibilities that the graphic form offers, it is memoirs and biographies that I see contesting obscured histories and speaking to the inequalities faced by different Latinx groups in the United States. The composition of the comic page—panels, gutter and panel shape—is an abundant resource. So, when thinking about how history continues to be written by those in power; this dissertation asks, can comics rework our idea of history?

My project started out addressing the gap in scholarship on Latinx graphic memoirs and comic biographies. I have identified four graphic narratives as Latinx cultural products: two biographical comics, *Who is Ana Mendieta?* (2011) by Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, and *Ghetto Brother: Warrior to Peacemaker* (2015) by Julian Voloj and Claudia Ahlering; and two graphic memoirs, *Spit and Passion* (2012) by Cristy C. Road, and *Darkroom: A Memoir* (2012) by Lila Quintero Weaver. Each book is a case study that is the basis of a chapter, which I have divided into two sections. All four narratives deal with social movements that have taken place throughout the United States, spanning the 1960s-1990s. *Who is Ana Mendieta?* is

set during the changing art scene of the 1970-80s that saw the rise of feminist body art. *Ghetto Brother* takes the reader into the social influx of urban decay in 1960s-70s New York City. *Spit and Passion* presents the high energy punk scene in the pop culture of 1990s Florida. Lastly, *Darkroom* looks closely at a pivotal moment in 1960s Alabama during the civil rights movement. I contend that each comic is deeply situated in various moments of U.S. history. *Latinx Comix* further explores how each of these graphic narratives uses the genre of life writing to reflect the cultural and societal flux of the time. I use the term comix to mean the varied style of comics that are not produced by mainstream publishers (such as Marvel or DC).

While the different histories and subjects that each comic covers are contextual in my thesis, they are not the focus of my study. In other words, I am interested in *how* comics portray these histories, and not in trying to write a new history. What intrigues me about these graphic narratives is how the form (gutter, panel shape, text-image relationship) can mimic or represent abstract ideas, such as the interstice or feeling emoted on the comics page. Graphic life narratives of marginalized voices challenge the risk of forgetting. It is the interstitial space of the comic page as represented in the gutter that I argue offers readers a complex portrayal of Latinx identities by interlacing personal and historical narratives. I use the term interstice as a nod to Gloria Anzaldúa's application of the term "intersticios" in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). Anzaldúa theorizes "the spaces between different worlds" that are paralyzing, where "the woman of color does not feel safe" because she is "caught between los intersticios."¹ In comics the space in between panels is known as the gutter. It's

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 42.

one of the most important components of the form. According to Scott McCloud, in his book *Understanding Comics* (1994), “despite the unceremonious title the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics.”² Given these two points, los intersticios and the gutter show how Latinx identity and comics transform these in between spaces into new worlds and histories.

My dissertation is the first study of Latinx graphic life stories. Like other scholars of graphic novels and comics, such as Deborah Whaley and Hillary Chute, I participate in the shift in comics studies scholarship that engages in gender studies and critical race theory.³ The narrative capabilities of Latinx graphic memoirs and comic biographies reclaim a Latinx subjectivity in the United States that presents the multiplicity of Latinx stories. My project places Latinx identity and subjecthood formation within a cultural, literary, and visual context. I argue that a comparative examination of these graphic narratives reveals how they contest dominant histories that either erase U.S. Latinx communities from social movements or characterize them as passive participants of history.

Like other cultural theory scholars, I have found comics studies to be a significant resource for examining ethno-racial cultural productions. In her book *Black Women in Sequence* (2016), Deborah Whaley writes that her project “extends these pivotal moments and interventions in comic book studies by providing theoretical, historical, and cultural analyses of Black women in sequential art.”⁴ Likewise, my project places Latinx identity and subjecthood formation within a cultural, literary, and visual context of the comic form. It

² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 66.

³ Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, no. 1 (2002).

⁴ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 8.

makes sense then, with superhero comics being part of the pop cultural fabric of twentieth and twenty-first century U.S. culture, that literary studies should be concerned with the cultural production of comics. There is space to explore the unique positionality of Latinx narratives and how they offer a counter history to dominant narratives.

These individual auto/biographies also tell a national history. How does Latinx subject formation function in these comics? What are the different Latinx identities portrayed? Three of the graphic narratives involve individuals who have immigrated to the United States during adolescence. While Cristy C. Road, the author-artist of *Spit and Passion*, was born in the United States, Road's immediate family immigrated from Cuba, so her narrative involves similar diasporic experiences. Each of the graphic subjects straddles multiple cultures, navigating their inherited customs and the dominant U.S. society. Each narrative portrays the formation of a diasporic, or transcultural subject, which is intrinsic to their Latinx identities.

My dissertation works within the context of woman of color feminist theory. Bell hooks has long questioned how class and race operate in memoir publishing; she calls attention to the ways in which personal writing has historically been reserved for white middle-class women.⁵ How have Latina comic artists reclaimed the graphic memoir genre of comics? Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary."⁶ Latinx subjecthood formation overlaps and crosses several borders, physical and metaphorical. The comic page is a juncture of lines that form borders, gaps, and the gutter. I am interested in

⁵ bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999).

⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.

how subjects are created in the panels of these comic biographies and graphic memoirs, and how the visuals of the medium function as narrative devices. Specifically, how the visual device of the gutter explore ideas of exile and membership?

In compiling a collection of Latinx comic biographies and graphic memoirs, I illuminate the unique positionality of Latinx stories in American literature that offer counter histories to dominant narratives. More generally, memoirs and biographies as a significant form of cultural production show how individual narratives reflect the larger stories we tell of the nation. How does the representation of Latinx figures in the medium of comics contribute to American Studies? My dissertation makes an intervention into American Studies by positioning comics and Latinx literature by showing the connection between visual culture and narrative theory in examining social, political, and artistic practices in the United States. I model a similar theoretical framework as Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence*, which "contributes to the larger fields of literature, history, and visual culture studies by modeling an interdisciplinary and American studies theoretical and methodological approach to sequential art studies."⁷ My project seeks to find how comics as cultural artifacts add to the study of cultural citizenship in Latinx Studies.

More specifically, I want to interrogate the different Latinx identities in comic biographies and graphic memoirs, pushing the bounds of memoir and biography to showcase the complexity of Latinx experiences in the United States. My project furthers the field of comics scholarship and media studies within Latinx Studies. Specifically, in how these graphic narratives illuminate history as reflected in stories and show how they are remembered via public memory. Whaley constructs an argument that "reveals sequential art

⁷ Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*, 12.

as a viable form for understanding how popular literature and visual culture reflects the real and imagined place of women of African descent in in nation making, politics and cultural production.”⁸ I continue this tradition of critiquing how cultural material objects contribute to and shape perspectives of Latinidad, immigration, and citizenship. My research is grounded in the connection between literature and culture.

Reading these four books together reveals how they present a counternarrative of Latinx experiences in the United States. The counternarratives that they offer are significant because they show the variety of Latinx identities while also speaking to the specificity of each group’s struggle. I define counternarrative as a story that contests or challenges an official account. Many of the scholars that I engage in Latinx and Comics Studies refer to the significance of counternarratives, but I linger on the concept because I see it as a significant contribution to the field. José Esteban Muñoz, when examining the cultural products of queer people of color, sees their disidentification with mainstream culture as part of their counternarrative.⁹ Foundational Chicana myths have been an important material for writers to refute the colonial histories of Indigenous Mexico. In her article “Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia,” Analisa Taylor examines how different Mexican and Chicana stories “presents us with an appealing counternarrative to the disempowering mother-whore myth of Malinche.”¹⁰ Comics scholars Brannon Costello and Qiana Whitted in their book *Comics and The U.S. South* (2012) also discuss how many of the graphic narratives that present more nuanced depictions of the U.S. South do so in through the counternarratives they

⁸ Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*, 8.

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Analisa Taylor, “Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico,” *Signs*, 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 819.

compose.¹¹ Many of the comic auto/biographies in my study incorporate drawn photographs, which I connect to Barbara Harrison's essay "Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry" that contends photographs as a narrative tool, especially for crafting counternarratives.¹²

In his book *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009), Latinx comics scholar, Frederick Aldama envisions the possibilities of Latinx graphic narratives, writing, "a whole field of accomplishment is being built before our very eyes."¹³ That field has continued to grow. I want to interrogate how these stories are expressed through the comics tradition of breaking and re-making individual and cultural memories. I fill in the gap in both Latinx and Comics scholarship that fails to address graphic memoirs and comic biographies that include racialized and gendered subjects. I make three interventions in my field: (1) As a significant form of cultural production, memoirs and biographies reflect larger historical narratives of the nation; (2) By looking at the art, music, and social movements portrayed in the texts through the lens of personal story, I explain how counternarratives oppose dominant histories; (3) I demonstrate how the abstract concepts of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality within the comic form rely on the artists' use of lines and shading to complicate the history of U.S. systems of racial and gendered binaries. Ultimately, there are two key principles that support my research. First, comics and graphic narratives are legitimate literary texts that engage with issues of remembering trauma, place-making, and social change. Second, Latinx

¹¹ Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, eds., *Comics and The U.S. South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

¹² Barbara Harrison, "Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry," in *Considering Counternarratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, ed. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), ebook, 113-136.

¹³ Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 5.

graphic memoirs and biographies represent both individual and collective narratives of marginality and subjecthood. It is the in-between space of the comic page that I argue creates new and complex understandings of Latinx identities.

Investigations into Graphic Auto/biography

My study considers how diasporic subjects living in a dominant culture retain the customs from their homeland while also participating in a transcultural citizenship.¹⁴ Other studies on the multimodality of comic narratives take a more continental scope, like Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Juan Poblete’s *Redrawing the Nation* (2009).¹⁵ Their collection posits that the “popularity of comics in the continent can be traced back to their ability to dramatize and perform—i.e., to mediate—a lengthy historical process, the modernizing development of Latin/o American—and, in particular, the formation of its urban cultures.”¹⁶ Comics are part of a global exchange of artistic content, and not unlike the novel, are rich in social capital that reflect the cultures in which they are produced.

The second part of my dissertation examines two graphic memoirs by Latina artists Cristy C. Road and Lila Quintero Weaver. There are several monographs and edited collections that have been published from 2005 to 2018 in the field of graphic memoir

¹⁴ I borrow the term “transcultural” from Fernando Ortiz, who in *Cuban Counterpoint* coins the term transculturation, as opposed to acculturation, to better explain the “transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions” (98), and from Ángel Rama, who in *Writing Across Cultures* develops Ortiz’s term for the larger Latin American literary context, where transculturation “resists considering the country’s own traditional culture as if it were passive, inferior to the foreign culture that would modify it, destined for great losses, and lacking any means to respond creatively” (19).

¹⁵ Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Juan Poblete, eds., *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*, (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

¹⁶ Fernández L’Hoeste and Poblete, *Redrawing the Nation*, 2.

studies that inform my research. Two in particular are Elizabeth Marshall's *Graphic Girlhoods* (2018) and Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010), which examine depictions of violence in comics about girlhood and the representation of trauma in autobiographical comics by women. Marshall and Chute investigate how these narratives critique structural racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. I mainly draw from Marshall's focus on memoirs that involve how woman authors recreate their childhoods and use the graphic form to navigate spaces of violence and trauma in school. I extend Chute's analysis of the hand drawn nature of comics and how the body is portrayed in graphic memoirs. When it comes to the historical nature of caricature in print media, I believe that there needs to be a critical race analysis of how comic artists are disrupting or responding to the racial and ethnic stereotypes in graphic narratives. Ultimately, the connections these scholars make between feminist knowledge, memory, and representations of trauma contribute to my interpretations of alternative feminist knowledge production in *Spit and Passion* and *Darkroom*.

In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute is concerned with how the body is drawn on the page. Here, I want to extend Chute's analysis of the body on the page, when she says, "the form of comics [...] lends itself to the autobiographical genre in which we see so many authors [...] materializing their lives and histories."¹⁷ How do we place a gendered and racialized body within the historical context of racial caricature, since it was often used as a tool of dominance in print media? Historically, newspapers used caricatures of Black and Jewish people to uphold anti-Black and anti-Semitic racist ideology throughout Europe and the Americas. With that in mind, we need to remember that when we talk about the body in

¹⁷ Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 11.

comics, we need to question how the racialized body has been dehumanized in dominant historical narratives. Not to mention, if we look at autobiographical comics within this context, we must ask how these artists reclaim cartooning as way to resist dominant histories that have used cartoons to strip the body of its humanity.

Several other studies on graphic memoirs include: Candida Rifkind and Linda Warley's *Canadian Graphic: Picturing Life Narratives* (2016), Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis' edited collection *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics* (2017), and Hertha Sweet Wong's *Picturing Identity* (2018). Each of these looks at different text-image relationships in autobiographies that break from rigid structures of the visual-verbal. They develop frameworks around how writer-artists use elements of the comics form in the renderings of the child and ask how those depictions are both shaped by and respond to structural inequalities.

My project combines the methodological approaches from both ethnic studies and comics studies, similar to other works like Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman's *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (2010) and Tahneer Oksman's *Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (2016). They concentrate on Jewish graphic memoirs, honing a comics scholarship that develops ideas around representation and storytelling techniques in how they focus on graphic portrayals of Jewish experience. My dissertation takes a similar approach, exploring how Latinx identities are represented and culturally produced in biocomics and graphic memoirs. I use the term biocomic as a portmanteau of the two words "biography" and "comic." My use also references Michel

Foucault's "bio-power."¹⁸ Both biocomics deals with issues of biopower in that they depict how certain populations are subject to death.

The counternarratives that I have identify throughout *Latinx Comix* come from marginalized voices, such as women, queer, Latinx and/or immigrants, whose stories are often not granted the same privileges of "be boring" as narratives by white and/or male author-artists, such as the autobiographical comics of Robert Crumb. Yet, graphic narratives like *Ghetto Brother* and *Darkroom* offer depictions of everyday life for Latinx people. Even the mundane activities like a family dinner occur within a larger sociopolitical context. For example, Quintero Weaver sketches for the reader an average school night at home that takes place during a violent suppression of a civil rights protest in February 1965.¹⁹ The visual tool of the drawn family photograph in *Darkroom* as compared to other graphic memoirs that present more sanitized versions of history, such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006). Quintero Weaver is intentional in situating her childhood within the politics of the civil rights movement. For example, Greice Schneider's focus on memoirs in *Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics* (2016) puts forth an analysis of boredom in comics (portrayed and conveyed through the reading experience). However, I reason that auto/bio comic artists are making very intentional choices when presenting ahistorical contexts of their stories.

In *Alternative Comics* (2009), Charles Hatfield's survey of the mundane in Robert Crumb's work, there are examples of the ordinary in graphic life narratives. However, it is

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "Bio-Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹⁹ Lila Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

Hatfield's historiography of autobiography in underground comics, which he dates back to the 1960-70s comix movement that I find most applicable to my project.²⁰ As comics historian Mark James Estren concludes: "The artistic styles are so varied that some have suggested defining the medium by simply calling it 'comix.'"²¹ Other edited volumes that explore wide-ranging themes in graphic autobiographies, such as *Graphic Subjects* (2011) by Michael Chaney and *Drawing from Life* (2013) by Jane Tolmie, not only examine the identity negotiations of the writer-artist, but also the theoretical approaches to the reader-viewer.

Latinx Studies, Re-drawn

The graphic narratives that I have identified each occur within the context of Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Argentinian immigration to the United States. While my larger examination focuses on Latinx subjecthood formation, each chapter is framed within the specific cultural history of those different Latinx communities. There are several major contributions within Puerto Rican cultural studies that inform my work, such as Lloyd H. Rogler and Rosemary Santana Cooney's *Puerto Rican Families in New York City* (1984), Juan Flores' *Divided Borders* (1992), Virginia Sánchez Korrol's *From Colonia to Community* (1994), Edna Acosta-Bélen and Carlos E. Santiago's *Puerto Ricans in the United States* (2006), José Ramón Sánchez' *Boricua Power* (2007), and Sandra Ruiz's *Ricanness* (2019). These texts examine the different waves of Puerto Rican migration, settlements in New York City and the U.S. more broadly, and the literature, art, and music of those communities. For my

²⁰ Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

²¹ Mark James Estren, *A History of Underground Comics* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974), 17.

chapter on *Ghetto Brother*, specifically, I track Benjamin Melendez's discovery of his family's Jewish heritage in the context of Latin American crypto-Jews in the Spanish Caribbean. Citing Stanley Hordes' study "The Sephardic Legacy in the Spanish Caribbean," I contextualize his parents' strange religious practices depicted in the biocomic.

Who is Ana Mendieta? and *Spit and Pasion* involve two periods of Cuban immigration to the United States. Antonio Jorge, Jaime Suchlicki, and Adolfo Leyva de Varona's *Cuban Exiles in Florida* (1991) and Susana Peña's *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* (2013) explore the political context of Cuban immigration in the 1960s and 1990s, respectively. To better place *Who is Ana Mendieta?* as a Cuban-American cultural product I looked to Isabel Alvarez Borland's *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (1998) and Iraida H. López's *Impossible Returns* (2015). When reading the biocomic as a literature of exile in conjunction with the collective memory of Mendieta's art I argue that the biocomic tried to re-member Mendieta as a Cuban artist—re-member meaning: to make her a member again of her Cuban culture; the narrative of reclaiming one's heritage is a common thread throughout many exile literatures. The biocomic also remembers her life and portrayal of her death in the news media. When examining the trope of the closet in *Spit and Passion* I cite the work of Queer Latinx Studies scholars José Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications* (1999) and Juana Maria Rodríguez in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014). Cristy as the child-narrator finds refuge in the closet to better make space for her "queer racialized female yearnings."²² Road's illustrations in the graphic memoir show how Cristy

²² Juana Maria Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

was able to disidentify, showing her desires as “possibilities are representable in their complexity.”²³

For the better part of a decade, Frederick Luis Aldama laid out a foundational framework on Latinx comics and graphic narratives, for example in *Your Brain of Latino Comics*, *Latino Comic Book Storytelling* (2009), *Multicultural Comics* (2010), *Comics Studies Here and Now* (2018), and—with co-author Christopher González—*Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future* (2016). Latino-created comics’ present a more nuanced depiction of Latino characters and culture imagine a different world.²⁴ Aldama writes that “Comic books and comic strips are in the storytelling air we breathe.”²⁵ Comics open the narrative possibilities of how I examine Latinx counternarratives in my own project. In reimagining and retelling a new past, there is the opportunity to redress old traumas and understand Latinx cultural production in new ways.

Section One—Comic Biographies

In this dissertation, I break up each of the four graphic narratives into specific case studies, which comprise four chapters, separated into two sections. Since my project is focused on the narrative structure of these comics, I made the differentiation based on the fact that two comic biographies in my study are written by an author and illustrated by an artist, who are both separate from the subject of the narrative, while graphic memoirs, the author, artist, and narrator are one in the same. Narratively speaking, this is an important

²³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

²⁴ Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

difference since there is a distinction between the subject of the comic (which at times is also the narrator) and author and illustrator who are making intentional literary/artistic choices in how they present the story of their subject. Conversely, graphic memoirs use a very unique narrative device in having an adult-narrator—the author-artist who is creating the comic in a contemporary time—and a child-narrator—the representation of the author-artist as a child in the story.²⁶

In section one I focus on the comic biographies, or biocomics, *Who is Ana Mendieta?* and *Ghetto Brother: From Warrior to Peacemaker*. They are both graphic narratives about how dominant societies exercise control over who is allowed to live and who is exposed to death. Christine Redfern and Caro Caron set out to address the violence of Mendieta's death, offering an alternative story to the one presented in the newspapers. Julian Voloj completed several hundred interviews with Benjamin Melendez and others and in collaboration with Claudia Ahlering to create what I argue is a graphic oral history of the Bronx in the 1960s. Each biocomic, in its own historical context, presents a counternarrative in the form of biographical comics.

Who Is Ana Mendieta?

In Chapter One, I examine how Ana Mendieta's personal history involved her longing for home, which cultivated a space for other Cuban artists. The comic biography places Mendieta as an active participant in her exile. Mendieta refused to conform her work to western standards, and instead chose to work outside the academy. Redfern and Caron

²⁶ Also, biographies are different genres than memoirs and should be approached with those differences in mind.

illustrate her refusal conform to a Eurocentric artistic epistemology as a knowledge production of resistance. Citing Guisela Latorre, I connect Mendieta's work to a Latina artist epistemology, which occurs in the metaphorical space of Muñoz's Brownness and the physical sites where art and landscape intertwine. The longing for home becomes the catalyst for an alternative art history. Redfern and Caron refuse to let Mendieta's art be consigned to the margins of art history books. They use the comic medium to present in full view the violence of Mendieta's death, which reflects similar misogynistic violence that Mendieta portrayed in her own work, so that the reader is unable to ignore the trauma that her absence represents.

Ghetto Brothers: From Warrior to Peacemaker

Chapter Two makes the progression from biocomics to necrocomics. I apply Achille Mbembe's theory of "Necropolitics" to examine how urban planning and government neglect in *Ghetto Brother* reveals the city as a site of death formed by neoliberal policies. I argue Melendez's resistance to necropolitical urban planning and divestment manifested as community-building, is intrinsic to *puertorriqueñidad*. I want to explore reading the biocomic as a graphic oral history. Firstly, I see an opportunity to generate new visual-verbal narrative devices by extending the tool of oral history to the comic form. I also compare *Ghetto Brother's* version of city planner Robert Moses to a graphic biography of Moses himself. Seeing the differences in color and mood between these two graphic biographies, for example, highlights how Voloj and Ahlering's biocomic contests the dominant narrative of Moses in the master narrative.

Section Two—Graphic Memoirs

This section focuses on the narrative capabilities of memoir to represent Latina cultural identity. I'm interested in how Cristy C. Road and Lila Quintero Weaver construct their graphic selves while also contextualizing their narratives within their respective communities. In what ways are they producing a Latina subjectivity in comic form? Both graphic memoirs encounter issues of racism and sexism. They offer counternarratives that specifically engage the (sexual and racial) margins of society in crafting memories of trauma in adolescence. The narrative overlay of the adult-narrator filtering the child-narrator's experiences is exclusive to graphic memoir, which allows for the story to show and critique political situations, like conservative far-right Christianity in 1990s Florida and racial segregation in 1960s Alabama, that affect the narrators. Each memoirist depicts their childhood through a historical filter that positions active Latinx participation in the gay rights and civil rights social movements.

Spit and Passion

Chapter Three engages issues of homophobia and racism in *Spit and Passion*, and recognizes the visual-verbal devices Road uses to construct a Queer Latinx identity in her graphic life writing. The graphic memoir is a grayscale depiction of adolescence lived out loud in the closet. Road's detailed, expressive, portrait-style drawings, coupled with her obsession with the punk band Green Day, offer a coming-of-age Latina story that deals with queer youth and developing an identity outside of one's family. I argue that Road's illustrations reimagine the concept of the grotesque to maneuver the reader through the racist, misogynistic, and homophobic trauma of her childhood. Cristy's affection for the

pop-punk band Green Day crafts a counter history of Latinx participation in the punk music scene while also showing how she molded pop culture into a space she could relate to.

Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White

In Chapter Four, I examine interracial cultural memory in Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom*. It is a coming-of-age Latina graphic memoir that is set during the civil rights movement. I place Quintero Weaver's comic among other graphic narratives, like John Lewis' *March* (2015), that present a counternarrative of the civil rights moment that challenges the dominant version often presented in white-centric mass media. Quintero Weaver meticulously reproduces family photographs, similar to other graphic memories like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, yet she uses the visual device to situate her family's narrative firmly within the politics of voter suppression and police violence. Whether it is a graphic memoir or comic biography, these narratives by and about Latinx individuals attempt to stop the risk of forgetting. They breathe life into stories that were forgotten, and in inking them into life they show how comics can participate in the cultural shift to recuperate ignored Latinx histories.

CHAPTER ONE: Out of the Window and Through the Panels: Re-Membering and Longing for Home in the Comic Biography *Who is Ana Mendieta?*

In the comic biography *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, art critic and writer Christine Redfern and artist and illustrator Caro Caron use the graphic medium to adapt the life and art of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta to raise questions about the circumstances that led to her early death.¹ They examine the ways that Mendieta's art, which dealt with the symbolic and quotidian, reflected her experience as an exile of Cuba; a woman in a male dominated field; and a person of color in the United States. *Who is Ana Mendieta?* does not seek to answer its title's question; rather, as Lucy Lippard asserts in the introduction, "it is a diatribe against violence against women."² The official story is that in 1985 Cuban-American sculptor Ana Mendieta went out a window in New York City. While many feminist scholars and activists believe she was murdered by her husband Carl Andre, he was never convicted of any crime. In this chapter I argue *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* presents a counternarrative that challenges the dominant historical telling of Mendieta's death and places her as an artist within the larger pattern of men's violence against women in the world of art and literature. In bold black ink Redfern and Caron hold Andre responsible for Mendieta's death, and indict the mainstream art establishment for remaining silent on her murder.

How does art produce alternative knowledges and histories? *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* works within the (auto)biographical tradition and the comics medium to form new

¹ Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, illus. *Who is Ana Mendieta?* (New York: CUNY Feminist Press, 2011).

² Ibid., 9.

knowledge productions and histories. Alternative comics (often called comix) have traditionally encompassed, as comics scholar Charles Hatfield observes, “autobiography, reportage, and historical fiction.”³ Autobiography offers the most probing questions regarding life narratives, with its “picaresque shaggy-dog stories or in disarmingly, sometimes harrowingly, frank uprootings of the psyche.”⁴ What do comic biography and graphic historical non-fiction offer? When Christine Redfern and Caro Caron decided to make a comic biography of Mendieta’s art and life, instead of a traditional coffee table art book, they chose to work within a long comix tradition. This is a tradition marked by strong language, unsavory, brash, and often scandalous stories that mainstream comics, like DC or Marvel, or major newspapers did not publish.

Who is Ana Mendieta? connects Mendieta’s artwork, her longing for home, and the Afro-Cuban and Latin American artistic practices that influenced her work. In this chapter I interrogate the physical and metaphorical spaces imbued with meaning in Mendieta’s comic biography to show how Redfern and Caron use the comic medium to engage ideas of remembrance and trauma. The faces, places, and events that form Mendieta as a person and as an artist inhabit the metaphorical space of the page, which depends on visual-verbal cues of the graphic form. Mendieta’s personal history involved her longing for home, where she cultivated a space for other Cuban artists, which is part of the formation of her cultural citizenship. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* re-frames Mendieta’s diasporic subjectivity by placing her as an active participant in her exile.

³ Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), x.

⁴ Ibid.

In this chapter I refer to *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* as a biocomic because it deals with issues of biopower, how bodies are controlled by means of death.⁵ Specifically, the biocomic deals with how women's bodies are repeatedly violated in the art world as part of maintaining a heteropatriarchal structure. As opposed to other scholars who focus on technology and humanity, I am concerned with how biocomics engage death in graphic life writing about racialized and gendered bodies. The biocomic takes the reader through Mendieta's development as an artist. Caron's visual depictions of artists, especially women artists, show how Mendieta was influenced by those who came before her and how she developed her own artistic practice situated in a Cuban worldview. The artistic transformation as she returns "home," or back to her homeland, is rendered in the scenes where she expands on her formal training at the University of Iowa. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* is filled with intimate drawings of the woman artists who precede Mendieta. Their inclusion makes them key characters in her life story. Caron's drawings translate the femininity and sensuality of Mendieta's work, characterizing a distinct break from her contemporaries in performance art, like Carolee Schneemann.

The official history that surrounds Mendieta's death diminished her artwork while bolstering her accused murder's career. Two days after Mendieta died, the *New York Times* reported, in the article "Sculptor Accused of Pushing Wife Out Window to Death" by Leonard Buder, that Mendieta was recipient of a "Guggenheim fellowship in 1980 and was represented in number of exhibitions." Buder then goes on to write about Andre being the

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Bio-Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Patheon Books, 1984).

“founder of the minimalist school of sculpture” and details his artistic style.⁶ While the paragraph about Mendieta is 20 words long, the one about her husband is 44 words long. It is twice the length. The headline alone speaks to the subject of the incident: Andre the sculptor and his wife, who also is an artist. Even though in that same year Mendieta had a fellowship from the American Academy in Rome, and even though Mendieta made innovations in the land and body art movements, her accomplishments are left out when reporting on her violent death. The newspaper reporting reproduces patriarchal subjectivity that place men as the priority, even when they are accused of murder.

In this chapter’s first section, “Longing for Home,” I identify the visual-textual devices in the biocomic in order to trace Mendieta’s journey in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* as both an artist and Cuban exile. I ask: how does art become the place to tell one’s story and to respond to the official narratives? I employ Guísela Latorre’s theory of Latina visual culture to examine how Redfern and Caron illustrate the development of Mendieta’s artwork. Latorre likens her theory of Latina visual culture to Latina feminist discourse, in that it “employs visual strategies” to confront the issues of “highly gendered and often exclusionary nature of social and political spaces.”⁷ I identify those same visual strategies in the biocomic.

Then, in section two, “Belonging in the Art World,” I analyze collective memory in the comic form as it entangles art and historiography. While the act of remembering cannot bring Mendieta back, it can bring her art and her life into public memory. The comic highlights the connection between public memory and official history. Similarly, Iraida H.

⁶ Leonard Buder, “Sculptor Accused of Pushing Wife Out Window to Death,” *New York Times*, B3, Sept. 10, 1985, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

⁷ Guísela Latorre, “Latina Feminism and Visual Discourse: Yreina Cerváñez’s “La Ofrenda,” *Discourse* 21, no. 39 (Fall 1999): 96.

López makes the distinction between national and collective memory in her book *Impossible Returns* (2015).⁸ López is concerned with how artist groups in Cuba construct collective memories of Mendieta and how those memories have been revised over time when compared to the official, national narratives.⁹ Redfern and Caron illustrate the process of how Mendieta's art was exhibited and received. They also confront the issue of how her extensive work was obscured from public exhibition, as seen in the final page of the comic, which shows the activists of Women's Action Coalition (WAC) holding up protest signs asking: "Where is Ana Mendieta?"¹⁰ While different artist collectives have labored to remember Mendieta's work, their memories often run contrary to the official versions that dominate in art galleries and museum exhibitions.

For the third section, "[Re]Membering Ana," I am interested in the slippage between the concepts of remembering and membership. How is Ana Mendieta remembered in the biocomic? How does the biocomic trace how she is re-membered, or made a member again, of Cuban culture in the biocomic? Caron threads Afro-Cuban and Indigenous Mexican imagery throughout Mendieta's words that Redfern has carefully curated. The close connection between how art and literature function in narratives of exile are important to how individuals reclaim membership in their home culture, therefore, I incorporate Isabel Alvarez Borland's *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (2015) in my analysis. Specifically, I am interested in in how she examines Cuban exile writers' post-1959 revolution conception of Cuban history and how they developed a relationship between their adopted and home

⁸ Iraidia H. López. *Impossible Returns: Narratives of the Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2015).

⁹ López, *Impossible Returns*.

¹⁰ Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 38.

cultures.¹¹ Alvarez Borland's study on exile literature expands my idea of how Redfern and Caron illustrate memories of Mendieta in the biocomic, as I connect them to how she used her art as a way to reestablish her connection to Cuba.

In section four, "Violence, Trauma and the Grotesque," I argue Caron's drawings use the grotesque to critique men's violence against women that has historically been ignored in the art world. I am interested in how the biocomic implements the anesthetic of the grotesque—viscera, nudity and bodily fluids—as a critique of men's violence. Redfern and Caron intentionally depict the image of Mendieta's body after she goes out the window. The explicit show of violence toward women at the hands of men was part of Mendieta's early artistic repertoire, as Leticia Alvarado identifies in the aesthetic practice of the abject in Mendieta's work in her book *Abject Performances* (2018).¹² Alvarado links Mendieta's abject performances, and other Latinx artists, to her expressions of Latindad. She writes, "these cultural producers cohere their aesthetic gestures around negative aspects—uncertainty, disgust, unbelonging—capturing what lies far outside mainstream, inspirational Latino-centered social justice struggles."¹³ The grotesque, like the abject, relies on visuals that point toward the parts of society that people prefer to ignore, like violence and trauma.

In the final section of this chapter, Transcultural Feminist Art, I look to the places in the biocomic where Redfern and Caron show how Mendieta's work transitioned away from her western art training. Mendieta as a diasporic subject is presented in multimodal form that

¹¹ Isabel Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 17.

¹² Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹³ Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 4.

expresses the transculturation of her art. Mendieta's art shows the African and Indigenous epistemologies that permeate her performances and sculptures. In depicting the feminist genealogy in Mendieta's life story, Caron's drawings reject the dominant narrative of her death. That is was either an accident or suicide.

I argue *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* traces an artistic journey that shifts between the personal and the historical, reinterprets the desire to go home, and uses the interstitial space of the comic form to complicate Mendieta's exile narrative. The historical context of the biocomic in recuperating Mendieta's story points to the gaps in the official history. Ultimately, Redfern and Caron instill in their biocomic the act of remembering the violence against women that was, and is still, prevalent in the art world. They do so by constructing a narrative that does not let Mendieta's art and life fade from public memory.

Longing for Home

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of my having been cast out of the womb. My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that tie me to the universe.¹⁴

What is the connection between Mendieta's work and her longing for home? *Who is Ana Mendieta?* opens with words from the artist describing feelings of being ripped from her home and how art has been a way for her to revive the connection to Cuba. Eventually, through her art, she would return to Cuba in 1980. However, I am interested in the generative possibilities of how graphic life narratives depict one's longing for home, particularly how Redfern and Caron sketch the conversation Mendieta has had between the female body and the land. In this section I argue that *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* (as both a graphic

¹⁴ Ana Mendieta, as quoted in *Who Is Ana Mendieta* by Redfern and Caron, 17.

biography and history) traces a visual map of Mendieta's desire to return. I want to take a different approach to the idea of longing in diasporic stories, one that places the act of longing as an active engagement on the part of the diasporic subject. Redfern and Caron place the feeling of "being cast out" alongside the ever-present urge to go back as more than a means to an end.

By implementing visual-verbal devices to guide the reader through the world of art, revolution and change, Redfern and Caron trace Mendieta's artistic journey in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* The text-image bonds in the biocomic document Mendieta's emotional journey to reconnect with her homeland. The comic narrative places Mendieta as an active participant in the Cuban diaspora. In the biocomic the reader sees Mendieta as the protagonist of the narrative; she is constantly thinking, creating and learning. In the biocomic Mendieta's return to Cuba is illustrated in a half-page panel. Caron draws Mendieta in the middle, hands stretched out, holding four crisscrossed arrows in one hand and the body of a decapitated chicken in the other. The lower half of her body takes the form of an oval-shaped leaf (alluding to similar nature symbology that appears in Mendieta's art). The text passages on either side of Mendieta communicate to the reader how she went back to Cuba in 1980 and developed a strong relationship with the expatriate community.¹⁵ Returning to Cuba at the start of the 1980s, Mendieta "became a two-way carrier of information about art between Cuba and the United States."¹⁶ It is this long journey between the United States and Cuba in

¹⁵ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 32.

¹⁶ Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta A Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art* 26, no. 2 (summer2014): 21-27.

a seemingly short comic book—a total of 55 pages—that positions Mendieta in the biocomic as active participant in her desire to return home.

The reader is pulled from the micro to the macro as Caron's illustrations propel the narrative toward a perspective of Mendieta's work in a larger, cultural context. Similarly, Mendieta's work functions as exile art, much like exile literature. As Alvarez Borland posits, exile literature and history have long been intertwined, since the writer's exile is often the result of larger historical event.¹⁷ *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* presents Mendieta's art as part of the wider unofficial history of the art movement in the 1970s and 80s. Alvarez Borland's analyses of Lino Novás Calvo's story collection *Maneras de contar* position exile literature as contesting "the official history" of the 1959 revolution.¹⁸ She asserts, "his narratives suggest that alternative perspectives on the events of the revolution should be examined because they can lead to a more complete understanding of what really happened."¹⁹ The biocomic deals with versions of history, however, the murkiness of truth isn't overlooked, like in traditional text narratives. Since drawing in and of itself makes obvious the creation of the visual on the page. The drawn story points to its own construction, alerting the reader that this is only one perspective of "what really happened."

In expanding historical accounts to include literatures of exile, Alvarez Borland offers a useful understanding of how I position comic biographies as historical texts. The conclusion she draws from her examination of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's book *View of Dawn*, is that he "deflates versions of official history" and in doing so "recognizes that all

¹⁷ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*.

¹⁸ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

histories...are interpretive constructions.”²⁰ Much like comic narratives are self-aware of their own constructions, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* functions on one level as an interpretation of Mendieta’s life story as part of a larger art history, specifically, the land and body art movements, where artists used a specific landscape or their body as the canvas, often altering it with natural and manmade materials. Land art pieces were created over long periods of time, whereas there is a performative aspect in body art.

What are the physical and metaphorical spaces imbued with meaning in the graphic narrative? The biocomic lays open the faces, places, and events that form Mendieta as a person and an artist. López, looking at Mendieta’s return to the island, writes: “Mendieta’s traces today are to be found not in the art institutions...but on the margins, in the alternative spaces where her memory has been passed down.”²¹ Where else but in comics does it make sense for individuals cast to the margins of history to be moved to the center of focus? The interstitial space of the gutter in comics can allow those margins to take concrete form on the page. For instance, returning to the final scene of the biocomic, the panel that glimpses into the gallery where Andre and art critics discuss moving on after Andre’s acquittal. The social actors like WAC protestors and Guerilla Girls move from the margins of the page toward the center.²² Women artists and activists still feel the effects of Mendieta’s death and absence in the mainstream art establishment. They are inspired by her art decades later. Their protest signs ask, “Where is Ana Mendieta?” These are non-sanctioned acts that attest to the alternative spaces that López argues are imbued with her memory. The biocomic

²⁰ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 38.

²¹ López. *Impossible Returns*, 91.

²² Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 38.

depicts the action happening inside and outside the gallery simultaneously, while also showing how the characters move from the margins to the center of the page.

Many of the one-panel pages are a collage of images that break from linear time. As opposed to a solely text-based medium, the image-text bonds communicate to the reader how multiple characters and narratives can intersect in any given instance. I am not concerned with whether the comic presents a reliable narrative, but how it presents a counternarrative that addresses the silences around Mendieta's death. The graphic representation of Mendieta's violent death complicates how the biocomic portrays her reclamation of her Cuban heritage in her art. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* presents to the reader a perspective that is both interior (narrated by Mendieta) as well as exterior (informed by historical events). One such example is the second page of the biocomic, in which two scared girls cling to one another. Jagged lines of white surround them. Mendieta, in a text bubble, tells the reader of her journey from Cuba to Iowa.²³

The metaphorical space of the page relies on visual cues that connect image-text to specific moments in Mendieta's personal history. Mendieta's narrative begins in an explosion of people, thoughts, and emotions, as seen in figure 1.1. At the center of the page two young girls huddle together. Their eyes cast upward as a hostile crowd engulfs them. Those girls represent 12-year-old Ana and 14-year-old Raquelín Mendieta. I place the Mendieta sisters as part of what Alvarez Borland defines as the "one-and-a-half generation." These are writers—which I extend to artists—who spent their adolescence in Cuba and adulthoods in

²³ Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 21.

the United States.²⁴ The full-page panel presents to the reader a visual representation of the one-and-a-half generation.

Redfern and Caron set up the theme of longing that will permeate both the narrative space of the comic biography and the physical places that inhabit Mendieta's art. As the reader navigates the complexities of this page, they can visually see how Mendieta as a Cuban exile encountered the hostile terrain of the United States within the larger context of Latin American political influx. At the bottom of the page, the words "VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN!!!" in large print hang over the image of Che Guevara, Fidel and Raúl Castro.²⁵ All at once the reader is immersed in the world of a scared 12-year-old who has just emigrated from Cuba to a country that is unknown and hostile.

Narratively, a full page layout can convey the metaphorical spaces that the subject, in this case Mendieta as a child, inhabits. The sisters look fearful. To the reader's right is an image of their parents, looking concerned, saying, "We are sending you away to America for a year...just until Castro's regime falls."²⁶ While they could not know this at the time, Mendieta would not return to Cuba for another 19 years. To the reader's left and above the girls, various people—nuns whom the Mendieta sisters stayed with when they first arrived in the United States, and Iowans—sneer and cast disdainful looks. They call the girls refugees, whores, and the n-word. The scene demonstrates how their racialization changes after the migration from Cuba to the United States. The panel encapsulates what Alvarez observes as

²⁴ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 7.

²⁵ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 21

²⁶ Ibid.

the “visual register,” which for Mendieta makes it so “she was suddenly marked.”²⁷ The biocomic makes clear that her whiteness does not translate into her new surroundings.



Figure 1.1. Redfern and Caron create a rich world of characters to show the complexity of the Mendieta sister’s immigration to the United States. Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 21.

In the foundational article, “The Diaspora Strikes Back,” Juan Flores blends cultural criticism, pop culture, and diaspora studies, which I use as a guiding framework for my analysis of Mendieta’s longing for home in the comic. He places the “diasporic experience” of countless Latinx emigrants within a “space and perspective” that allows them “to

²⁷ Alvarez, *Abject Performances*, 31.

comprehend their own individual and collective subordination,” while also possessing the ability to counter that subjugation by “self-advancement or grass-roots political activism.”²⁸ As noted before, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* forms Mendieta’s diasporic subjectivity as an active participant in her circumstances. How does reframing the diasporic subject’s longing for home reveal the complex metaphorical space of identity and art?

Who Is Ana Mendieta? shows Mendieta’s active role in her own emancipation.

Namely, after graduate school she goes to study in Mexico and then later returns to Cuba. Caron in a three-panel layout draws Mendieta leaving her senior thesis project at the University of Iowa, she looks happy with her hands thrown in the air, a stark contrast to the previous panel in which Mendieta re-enacted a rape scene to critique the violence happening to women on campus. In the next panel, the reader sees her take off her mask while sitting in the lap of a skeleton. Then she is naked, straddling the skeleton. In the third panel, Mendieta lies in the ground with flowers around her as her mentor Hans Breder and the skeleton take photos. Mendieta narrates: “We traveled to Mexico where it was easier for me to make art that communed with the bones of the buried past.”²⁹ I argue that the skeleton occupies the metaphorical space of the narrative, Caron draws it as the visual representation of the bones of “the buried past.” Mendieta as a diasporic subject rejects a western art canon, opting to exploring Mexican art epistemologies.

Redfern and Caron take on the complexities of Mendieta’s Latin American identity and art. In her biography of Mendieta, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, Jane Blocker writes, “by virtue

²⁸ Juan Flores, “The Diaspora Strikes Back: Reflections on Cultural Remittances,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 39, no. 3 (November 2005), 22.

²⁹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 28-29.

of her identity and her politics, she exposed and troubled the assumptions that lie hidden behind” strict dichotomies like male/female, earth/body.³⁰ The comic engages Mendieta’s social critique through iconographic metaphor of the good and evil filtered through the surreal nature afforded by the drawn form. Mendieta’s advancement to young adulthood is illustrated as a young girl with a head drawn cartoonishly large, sitting under a scale. On one side of her is a masked angel and the word “artist,” while the other side a devil holds a gun, with the word “criminal” under it.³¹ The use of the familiar devil-versus-angel trope represents the choice the artist must make. In the next panel the reader sees that Mendieta is wearing a mask like that of the angel, indicating her choice. She will wear the mask for the next several pages of the narrative. The mask functions as “iconic repetition,” which Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri in their essay “Focalization in Graphic Narrative,” argue signals significance to the reader when a specific visual repeats throughout the narrative.³² The repetition will reinforce for the reader that the removal of the mask signifies another identity shift within Mendieta’s story.

For Mendieta, her art was her refuge. How can art be a refuge if art doesn’t acknowledge one’s home/homelands? By the 1980s she began to exhibit her work globally. Returning to Cuba in 1980, the comic narrates, in Mendieta’s voice, “as my sculptures disappear back into the earth, I too wanted to return to my origins.” Caron illustrates Mendieta as a cocoon opening up, one arm holding a chicken (she used chickens in many of her pieces, invoking the use of animal sacrifice in Afro-Cuban tradition of Santería) and in

³⁰ Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 10.

³¹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 22.

³² Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri. “Focalization in Graphic Narrative,” *Narrative* 19, no. 3 (2011), 330-357.

the other hand a compass; the words “feminist,” “modernist,” “postmodernist,” and “Latina” float near her, all crossed out.³³ As she developed as an artist, her long journey back home inhabited a space within her art and her praxis. Laura Roulet explores Mendieta’s artistic development in terms of her travels to and from the Island, where she would “became a catalyst for young creators who were eager to try out new means of expression.”³⁴ Mendieta made art and made connections between her adopted home (the United States) and her homeland (Cuba). Her longing for home created a space for other Latinx and Cuban artists to create and exchange work.

Mendieta’s art and transnational work with artists was a type of Latinx cultural citizenship, a concept that I employ from the edited volume *Latino Cultural Citizenship* by William Flores and Rina Benmayor. They offer a definition of cultural citizenship that “names a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country.”³⁵ Many of the essays in *Latino Cultural Citizenship* take place at the sites of border spaces. They present another way to understand “cultural processes that result in community building and in political claims raised by marginalized groups on the border society.”³⁶ Mendieta and her work occupied border spaces that are also Brown spaces,³⁷ in that she traveled to Mexico to research various Mexican and Indigenous artistic practices. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* depicts Mendieta throwing off her mask and

³³ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 32.

³⁴ Elvis Fuentes, as quoted in Laura Roulet “Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba,” *American Art*, 26, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 23.

³⁵ William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, (Connecticut: Beacon, 1998), 1.

³⁶ Flores and Rina Benmayor, *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, 15.

³⁷ José Esteban Muñoz “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-88.

beginning to make love to a skeleton. She says: “Every summer we traveled to Mexico where it was easier for me to make art that communed with the bones of the buried.”³⁸ The three panels depicting her transformation show Mendieta in the loving hands of the skeleton, who welcomes her like a lost lover, as she caresses the bones and lays her body bare. Caron’s drawings translate the femininity and sensuality of Mendieta’s work to the page, which stands in contrast to the bareness and starkness of Minimalism, which was devoid of any symbolism and often relied on basic geometric shapes.

I would like to make two significant points regarding the representation of Mendieta’s artistic shift in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* First, while Mendieta was trained professionally in Western art at Iowa State University, she made a distinct break from her training and the feminist art movement of that time. Her research into Indigenous art and Afro-Cuban religious practices marked a purposeful move toward African and Indigenous epistemologies, which treated nature as a revered entity to work with, as opposed to something to dominate. Her cultural citizenship inhabited the metaphorical space of Latin American diasporic subject, a Brown space that resisted dominant practices of Western art.³⁹ Similar to Mendieta’s work, writing about Chicana muralist Yreina Cervántez, Latorre argues: “Like many other Chicanas who struggled to find a voice in the academy, this artist concurred that knowledge and learning were not exclusive domains of educational institutions.”⁴⁰ I recognize the refusal of Latina artists like Cervántez and Mendieta to conform their work to Western standards, and work outside the academy, their knowledge

³⁸ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 29.

³⁹ See José Esteban Muñoz discussion of Mendieta performing brownness in her art in “Vitalism’s After-Burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta,” *Women & Performance* 21:2, 191-198.

⁴⁰ Latorre, “Latina Feminism and Visual Discourse,” 106.

production was an act of resistance. A Latina artist epistemology occurs in the metaphorical space of Brownness, physical sites where art and landscape intertwine in agreement.⁴¹ The longing for home becomes the catalyst for a knowledge production of resistance.

The second point I want to make about Mendieta's artistic transformation is about the use of home and homeland in the formation of her cultural citizenship. Mendieta's communion with the earth parallels her longing to return home, to return to the earth. "As my voice grew stronger, my work became more intimately connected to the land," Mendieta says in a panel where she is drawn nude, eyes closed, in the ground, above her the roots of a great tree and around her are images from her "Siluetas" series.⁴² The four circles that surround Mendieta each depict one of her land art pieces. The circle on her upper right-hand side shows a silhouette covered in earth from her "Island, 1981" piece,⁴³ which resembles her other work, *Untitled, Incantation Olokun-Yemayá*.⁴⁴ The work with the earth and water and her choice of titles, like Olokun, and Yemayá,⁴⁵ reference an Afro-Cuban tradition.⁴⁶ *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* does not shy away from portraying Mendieta's entanglement with Afro-Cuban culture. The graphic life narrative visually motivates the reader to think about how Mendieta navigated cultural shifts, sometimes precariously, as well as to ask questions like how successful she was in mediating aspects of her transcultural identity.

⁴¹ Muñoz "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down."

⁴² Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 30.

⁴³ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 48.

⁴⁴ Gloria Moure, "Ana Mendieta." In *Ana Mendieta*, ed. Gloria Moure, (Barcelona: Ediciones La Polígrafa, 1998), 88.

⁴⁵ Yemayá (sometimes spelled Yemoja) is a Yoruba deity "based in Afro-Atlantic religious cultures for her ability to dominate natural phenomena."

⁴⁶ Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola, eds. Introduction, *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), xix.

Belonging in the Art World

I began by investigating the alternative epistemology of Mendieta's art and research as portrayed in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* Now, I probe that connection further to connect it to art historiography as it relates to Latinx memory and biography. Specifically, I ask: How does art produce alternative knowledges and histories? How do comics as a medium contribute to this process? I position *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* as a comic biography that is a multi-modal life narrative that renders complex individual lives in history. Mendieta used fire, bone, blood, hair, and animal remains as her materials, while her body and the land were her canvases. Other artists of the time were also using land and body in their art, and *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* drops the reader into the lesser-known history of U.S. Latinx art.

For Mendieta, developing a sense of what it meant to be a woman artist in a misogynistic art world was complicated by what it meant to be a Cuban expatriate making art in the United States. It is helpful to go back to Latorre's theory of Latina visual culture, which shows how art is used to contend spaces of exclusion.⁴⁷ I observe that same epistemology taking place in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* In her research, Latorre examines how Latina artists use murals to develop their own space beyond the confines of the museum gallery. Latina writers, like many artists, "struggled to carve an epistemological space for themselves."⁴⁸ Part of that epistemological space, for Mendieta, was both in her art and her advocacy. She assisted with U.S. artists coming to Cuba, as well as Cuban artists having

⁴⁷ Latorre, "Latina Feminism and Visual Discourse."

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

residencies in the United States.⁴⁹ In the biocomic Redfern and Caron illustrate the challenge for Mendieta to carve out space for herself. For example, in one panel Mendieta is standing in front of the Lowe Art Museum covered in what looks like branches, sticks and twigs—a reproduction of her 1982 piece *Stem Mother*.⁵⁰ At the same time, Andre’s art was exhibit inside the museum. The scene shows how galleries and museums physically allow certain people inside and keep others outside. In addition to dealing the exclusion from art authorities, Mendieta also had to contend with misogynistic sentiments that dismissed her work for its own significance. In that same scene, worm-like creatures with human faces make disparaging comments about Mendieta: “She’s sleeping with him to get ahead in her career.”⁵¹

Work done to excavate individual stories from the margins, such as with Ana Mendieta’s life and work, are only minor references in art history. In the introduction of “Unearthing Objects, Discovering Stories, and Retelling Lives” issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Amy-Katerini Prodromou & Nicoletta Demetriou comment of the methodology of life narratives of unknown figures in history: “The process of uncovering these lives seems not unlike the kind of tenuous, probing brush strokes an archeologist uses against the buried artifacts of the past.”⁵² Redfern and Caron meticulously dig through the archive of letters, films, interviews, newspaper clippings and lectures in their attempt to recuperate Mendieta’s artistic journey, which is catalogued in their works cited page.⁵³ What’s particular about *Who*

⁴⁹ Roulet, “Ana Mendieta A Cultural Connector with Cuba,” 25.

⁵⁰ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 33.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Amy-Katerini Prodromou & Nicoletta Demetriou, “Unearthing Objects, Discovering Stories, and Retelling Lives,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32, no. 3 (2017): 470.

⁵³ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 54.

Is Ana Mendieta?, compared to other biographies of Mendieta, is that the recovery process is made apparent to the reader, as they encounter page after page of Caron's detailed drawings and illustrations. The visual-verbal medium lays bare the process of creating a story, as well as telling it.

Redfern and Caron's biocomic fuses together the major critiques of art history in cartoonish fashion. Caron's illustrations transport the reader into Mendieta's journey into the art world; she utilizes the hand drawn style often found in auto/biographical comics. Hillary Chute, in her book *Graphic Women*, which focuses on autobiographical comics by women, observes the "intriguing aesthetic intimacy" of the hand drawn.⁵⁴ The reader becomes intimately absorbed in the narrative as a result of Caron's artistic style. For instance, a masked Mendieta stands in the crowd peering up at an oversized and naked Carolee Schneemann. She stands, to borrow the figure of speech, ten feet tall in front of amazed onlookers. The people in the crowd look like awe-struck rats in a maze. Two art critics, who Caron has drawn like buzzing bees, fly around the edge of the panel. One says, "I have not been able to find a woman artist who clearly belongs in a one-volume history of art!" Schneemann stands naked challenging the absence of women in art history books, as seen in figure 1.2.⁵⁵ In a later panel Mendieta lies naked as she incorporates the female body into her art. Both artists use their body as part of their performance, often exposing themselves as a way to critique issues of patriarchy and conservatism. Caron introduces to the reader the faces and names of women artist and writers in the world of the biocomic. In doing so, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* contributes to the tradition of biography and comics that creates alternative

⁵⁴ Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6.

⁵⁵ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 24.

knowledge productions and histories. Biography and history entwine, and Mendieta's *Künstlerroman* is inextricable from the new canon of woman artists being forged in the latter half of the twentieth century.



Figure 1.2. Mendieta watches as Schneemann critiques the art history canon. Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 24.

Soon Mendieta's belonging in the art world and longing for Cuba combine. The biocomic continues her journey through the archive of women and feminist artists to alternative artistic epistemologies. The reader can follow Mendieta through the pages of the book. We see Mendieta go from standing in the crowd watching Schneemann, to moving

past the array of woman artists drawn in various scenes from their lives.⁵⁶ Hubertine Auclert, Frida Kahlo, Emily Carr, Camille Claudel, and Marie Bashkirtseff speak of their artwork and how it was publicly received. Each artist occupies a place in Mendieta's life narrative.

Redfern and Caron intentionally include each woman as a character in the narrative of the biocomic. In doing so the voices of these woman artists are heard every time the graphic novella is read. They also map out a feminist genealogy of artists, which responds to the patriarchal lens of the art history books mentioned earlier in the comic. Each artist becomes a social actor in the overarching narrative of the art movements of the 1960s and 70s.

What role do these hand-drawn social actors play in the story of Mendieta as an artist? What is their role in the larger narratives we tell of women in the art world?

Schneemann is pictured in the top panel above the archive of women artists. She says to Mendieta: "Well Ana, you can't just sit back and accept that! Those walls closing out women were so dense and so in place that I began my own research into history...that was enlightening!" While speaking, Schneemann uses a flyswatter to smash the flying bug of the patriarchal critic seen in the previous panel.⁵⁷ She conveys to Mendieta, and to the reader as well, there is no reason why women should not be included in art history. Women artists are included in this counter history. Caron draws Mendieta and the other artists and Redfern makes sure to include their voices by literally having them speak on the page—she attributes a text bubble to every one of them. They are no longer names scrawled in the margins of the art history books or faceless women left in obscurity.

⁵⁶ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 24-25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

The risk of forgetting harms every generation that comes after. Cherrie Moraga knew of this danger. In one of the most important books on women of color's struggles, *This Bridge Called My Back* (2015), she writes in the preface to the fourth edition: "I watch how desperately we need political memory, so that we are not always imagining ourselves the ever-inventors of revolution."⁵⁸ By political memory, I believe she refers to any act of remembering that counters dominant narratives that purposefully leave out marginalized people. Mendieta was a Cuban woman immigrant working in the art world that privileged white heterosexual males. One of the most prominent artists of that time, Carl Andre, violated her when he pushed her out that window on September 8, 1985. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* shows how Mendieta was violently silenced when her husband ended her life. In the final pages of the narrative, her body lies lifeless and broken—like one of her blood-soaked *Siluetas*.⁵⁹ Redfern and Caron could not save her from such a horrible fate, but they can save her life's story through text and image.

Who then can resist the canon of Western art history's refusal to acknowledge Mendieta's contribution? In the Introduction of the special issues of *Signs*, "New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture," Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones assert: "Attention paid to the politics of identity and identification in visual art is often dismissed by guardians of the discipline of 'art history' as 'cultural studies.'"⁶⁰ Just as in literature, when identities have to be named, then it must take place in the realm of cultural studies, or often ethnic studies. However, default identities, such as white, male and/or middle class, go unnamed and

⁵⁸ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th edition, (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), xix.

⁵⁹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones, "Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture," *Signs* 31, no. 3 (spring 2006) 607-615.

therefore aren't relegated to the margins of "great literature" or "great art." Alvarado rejects a multicultural view of Mendieta's work, instead positioning "Mendieta's abject performances" as sites that "reflect on embodied alternatives" when thinking about "the inclusion of minoritized populations."⁶¹

The biocomic addresses the double standard in art history. On one page in particular Caron depicts the changing times in 1970s: Robert Katz speaks into a microphone saying: "Notoriously insensitive to women participating in the mainstream art world as equal competitors, the same establishment that had been ignoring their work, suddenly approved of them working with their own bodies in the 1970's."⁶² He then adds in another speech bubble, "and the more attractive the body, the better!!!" In a smaller panel on the bottom of the page Lucy Lippard says: "Because women are considered sex objects, it's taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she's beautiful." Lippard continues in another speech bubble: "While Vito Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back is an artist!?!". The longer panel in the middle depicts Hannah Wilke walking across the floor removing pieces of clothing, while a squatting Shigeko Kuboto videotapes her. Kuboto is also painting with a brush that has been inserted into her vagina. Nearby, Yayoi Kusuma paints circles in the nude, save for a party hat on her head. In a smaller panel near the bottom left-hand corner of the page, Vito Acconci records himself masturbating.⁶³ I want to note that Lippard is drawn in the style of daytime talk show host, as opposed to Katz, who looks like an on-the-street reporter. I

⁶¹ Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 27.

⁶² While the characters are not named in the panel, they can be identified by their picture on the flyleaf (which refers to the art on the inside of a book cover).

⁶³ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 27.

contend that the subtle visual message is that men's words should be taken more seriously, like a news report, while women's words are trivial, likened to daytime talk shows. Feminist theories of visual culture pushed back against these designations. Their potential lies in their ability to "expand but also refine how we think about identity and visuality as well as conceptual categories that are central" to feminist work.⁶⁴ The comic form actively engages with critiquing these stereotypes.

[Re]Membering Ana

How does the visual device of the gutter explore ideas of exile and membership? In this section, I interrogate how Mendieta's biocomic partakes in a larger recuperation of marginalized stories, specifically through the idea of remembering Mendieta's life and art as part of her cultural membership with Cuba and its diaspora. I couple this with the idea of Ana Mendieta as re-membered, meaning that she is made a member again of Cuban culture. Placing the focus of study at this apex shows the significance of narratives of crossing—in this instance, Mendieta's journey as a Cuban émigré navigating the Western art world in the 1970s.

When Mendieta returned to Cuba in 1980 she could no longer make art within the confines of a limited Western perspective. The biocomic portrays her transition in words and images. In her essay "Postwar Memories," Tonia Bruguera writes, "Ana then became a symbol of returning to the homeland. Being a symbol meant also the possibility of somehow

⁶⁴ Doyle and Jones, "New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture," 614.

belonging, the possibility of having at least the right to belong.”⁶⁵ In one scene Caron has drawn Mendieta working on her 1981 Rupestrian Sculptures, “Goddess of the Wind,” “First Women,” and “Old Mother,” carved into the wall of a cave in Escaleras de Jaruco, Cuba. Mendieta kneels at the wall of the cave, chisel in hand, cutting shapes into the stone. She says, “It seems that primitive cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources that give life to the image they create.”⁶⁶ The sculptures have soft curves, some taking a somewhat humanoid figure. They are broad at the top then taper toward the bottom. *Who is Ana Mendieta?* constructs a graphic narrative that shows how Mendieta, though feeling like she was torn from her Cuban culture, returns to the land of her birth to make an enduring impression in the earth. Considering that much of her art was ephemeral, often gone within a day, the reader can see how Mendieta was active in her return by leaving a permanent contribution.

Mendieta’s art explores her Cuban and American identity of exile. She supplants her Western art training with an Afro-Latin American world view. Blocker terms that “in-between” as exile; she asserts, “by engaging the contradictions of identificatory practice...Mendieta occupies the discursive position of exile, and she uses this position to produce in us a sense of the uncanny.”⁶⁷ While I do not engage the same theoretical framework of Freud’s *Heimlich*, or the uncanny as Blocker does, I find the articulation of the threshold as a performance of exile valuable.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Tonia Bruguera, “Postwar Memories,” in *By Heart/De Memoria*, ed. María de los Angeles Torres (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 169.

⁶⁶ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 33.

⁶⁷ Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 73.

⁶⁸ Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 73.

I place Blocker's view of the threshold within the context of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), viewing exile as bodies cast out from one "imagined political community" into another.⁶⁹ The interstitial space of identity opens the reading of the biocomic's use of the gutter, the literal space between panels, as a visual device to explore ideas of exile and membership. Anderson theorized communities "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."⁷⁰ To understand how an individual views their exile, it is helpful to understand how they imagine themselves as a member of a nation or an imagined community, with the goal of comprehending how they envision becoming a member once more of their native imagined community. In this case, how does Mendieta see her own membership as part of Cuba regarding her exile and subsequent re-patriation? Redfern and Caron's graphic biography tells Mendieta's artistic journey through her reclamation of her Cuban identity.

Redfern and Caron use the comic form to excavate Mendieta's story, and it is the images of Mendieta covered in soil, buried in the earth, that highlight the work that she has done to re-root herself in Cuban culture. I link this reclamation of culture to Alvarez Borland's use of the term *desterrado* as opposed to exile. She translates *desterrado* as "literally to be unearthed."⁷¹ Mendieta herself described her exile from Cuba as being torn away and her art as a way to reestablish those bonds.⁷² If exile is like being unearthed from one's homeland, then art can be a way to return, to re-earth one's self in the homeland. The biocomic's depiction of the many ways that Mendieta physically put herself back into the

⁶⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

⁷⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁷¹ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 8.

⁷² Redfern and 17.

earth, which calls for how *desterrado* can more accurately translate Mendieta's exile. I argue that the biocomic portrays Mendieta as a *desterrado*, in that Caron illustrates for the reader the many ways that she tried to re-earth herself. For example, in figure 1.3 Caron draws Mendieta laying naked in the soil beneath the roots of a tree, four bubbles connect to her like roots and each bubble holds a different rendition of one her *Siluetas* series. Mendieta as a *desterrado* points to her uprooting, which the biocomic demonstrates her process of re-rooting herself.

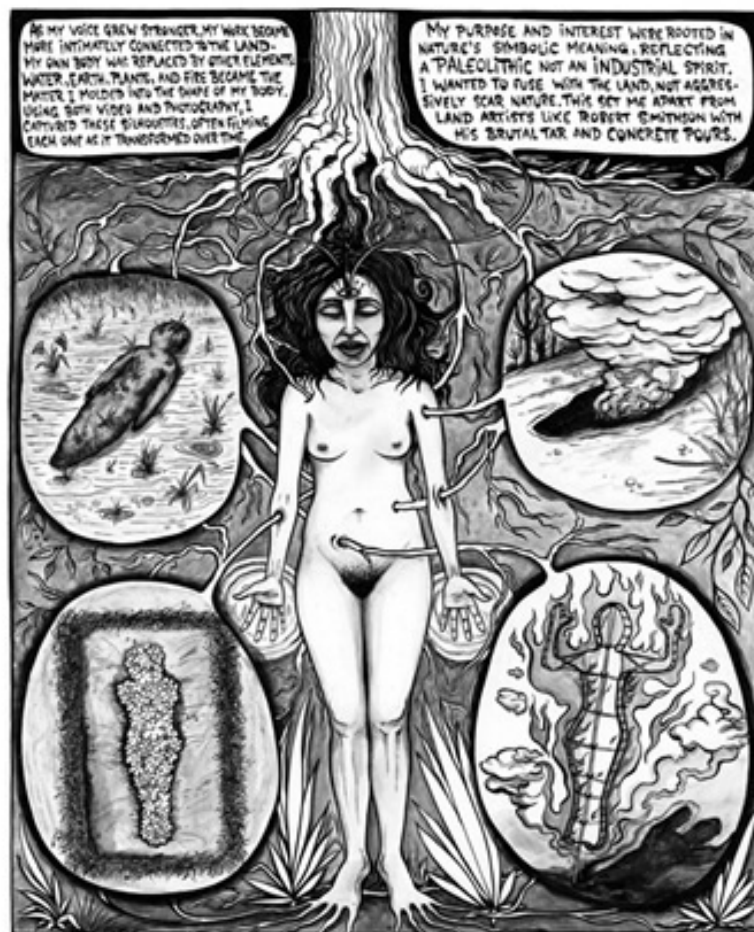


Figure 1.3 Caron reproduces some of Mendieta's "Silueta" series. Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 28.

The biocomic as a memory re-members Mendieta as both an artist in the feminist art movement and in Cuban art and culture. Memory then becomes a way to respond to *desterrado*, “having lost the essential link between land and soul.”⁷³ The panel also includes two narration bubbles, the second saying: “My purpose and interest were rooted in nature’s symbolic meaning, reflecting a paleolithic not an industrial spirit. I wanted to fuse with the land, not aggressively scar nature. This set me apart from land artists like Robert Smithson with his brutal tar and concrete pours.”⁷⁴ Words like “root,” and “land,” and “nature” all connote meanings of importance. They also have a connection to the idea of the ground, or being grounded. Mendieta’s reverence of the land, her later artistic trajectory spent in the soil trying to re-earth herself, becomes fundamental to her as an artist. Her land art is the medium in which she re-establishes the link between land and soul. Caron’s drawings put four of Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series in conversation with each other on the page. While Mendieta’s installations were filmed, the actual shape and material used no longer exist. In re-creating those pieces for the reader next to her words on communing with the land, *Who is Ana Mendieta?* highlights the deep connection her art had to the earth.

In showing how Mendieta re-earths herself and distances herself from Western, male land art, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* doesn’t place her outside the context of the art scene of that time. Her art and performances “sought to make a statement about violence, power, and indifference in society.”⁷⁵ She points to the violence that other male artists commit toward nature. Caron draws Mendieta’s body nude; Mendieta was often without clothes in her performances, showing a freeness with the body. Her eyes are closed, face relaxed with

⁷³ Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 8.

⁷⁴ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 30.

⁷⁵ López, *Impossible Returns*, 91.

hands open and palms out. Mendieta looks calm. The balance she establishes with the soil and roots displays a balance of energy. Again, the reader can see how the art she created did not try to show power over the land. Caron's image of Mendieta lies in stark contrast to the final image of the narrative.

Violence, Trauma and the Grotesque

Violence against women is ugly. Unfortunately, it is too often kept quiet. The comic medium is a chance to make that violence known and women's stories heard. The *graphic* nature of graphic narratives makes it so the messages, often ambiguous in text-based narratives, become undeniable in comic form. I argue that *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* as a biocomic refuses to let Mendieta's story become relegated to the misogyny of the margins in art history books. In doing so, the graphic narrative contests the official accounts of her death. Historically, "comic books have the capacity to open readers' eyes to social injustice," especially Latinx comics.⁷⁶ *Who is Ana Mendieta?* uses the aesthetic of the grotesque to explore the traumas of unregulated men's violence in the art world.

The final time the reader encounters Mendieta in the narrative is at the scene of her death. After falling 34 stories onto the deli's roof below Andre's apartment building, the reader sees the form of a lifeless corpse shaded black and grey on the page.⁷⁷ In three panels the biocomic encounters Mendieta's death differently compared to the other biographies and essays on her life and art. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* puts on full display for the reader the violent

⁷⁶ Frederick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 19.

⁷⁷ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

circumstances of her death, while others mention her death in one or two lines, or relegate the incident to the footnotes.⁷⁸ Mendieta's comic biography functions within the Latinx comics tradition that uses the exaggerated form as social commentary, like comic strips that explicitly challenge issues of immigration policy that affect Latinx communities in the United States.⁷⁹

The comic biography opens with a full page panel depicting the pattern of abuse in the art and literary scene in the United States. The images of William S. Burroughs shooting (and ultimately killing) his wife Joan Vollmer during a game of William Tell, Jackson Pollock's high-speed car crash that killed himself and the passengers in the car, Adele Morales' lie of falling on glass to cover for her husband after he stabs her in the back, and Valerie Solanas' shooting of Andy Warhol in his studio.⁸⁰ Taking place from 1951 to 1960, each incident involves an act of violence toward and/or control of women. The prevailing imagery places each act of violence in relation to the other. Redfern and Caron create an archive of misogyny. The graphic narrative contextualizes Mendieta's life, work, and subsequent death. The pattern leads the reader to ask: Why is there so much violence against women in the art and literature world? Redfern and Caron use the comic medium to adapt Mendieta's life and art to raise questions about the circumstances that lead to her early death. The comic form can "reframe all aspects of our everyday world."⁸¹ Through Redfern and Caron's counternarrative the reader begins to see Mendieta's marriage differently, not just a commonplace dispute turned tragic, but as an abusive relationship that is protected within

⁷⁸ See Jane Blocker's book *Where is Ana Mendieta*, Tania Bruguera's chapter "Post War Memoires," Irida H. López's chapter "Ana Mendieta: Chiseling (in) Cuba," among others.

⁷⁹ Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, 74.

⁸⁰ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 19.

⁸¹ Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, 17.

the art world, by an establishment that privileges white male perspectives and protects abusers, like Carl Andre. Ultimately, it is possible that the violence portrayed in Mendieta's work and the violence depicted in this graphic narrative can begin to bring an end to the abuse of women through the destigmatization of narratives about that violence.

Who Is Ana Mendieta? continues in the tradition of recuperating women artists by continuing to ask who she is in relation to art and art history. Like other biographers, Blocker aims to "locate Mendieta within art history, to find a place for her art, her ethnicity, her nationality, and her gender."⁸² In a review of the biocomic, Shana Thornton concludes: "We see the oppression and exclusion that motivated her, the violence against women that provoked her."⁸³ The art critic is influential to how an artist and their work is received and later catalogued. Blocker examines how one particular critic, Henry Sayre, is "effective in accounting for the often misunderstood aesthetic decisions of artists" but this critique merely shifts the focus of observation, still requiring "critical interpretation."⁸⁴ Sayre renders Mendieta's works "as performance to the extent that they invoke disappearance, movement, and indeterminacy."⁸⁵ While this may be true, perhaps the graphic form is better equipped to interpret the nuances of Mendieta's work, in that "the comic (re)produces destabilized, uncontrollable, and fluid identities."⁸⁶

However, one non-fiction book by Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta*, does go into detail about her death and the criminal

⁸² Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta*, 4.

⁸³ Shana Thornton, "Who Is Ana Mendieta? By Christine Redfern & Caro Caron," *HerCircleEzine.com*. (2011), <http://www.hercircleezine.com/2011/11/01/who-is-ana-mendieta-by-christine-redfern-caro-caron/>.

⁸⁴ Block, Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸⁶ Sebastian Bartosch and Andreas Stuhlmann, "Reconsidering Adaptation as Translation: The Comic in Between." *Studies in Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013): 62.

investigation of Andre. A *Publishers Weekly* review describes his “police procedural” as “an act of remembrance.”⁸⁷ Katz’s book is more of a true crime genre, and not like the other works that are art histories and critiques. *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* is the only Mendieta biography that challenges the official narrative of her death as an accident or suicide. Redfern uses Katz’s book as reference, though.⁸⁸ Why is her possible murder not a more significant part of the historiography of Mendieta’s art?

Redfern and Caron speculate on the final moments of Mendieta’s life. The first panel sets the scene: Mendieta is on the phone with a friend, Natalia Delgado.⁸⁹ Caron draws her face as worried and concerned. Mendieta says into the phone: “I’m excited with my newest work for the commissions. I just need to settle these problems with Carl once and for all!!!” The narration box reads, quite ominously: “But marital bliss was short lived. Just after midnight on September 8, 1985...” The previous panel shows a full page panel of Ana and Carl standing atop a large wedding cake with the various art scene characters decorating the cake.⁹⁰ Redfern and Caron use the tension of the words and images to convey to the reader their story does not end well.

How do Caron’s drawings use the grotesque to critique violence committed toward women that is overlooked in the art world? The bottom half of the page juxtaposes the reproduction of one of Mendieta’s *Siluetas* pieces from 1973 and the image of her ruined body sprawled on the deli’s roof.⁹¹ The visual connection made between Mendieta’s art and her

⁸⁷ “Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta by Robert Katz,” review, *Publishers Weekly*, (May 1990), <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-87113-354-0>.

⁸⁸ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 54.

⁸⁹ Mendieta’s friend is identified later in the Annotated Bibliography of *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 52.

⁹⁰ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

death demonstrates the violence that Mendieta criticized in her art. Her 1973 *Siluetas* that Caron renders here is of a white sheet covering the outline of Mendieta's body, blood seeps from beneath the cloth, while an animal's heart sits atop the bloody torso. There is the illustration of Mendieta's corpse in the right panel on the page. She lies face down, head turned to the side. Blood has begun to pool, seeping from her wounds, as seen in figure 1.4. The image is visceral. The reader cannot turn away. There is no ambiguity of "her going out the window." The image is quite grotesque. How has the concept of the grotesque been used to critique violence committed against marginalized communities?



Figure 1.4 The reader cannot ignore the violence of Mendieta's death. Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

Who Is Ana Mendieta? disrupts the official account of Mendieta's death by using the grotesque to address the silence around misogyny in the art history, specifically in the explicit violence of her death. Redfern and Caron force the reader to confront the trauma marked on Mendieta's body in illustrating her death, much like how Mendieta used her own body in her

previous performances. Other scholars have made similar observations to the carnivalesque and the abject in works that center subjugated individuals. Since the grotesque originates in visual art, it makes sense then to reestablish the concept in graphic novels. Emma Tinker's examination of Robert Crumb's comics uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, writing: "Carnival rituals privileging grotesque representations of the body, ambivalent laughter and the symbolic inversion of hierarchies enact a disruption of authority."⁹²

However, it is the abject that connects Mendieta's art to a transnational feminist context, which appears in the earliest iterations of Mendieta's work. As Alvarado argues: "It is here that Mendieta begins to elaborate a complex engagement with alterity, approaching its racialized and gendered vectors through the unsettling aesthetic force of her abject performances."⁹³ Caron mimics the unsettling affect of Mendieta's art throughout the comic. In doing so, the biocomic highlights the ways that Mendieta pushed back against the gender and racialized trauma she experienced and witnessed, while also using the grotesque to visually present her life story as a counternarrative to the neat, sterile version of her death.

Dark humor breaks some of the tension in the scene. Redfern and Caron use satire to critique how the police handle the incident. In the panel where Mendieta's lifeless body lay, there is also the drawing of a beheaded chicken.⁹⁴ Looking through the lens of what Horstkotte and Pedri call braiding, this repetition "charges layout with meaning braiding suggest a repetition that folds in on what precedes it, forcing readers to re-evaluate previous

⁹² Emma Tinker, "Identity and Form in Alternative Comics, 1967 – 2007." PhD Diss., University College London, October 2008.

⁹³ Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 26.

⁹⁴ The image references Mendieta's 1972 piece, *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)*. She beheads a chicken, plucks its feathers and then covers her body with the feathers.

certainties.”⁹⁵ The chicken is one of many elements that are braided throughout the narrative. The chicken lies atop a bull’s-eye and says: “The police, unlike Mendieta, didn’t photograph the body.”⁹⁶ It is clear Caron’s drawing is not literal, since no chicken was actually found with Mendieta’s body. But it does charge the police with insufficiently investigating her death.

Who Is Ana Mendieta? questions the circumstances of Mendieta’s death, leading the reader through the police encounter with Andre, handling of her body and subsequent murder trial. They point to the cracks in the investigation: the police let Andre wash his hands, they do not photograph the body. Two long curling cords flow out of the phone in the first panel and connect to the bodies. The overall scene is grotesque. As Anna Walczuk notes, the grotesque is “viewed both as a powerful strategy to generate meaning, and a particularly effective vehicle to represent the inexpressible.”⁹⁷ I see Caron’s use of the grotesque in the biocomic to express the trauma of Mendieta’s death and the following suppression of the story of Andre as Mendieta’s murderer. The use of the grotesque in classical art and literature often relied on “exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features.”⁹⁸ Here in the biocomic Mendieta’s body lies motionless, her mouth gaping and her limbs in unnatural positions.⁹⁹

A significant interaction in comics takes place between violence and the body, especially when it comes to marginalized bodies. In the Introduction to her edited collection

⁹⁵ Horstkotte and Pedri, “Focalization in Graphic Narrative”

⁹⁶ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

⁹⁷ Anna Walczuk, “The Grotesque as A Literary Strategy for Expressing the Inexpressible.” *British and American Studies* 18 (2012), 147.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁹⁹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 35.

Drawing from Life (2000), Jane Tolmie writes: “Comics about abuse offer a visual networking strategy for bringing together survivors in particular and those interested in raising awareness in general.”¹⁰⁰ Tolmie examines how embodiment functions in the semi-autobiographical graphic narratives *One Hundred Demons* (2002) by Linda Barry and *Daddy’s Girl* by Debbie Drechsler (1996). Tolmie compares how Barry and Drechsler use “deliberate visual decisions” to engage with the sensitive, and often censored matter of child sexual abuse.¹⁰¹

How then does Caron’s graphic portrayal of Mendieta’s body in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* make “deliberate visual decisions,” as termed by Tolmie? Firstly, in choosing to draw Mendieta’s ruined body for the reader sends a clear message: Look at what happens when violence against women goes unchecked. Much like when Tolmie emphasizes how “Drescher’s visual rendering of trauma” makes graphic the issue of sexual assault in ways that the written word is unable to do, “recognition cannot be refused.”¹⁰² Caron’s grotesque drawings, so too, confront misogyny in a way that writing can never do.

I also like to think of drawing Mendieta’s death as part of the graphic narrative was Redfern and Caron’s attempt to, as Audre Lorde writes, “transform silence into language and action.”¹⁰³ In telling Ana’s story, how do Redfern and Caron use the visual-verbal devices in *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* to disrupt the silence around violence against women in the art world? Every woman character Caron animates refuses to stay quiet. Lorde says that death “is the final silence,”¹⁰⁴ and while Mendieta used her art to speak the silences that she saw needed to

¹⁰⁰ Jane Tolmie, “Introduction (If a Body Meet a Body)” from *Drawing from Life: Memoir and Subjectivity in Comics*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2000).

¹⁰¹ Tolmie, Introduction, xi.

¹⁰² Ibid., xvii

¹⁰³ Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Pressing, 1984), 40.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 41.

come to light, the comic biography transforms Mendieta's death, her final silence, into language, image and action.

Transcultural Feminist Art

Art becomes the place to tell one's life story and to respond to the official narratives presented in the newspapers and rumors whispered in the galleries. As a *New York Times* headline reads: "Greenwich Village Sculptor Acquitted of Pushing Wife to Her Death."¹⁰⁵ According to both the State Supreme Court in Manhattan and the *New York Times* (known as the newspaper of record) Mendieta's death was not the result of men's violence against women, but some tragic accident.¹⁰⁶ The biocomic ends with a one page panel of a gallery enclosed in a circle. Andre stands with two people—possibly artists or art critics—as a woman hands him Mendieta's head on a platter. Andre says: "Justice has been served." The man standing near him shouts with glee: "Hurray for the art\$\$\$!" The woman serving Mendieta's head says: "Let's hope this all just goes away!"¹⁰⁷ The visual message is that Mendieta was sacrificed so that his career could be maintained. Andre, the art critics, and gallery owners, along with the justice system and news media, are the authority on this story. Caron has encircled the glimpse into the gallery with protestors from WAC and Guerilla Girls.¹⁰⁸ Those on the fringes, in this case on the actual margins of the page, do not think justice was served. They believe that Mendieta was murdered and that her art was a

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Sullivan, "Greenwich Village Sculptor Acquitted of Pushing Wife To Her Death," *New York Times*, February 12, 1988, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

significant contribution to the world. She was not worth sacrificing. The biocomic pushes those social actors toward the center, telling a conflicting version of art history.

Comic biographies of diasporic subjects are multimodal forms that speak to this latest study in transculturation. Mendieta's transcultural art is part of her Cuban identity. As Fernando Ortiz, in *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995), terms transculturation, to better explain the "transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions."¹⁰⁹ Ángel Rama, in his book *Writing Across Cultures*, develops Ortiz's term for the larger Latin American literary context, where transculturation "resists considering the country's own traditional culture as if it were passive, inferior to the foreign culture that would modify it, destined for great losses, and lacking any means to respond creatively."¹¹⁰ The biocomic illuminates Mendieta's experience where she used art to maintain her cultural practices in the Cuban diaspora. The graphic narrative is filled with allusions to Western and Latin American artistic practices, reflecting how Mendieta integrated the reigning society's customs as well, to form a new tradition unique to her.

As a method of resisting a predominantly Eurocentric art world, transculturation in Mendieta's art shows the influence of African and Indigenous art that is present in her performances and sculptures and is reflected in the pages of the book. For example, a page, which bisects in the middle: the top half contains text from Mendieta's personal papers, summarizing the direction her art is going and her return to Cuba in 1980; an accompanying illustration depicts her holding in one hand four arrows that point in different directions, and

¹⁰⁹ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 98.

¹¹⁰ Ángel Rama, *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturations in Latin America*, trans. and ed. David Frye, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 19.

in the other a decapitated chicken.¹¹¹ She beheaded a chicken as part of a 1973 performance. The Afro-Caribbean religion of Santería incorporates animal sacrifice as part of its practice. Analyzing the animal and spiritual elements of Mendieta's art, Gloria Moure writes, "for this purpose, Ana Mendieta widened naturalist connotations with superimposed formalisations [*sic*] taken from anthropology and history, related to her own cultural roots."¹¹² By alluding to her own cultural past, Mendieta grounds land art in a historical framework, which differs from her contemporaries who either detached the art from nature, such as minimalists of the time, or white feminist artists who appropriated "goddess" art from Asian or African cultures.

In the page following Mendieta holding the beheaded chicken, the reader encounters her dressed up like her sculpture in an exhibit she gave outside the Lowe Art Museum. In contrast, Andre exhibits his work inside.¹¹³ Mendieta is physically not in the museum. As an institution, museums curate and canonize national culture. The art institution quite plainly excluded Mendieta from that national space. Her refusal to assimilate into Anglo American culture by reclaiming a cultural membership in Cuban culture is at the crux of her transcultural art.

Mendieta's transcultural life is translated through use of the gutter.¹¹⁴ Comic artists use the gutter to re-articulate time and space. For the biographical sketch, the gutter extends life narrative temporally and spatially in a way that allows for the reader to comprehend

¹¹¹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 32.

¹¹² Moure, *Ana Mendieta*, 32.

¹¹³ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 33.

¹¹⁴ The gutter in comics, as explained by Scott McCloud, is where we make sense of comic panels even though they "fracture both time and space," since our mental ability of closure "allows United States to connect these moments." Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 67.

complex, developing themes of exile that might otherwise go unnoticed. I'd like to focus on two pages from *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* in my following analysis of the gutter as a transcultural space. The first example is when the reader sees Mendieta bent over a table with her pants down while onlookers gawk; her student art performance was centered on bringing attention to the rampant sexual violence on campus.¹¹⁵ Redfern and Caron position this scene at the top of the page. Here the graphic narrative is using an aspect-to-aspect transition, directing the reader's eye to specific parts of the panel.¹¹⁶ In the middle of the page, the perspective changes, now the reader encounters Mendieta's face up close, as she narrates her reasoning for her performance: "My sister was beaten by her husband and another student was raped and murdered on my campus."¹¹⁷ The following transition of panels is action-to-action.¹¹⁸ At the bottom right corner of the page, the panel takes the shape of a circle, and within it the reader sees Mendieta scooped up by a larger skeletal hand and taken through an open window, as seen in figure 1.5.¹¹⁹ The left side of the page features onlookers, and various characters commenting on Mendieta's performance piece and the current attitudes around sexual assault and art.

¹¹⁵ In the Annotated Bibliography of biocomic you can find reference to the rape scene depicted. Redfern attributes the information from an article by Lucy Lippard and Robert Katz' biography *Naked By the Window*. Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 28 and 48.

¹¹⁶ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 72.

¹¹⁷ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 28.

¹¹⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 72.

¹¹⁹ Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 28.



Figure 1.5. The reader sees Mendieta physically lifted from her senior art thesis project. Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 28.

However, Caron's illustrations are not the traditionally neat panel layout of comic borders. By breaking with convention, Caron pulls the reader into both the individual narrative of Mendieta as a young art student and the larger historical context. The reader can move around the page, engage personally with the vulnerable body of Mendieta, indulge in voyeurism with the audience, or take a step back and make their own assessment of the situation like one of the commentators. As the narrative moves between perspective, time, and space, we encounter how biography is not only the simple retelling of an individual's life, but a larger complicated production. While Mendieta is the focus, her art and life only make sense within the larger context of misogyny in the art and performance movements of that time. The graphic form's panels and perspectives can aid the reader in shifting from the micro to the macro, offering them the ability to do so at their own pace.

Earlier in this chapter I referenced Moraga and Anzaldúa's collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, a project that rallied women of color across language, custom, and class. The front of the third edition of that influential text is a white canvas background with two long, eerie, blood-red handprints that move from the top and spread downward. Celia Herrera Rodriguez curated the visual art for the book. Appropriately, she chose Mendieta's "Body Tracks" for the cover. She recounts her artistic decisions, saying, "I chose *Body Tracks* (1974), bloodied hand and arm tracks descending toward the ground, as a reminder that this path is dangerous and that many have fallen."¹²⁰ The path she refers to is the journey many women of color take in their fight against oppression and injustice in their worlds. Many of them, like Mendieta, fall too soon. However, those of us who chose to remember refuse to let them fade from memory.

Conclusion

Redfern and Caron published *Who is Ana Mendieta?* In 2011, after years of research and work. I started writing about their biocomic in 2015. Since then, the Brooklyn Museum recently had a retrospective of Mendieta's work as part of their exhibit "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985."¹²¹ In 2018 the *New York Times* finally published an obituary for Mendieta by Monica Castillo.¹²² Thirty-three years after her death Mendieta is finally

¹²⁰ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, "A Sacred Thing That Takes United States Home," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 3rd edition, (Berkeley: Third Women Press, 2002), 281.

¹²¹ Brooklyn Museum, "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985," [brooklynmuseum.org, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/radical_women](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/radical_women).

¹²² Monica Castillo, "Overlooked No More: Ana Mendieta, a Cuban Artist Who Pushed Boundaries," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/obituaries/ana-mendieta-overlooked.html>.

being recognized as more than a “sculptor’s wife.” Yet, what does that moment mean for women who have lost their lives to violence and lost their art from the history books? What can a comic book offer? For one, it says that Mendieta existed. It says that her fight to recuperate the traditions of Cuba and the Caribbean did not exclude her from being a great artist, nor did her struggle against rampant misogyny make her any less of a Cuban American. In fact, she “confronted her entirely male peers with a contemplation of their participation in systems of domination.”¹²³ Castillo begins her *New York Times* obituary by writing: “Ana Mendieta’s art was sometimes violent, often unapologetically feminist and usually raw.”¹²⁴ And that is how Redfern and Caron portray Mendieta and her artwork: raw, and unapologetically feminist, and Cuban.

In the final page of the biocomic the reader is left with the image of Mendieta’s head on a plate, held by an influential art curator who says: “Let’s hope this all just blows away!” Perhaps, like one of Mendieta’s *Siluetas* made of flowers or sand, they hope her death would eventually disappear. However, the comic biography refuses to let her death disappear. On the top of the final page of the narrative, hangs a haunting quote from Mendieta: “In Cuba when you die, the earth that covers us speaks.”¹²⁵ When drawn, the dead can speak. Despite the effort made to forget her artwork and murder, Mendieta continues to speak every time someone engages with her art or opens this comic book.

¹²³ Alvarado. *Abject Performances*, 44.

¹²⁴ Castillo, “Overlooked No More.”

¹²⁵ Mendieta, as quoted in Redfern and Caron, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 38.

CHAPTER TWO: Necropolitics and Community Response in the Necrocomic

Ghetto Brother: Warrior to Peacemaker

Buildings reduced to rubble, concrete and metal strewn about, tires piled high on dirt mounds piled higher. It looks like a bomb went off. This is beginning of the comic biography *Ghetto Brother: Warrior to Peacemaker* by Julian Voloj and Claudia Ahlering.¹ Set in the 1970s in South Bronx, New York, the graphic narrative chronicles the life of Nuyorican Benjamin “Benjy” Melendez, former gang leader and community activist. *Ghetto Brother* recovers a history of the Puerto Rican diaspora that negotiated and prevailed over the mark of disposability cast on them by the New York City government. Independent non-fiction comics have long been a medium of defiance. Voloj and Ahlering illustrate Melendez and his community’s struggle to overcome an unequal landscape. I adapt Achille Mbembe’s theory of “Necropolitics” to examine how urban planning and government neglect in *Ghetto Brother* reveals the city as a site of death formed by neoliberal policies.² How did the Puerto Rican diaspora respond to economic instability and housing insecurity that was created and maintained by the State? In this chapter, I argue that Melendez’s community-building resisted necropolitical urban planning and divestment, which are intrinsic to *puertorriqueñidad*. I believe as a Latinx cultural product, Puerto Rican comic biographies recast diasporic urban

¹ Julian Voloj and Claudia Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother: Warrior to Peacemaker* (New York: NBM, 2015).

² Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 1 (2003): 11-40.

spaces as beacons of hope for newer generations of Boricuas seeking refuge in the United States post-Hurricane Maria.

The theoretical framework of Necropolitics provides an opening to investigate the logic and effects of urban planner Robert Moses' Cross Bronx Expressway as portrayed in the biocomic. Mbembe builds off Michel Foucault's "biopower" by shifting the focus of sovereignty to answer the question: "But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?"³ Mbembe argues that race, which "has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice" links to "the politics of death," and results in the regulation of death distribution from "an economy of biopower."⁴ I too am influenced, in part, by Foucault's theory of biopower in forming the term biocomics, comics that are both biographical, but also expose bio-power, or "the performances of the body" and "the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations."⁵

It is not enough to draw the material conditions of communities suffering urban neglect in the South Bronx, or term a theoretical framework like Necropolitics. Another scholar who builds upon Mbembe's research develops the term necropolitical activism. Noam Leshem in his essay "'Over Our Dead Bodies': Placing Necropolitical Activism," implements a geographical and spatial analysis of the Israeli occupation of Palestine to analyze Palestinians' agency in their responses to forced removal and violence.⁶ Leshem concludes that "the omnipresence of death" should be "the starting point of political

³ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 12.

⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Bio-Power," in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Pantheon: New York, 1984), 262.

⁶ Noam Leshem, "'Over Our Dead Bodies': Placing Necropolitical Activism," *Political Geography* 45 (2015): 34-44.

inquiry, rather than its catastrophic conclusion.”⁷ I identify necropolitical activism in the biocomic and agree that when pushing the application of the necropolitical, and in larger transnational connections, death becomes a catalyst for social change. I also want to examine how the graphic narrative uses the conventions of the comic form in depicting Melendez’s necropolitical activism. It was the loss of his friend Black Benjie that moves Melendez to make a change in both his own life and in the circumstances of his community.

I am also interested in how death functions in the comic to represent how marginalized subjects relate to one another in spite of certain death. Puerto Rican and performance studies scholar Sandra Ruiz, in her book *Ricanness* (2019), theorizes an idea of Ricanness, how Puerto Rican colonial artists and activists critique, adapt, and exist under the weight of disposability of United States imperialism.⁸ After I identify the necropolitical circumstances to which Benjy and his community are subjected, I argue what makes *Ghetto Brother* significant as a Puerto Rican counternarrative is that it shows how that community resisted displacement, urban decay, and violence. Ruiz says of the history of Ricanness, how it “embodies colonial desires,” and how the Rican Body “is marked by a common ongoing endurance.”⁹ I see this endurance in the narrative of the biocomic.

Benjy Melendez’s biography is also an oral history; it is not just his life that is being narrated, but a history of the Bronx in the 1960s and 1970s. The spatial, temporal, and historiographical positions of the comic form utilize the text-image relationships to engage in counter history. In the long colonial history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States,

⁷ Leshem, “Over Our Dead Bodies,” 42.

⁸ Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Protest* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁹ Ruiz, *Ricanness*, 2.

the post-Maria exodus is one more manifestation of imperial rule. I believe literature, in this case comics, provides a space to view these different migrations side-by-side, across time, to better understand how United States imperialism continues to cannibalize the Island. For Paul Gravett, in his book *Comics Art* (2013), comics are “a medium open to converging almost every subject using visual and often verbal language.”¹⁰ However, comic narratives also offer a space to witness resistance. *Ghetto Brother* shows that previous generations of Puerto Ricans were also left to die, yet many choose to live in opposition to state-sanctioned death. As José Ramón Sánchez remarks in his book, *Boricua Power* (2007), “Puerto Ricans have a long and distinguished history of protest against discrimination, expensive and poor housing, workplace exploitation, and political repression, as well as political freedom.”¹¹

I want to contextualize the social and political climate of New York City in the 1960s. Specifically, I refer to the Young Lords Party’s political actions of the time. Johanna Fernandez, in her chapter “The Young Lords and Social Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism,” characterizes the political situation in which the Young Lords came of age. During that time, New York City was going through “teachers strike of the 1968, the school decentralization movements in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, recurrent housing struggle, the welfare-rights movement, the prisons rebellions,” to name a few.¹² New York City was in a metamorphosis of urban plight and social change. The communities most affected by housing, health, and economic inequalities fought back. When put in that light, with a city on

¹⁰ Paul Gravett, *Comics Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 9.

¹¹ José Ramón Sánchez, *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), ebook, 278.

¹² Johanna Fernandez, “The Young Lords and Social Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism,” in *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, ed. Clarence Taylor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 143.

fire, Puerto Rican communities ignited in the biocomic. Benjy Melendez's story of how his gang went from barely surviving to becoming an organization for social change isn't uncharacteristic to how many marginalized communities responded to the mark of disposability.

Many of the poorest communities in New York City were displaced as a result of the actions of urban planner Robert Moses. Benjy narrates his family's move to the Bronx during an episode of "white flight" caused by the sanctioned fragmentation of the borough. Benjy says, "and then came Moses."¹³ The image that accompanies it is of Biblical Moses parting the Red Sea. The visuals of the panel establish for the reader that Melendez is referring to a different Moses. It is the visual metaphor that adds humor to the reality of the subject; Robert Moses parts the borough in order to make way for the Cross Bronx Expressway, as seen in figure 2.1. The rest of the page has the image of a smug-looking Moses set in between bending tenement buildings that look like waves. Surrounding that panel are three other, smaller panels that show the masses of cars and the chaos of the expressway. To Moses, and the New York City Department of City Planning, the South Bronx was expendable. The bottom two panels are filled to the borders with lanes and lanes of cars; what the reader does not see are any people. Over half a million residents were displaced. As Moses biographer Robert Caro is quoted as saying in a *New York Times* article, "If you were talking about a European dictator, you'd call it one of the greatest forced migrations in modern history."¹⁴ The Melendezes, like many other Puerto Rican Families at the time, "settled in the poorest sections of northern cities in the 1950 and 1960s," which—

¹³ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 13.

¹⁴ Charles McGrath, "The Power Walker," *New York Times*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/magazine/the-power-walker.html>

fueled by Moses' urban upheaval—added to the “heightened racial segregation and economic displacement.”¹⁵

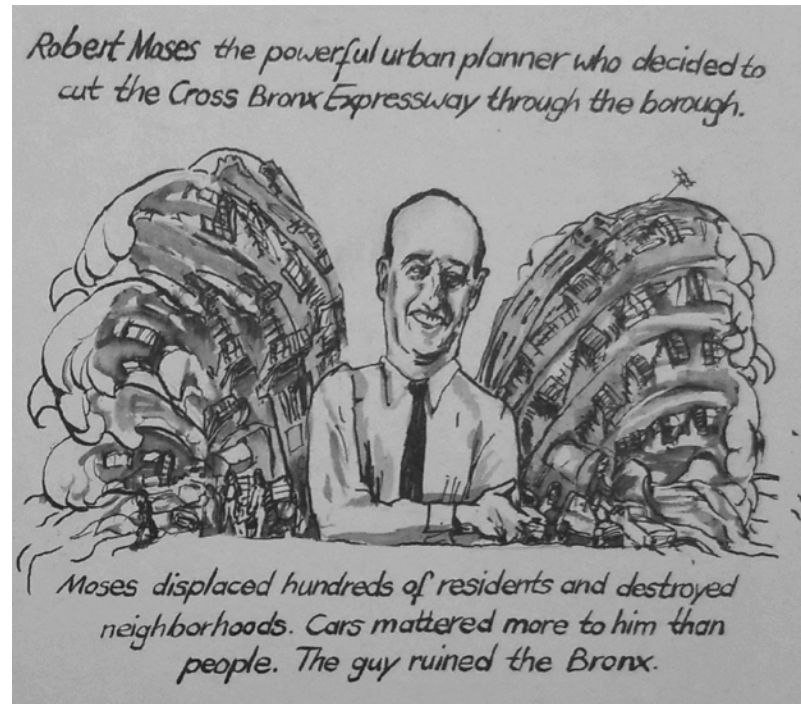


Figure 2.1. Robert Moses stands with a smug look as he parts the South Bronx. Voloj and Ahlring, *Ghetto Brother*, 12.

Moses' presence in the Bronx and New York City in the wake of the expressway's construction looms over the comic's narrative. What does it mean for such a large public works project to displace so many residents and alter the geographic layout of a city? A “splintering occupation” takes place, which Mbembe defines as “a network of fast bypass roads, bridges and tunnels.”¹⁶ In the comic, Ahlring has drawn the tangled web of cars and

¹⁵ Fernandez, “The Young Lords and Social Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism,” 149.

¹⁶ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 28.

roadways that have ensnarled the Bronx.¹⁷ The segmentation of the South Bronx by the expressway creates clear boundaries in the city where parts are left to decay. We see this play out in a four-part panel depicting the white flight in the area: the first panel shows a clean neighborhood, with the narration: “First, the Irish moved out of the borough.” In each subsequent panel, the scene decays as the buildings have broken windows and the street becomes more and more disheveled. More ethnic European groups move out: next the Germans, then the Italians, and finally “the Jews.”¹⁸ The New York City government exerts sovereignty in the “capacity to define who matters and who does not.”¹⁹ Overshadowed by Moses’ expressway, Melendez, his family, his gang, and fellow neighbors become disposable.

The effects of urban planning and New York City's governmental neglect of the South Bronx are a small part of *Ghetto Brother*. Robert Moses is only mentioned a few times. However, the impact of these decisions is evident in the pages upon pages of dilapidated buildings, trash-filled streets, and rampant violence. Voloj and Ahlering give us a biocomic that does not cover all of Benjy Melendez’s life, or of the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City. But it does shed light on a time when New York City left some of its most vulnerable citizens to suffer. The necrocomic is a recovery project that explores a history not often remembered in mainstream accounts of New York City and the Bronx. How the community responds to death in the necrocomic shows how they transform death spaces. Necropolitics reconstructs what led to the atrocity of displacing almost half a million New Yorkers for an expressway. The power of death’s presence should be the impetus of critique

¹⁷ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 27.

and not merely the end result.²⁰ I read the comic biography of Benjy Melendez for spaces where killing is permitted “without committing homicide.”²¹ Which I argue renders the violence and death from gang activities and drug addiction not as individual faults, but part of the larger neoliberal system that thrives on the death of the disposable. Necropolitics presents death as a tool for increasing capital that relies on “racialization, as contemporary racism.”²²

Necropolitics, Necrocomics

While in the context of the narrative, Benjy’s story is a survivor’s tale. It’s a memorial; a comic of death that I argue creates a “necrocomic.” *Ghetto Brother* begins with the death of Black Benjie, a member of the gang and close friend of Benjy Melendez. His friend is beaten to death while trying to make peace with a rival gang, as seen in figure 2.2. Why does the narrative begin here, and not on page 8, with an older Benjy walking around his former South Bronx neighborhood? This death is significant because it is the catalyst for change; it sparks in Benjy the desire for peace and agency within the politics of death. As Mbembe theorizes, “death in the present is a mediator of redemption.”²³ The story that Benjy wants to tell starts with the images of his friend’s death, it functions much like a like a

²⁰ Leshem, “Over Our Dead Bodies,” 42.

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 53.

²² Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historication of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), ix.

²³ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 39.

eulogy. His final line at the end of the book reads: “I am going to tell them my story.”²⁴ The story that follows is as much about life as it is about death.



Figure 2.2 Black Benjie is beaten to death by a rival gang. Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 7.

Under the planning of Robert Moses, New York City became a city divided. In the graphic narrative, Melendez recalls his displacement from Greenwich Village because of Moses’ “urban renewal project.”²⁵ The panels show a forlorn family who face yet another move because of forces outside their control. The Melendez family and other poor families

²⁴ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 118.

²⁵ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 15.

of color are forced north and then disrupted again by the Cross Bronx Expressway. Their space is sacrificed so that white middle class families can enjoy the privilege of driving to the suburbs and to the beach. The geography of necropolitics, “the overlapping of two separate geographies that inhabit the same landscape,” takes shape.²⁶ *Ghetto Brother* illustrates on the page the destruction caused by urban renewal in creating a better metropolis for the dominant class, while allowing less desirable parts to decline.

The rise of global capitalism affects microcosms of societies, like the South Bronx and New York City. Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, in their book *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism* (2014), argue that the concept of “make live and let die” bridges Foucault’s “life” and “politics” in his theory of biopolitics.²⁷ They go on to state that necropolitics “regulates life through the perspective of death, therefore transforming life into mere existence below every life minimum.”²⁸ Death isn’t the only aspect of life that is being transformed; it is also everything leading up to death. *Ghetto Brother* begins with the death of Black Benjie, Melendez’s friend and fellow Ghetto Brother.²⁹ As the story progresses we as readers see the circumstances that led to this fatal situation. Voloj and Ahlering use the comic medium to re-create Melendez’s oral history, which intimately involves the politics of death and disposability.

When life becomes insufficient life in a neoliberal present then a subaltern group can use necropolitical activism as a form of resistance. It is the acceleration of the necropolitical

²⁶ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 28.

²⁷ Gržinić and Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism*, 24.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 7.

that offers a “historicization of biopolitics in the time of neoliberal global capitalism.”³⁰

Gržinić and Tatlić’s application of the necropolitical on a global scale is pertinent in considering the process of insufficient life caused by what Mbembe calls “deathscapes.”³¹ In Melendez’s memory of the South Bronx, the neighborhood is depicted as rows of tall apartment buildings, abandoned and crumbling, debris and garbage everywhere. There is housing available, but it is inhabitable, insufficient for life. However, Melendez and his gang, like many other gangs, make a space for themselves among the ruin. Melendez narrates: “Gangs took over blocks of abandoned buildings and transformed them into their clubhouses.”³² The community-making of gangs makes what was once insufficient habitable. The comic shows how they built spaces within the urban landscape.

Is the South Bronx itself a deathscape or are there just deathscapes depicted through *Ghetto Brother*? I argue that while the borough as a whole is not a site of death, there are pockets of death that show up throughout the graphic narrative. Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić describe these deathscapes as deplorable conditions that turn entire populations into the living dead.³³ Benjy explains that while there was an explicit “no drug” policy in his gang, there were drug users.³⁴ The accompanying illustrations are of Benjy ordering members that have been using drugs to be detoxed. They are rounded up by other Ghetto Brothers and confined to an isolated room of their clubhouse.³⁵ For example, in figure 2.3, the last two panels show two of the members, separately, with faces in agony while they experience

³⁰ Gržinić and Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³² Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 35.

³³ Gržinić and Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism*, 25.

³⁴ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

withdrawal symptoms. Ahlering draws jagged lines that distort their faces. The members of the gang who are addicted to drugs look high, half asleep and barely alive. In other words, they look like the living dead.

Ghetto Brother shows how untreated substance abuse leaves individuals living a life that only satisfies their addiction, a life that is insufficient. The above-mentioned scene is an example of one of the deathscapes created by the New York City government's neglect of these individuals. East Harlem wasn't much better. Activist groups like the Young Lords Party responded to "deep official neglect" forcing the City to remedy the "neglect that permitted public officials and the public to tolerate dirty streets, poor sanitization."³⁶ *Ghetto Brother* adds to the history of Puerto Rican resistance, chronicling how Boricuas in the Bronx would eventually fight back in their own way.



Figure 2.3. Benjy's no drug policy in action. Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 38.

³⁶ Sánchez, *Boricua Power*, 229.

Racialization in the necrocomic takes form in the depiction of the Cross Bronx Expressway construction, in line with what John Márquez describes as “the neoliberal entrapment model,” in his article “Latinos as the Living Dead.” He responds to the contradiction of a porous border caused by open capitalism and the call to defend the “sovereignty of the nation.”³⁷ Neoliberal politics are also politics of who lives and who dies. Márquez connects “raciality” to the politics of death in that there is the component of what he calls a “racial state of expendability.”³⁸ For example, Benjy recalls how the Bronx had been a nice place to live.³⁹ The last four panels of the page, all equal size, show how each group of immigrants (all ethnic groups that would soon be racialized as white in the United States) move out of the neighborhood. While each image looks relatively the same, Voloj and Ahlering’s use of braiding makes the difference in each panel, as the background becomes more dilapidated and trashed, showing the change of the Bronx.⁴⁰ As an extension of neoliberalism, white flight contributed to the decline of the Bronx. The State divested and neglected the area when Black and Brown people moved there.

Urban renewal becomes a term that receives little opposition from the public although it is invoked to justify the displacement of thousands of nonwhite families. As Sokthan Yeng establishes in her book, *The Biopolitics of Race* (2014), the language used when talking about immigration and its effect on American life employs veiled racism, particularly in the way that “neoliberal language obscures ancient prejudices by embedding them in what

³⁷ J.D. Márquez, “Latinos as the Living Dead: Raciality, Expendability, And Border Militarization,” *Latino Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 475.

³⁸ Márquez, “Latinos As The Living Dead,” 480.

³⁹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 12.

⁴⁰ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 12.

is considered the most neutral discourse.”⁴¹ Yeng’s analysis of the biopolitics around immigration and its connection to state racism and neoliberalism is important in that it provides the critical framework through which to examine the racism inherent in neoliberal politics taking place in the comic. For example, as previously mentioned, the Melendez family is forced to move out of Greenwich Village, which is accompanied by Melendez’s use of the term “so called urban renewal,” placing the term in scare quotes.⁴² Melendez is aware of the institutional language used to justify his family and community’s displacement. The language in the graphic narrative is not neutral.

The Ghetto Brothers build space in the necrocomic as part of the collective action that I argue developed out of the geography of the necropolitical. Territory is important. It is how gangs establish space within a deathscape and demand respect from other gangs. As with the idea of nationalism, according to Leshem—who cites Richard Handler’s theory—is based on the ability of nationalists to obtain a demarcated territory. These actions “establish physical and symbolic control over large contiguous portions of the city” for the purposes of acquiring “economic, social and political privileges.”⁴³ The practice of place-making is depicted in *Ghetto Brother* in how certain communal spaces are illustrated.

Necropolitical Activism

How does necroactivism operate within spaces of death, particularly as it can be applied to the deathscapes depicted in the South Bronx of *Ghetto Brother*? The notion of

⁴¹ Sokthan Yeng, *The Biopolitics of Race: State Racism and U.S. Immigration* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 10.

⁴² Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 15.

⁴³ Leshem, “Over Our Dead Bodies,” 40.

necropolitical activism, in particular Leshem's conception of collective political action, is applicable to an analysis of how Benjy and his gang, as well as other gangs in the South Bronx, transform space and place.⁴⁴ In the comic, Benjy narrates what it was like during that time for gangs to reclaim neglected spaces and turn them into "clubhouses." Clubhouses refer to the abandoned buildings they took over; they were essentially squatting. As seen in figure 2.4, the first panel of this page, which takes up two-thirds of the row, depicts several dilapidated buildings surrounded by refuse, and a trail of figures entering the building on the corner.⁴⁵ Many of the faces are drawn with smiles or expressions of happiness, despite the dismal surroundings. The urban space often functions as its own character in the necrocomic. Several panels have clouds of texts—not quite the traditional text bubbles of comics—that illustrate the music being played. The overall scene in this page is that of individuals banding together to have a good time in oppressive conditions.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 35.



Figure 2.4 The Ghetto Brothers take over a dilapidated building and have a party in their new “clubhouse.” Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 35.

The Ghetto Brothers might have been left to die, but their place-making is necropolitical activism at work. Often this place-making coincides with music. I am interested in how music as an abstract concept is portrayed in the necrocomic. Other comics scholars, like Kieron Brown, analyze musical notations and symbols in the panels.⁴⁶ Brown describes this “absence of sound in comics” in the reading experience as akin to “playing along at home.”⁴⁷ By that same logic, then, when the reader experiences the scenes of music playing it could be said they are “jamming along at home.” The illustrated music mixed with

⁴⁶ Kieron Brown, “Musical Sequences in Comics,” *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1-6, <http://doi.org/10.5334/cg.aj>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1

the images and words in the frames invites the reader to partake in the experience. While the reader may or may not share a similar cultural identity with those being portrayed, the ability of the comic to connect its readers with its subject is valuable in that it offers the possibility to connect across time, space, and identity.

Necropolitical activism takes place in the South Bronx, often being fought within white supremacist institutions, like urban planning, which function in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. How is the government able to dispose of an entire population of Black and Brown people without being scrutinized on a national level? In order for this to happen, as Yeng specifies, “the logic of internal neoliberalism” is veiled so that its reach of disposability broadens unchecked.⁴⁸ In the case of *Ghetto Brother*, the City of New York’s refusal to adequately address drug addiction is] seen as an institutional failure.⁴⁹ Benjy makes a point to take a stance against drug use. In one panel, a member of the Ghetto Brothers is seen laying on his side, writhing in agony. A few panels before, Benjy, in a leadership position says, “I wanted the Ghetto Brothers to stay clean.”⁵⁰ The heroin epidemic during the Vietnam War ravaged many cities like New York, and very little was done to treat addiction or the condition that fueled it.

As long as the inner workings of a system are purposefully ambiguous, and only its effects—such as poverty and drug use—are observable, then it becomes harder to disrupt that system. Necrocapitalism, as depicted in *Ghetto Brother*, feeds off of the neoliberal state to

⁴⁸ Yeng, *The Biopolitics of Race*, 77.

⁴⁹ Some journalists and scholars have researched the involvement of the CIA bringing in illicit drugs into urban spaces as a means to disrupt activist groups. Since *Ghetto Brother* does not engage with this specific history I don’t find it directly related to my analysis of the comic.

⁵⁰ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 38.

create and maintain the degradation, divestment, and collapse of the South Bronx. In one scene, Melendez tells us about the time his brother Victor was stabbed. Over three panels, the borders are zig-zagged, and the shading is dark. We see a hand holding a knife in the first panel, although the person is out of sight, hiding in the gutter (of the comic). Benjy suspects that it was one of the Mongols gang members. The Ghetto Brothers eventually take their revenge. However, Melendez comments, looking back, “violence begat more violence.”⁵¹ The intra-fighting between New York City gangs does not address the larger issues of poverty, addiction, and housing insecurity. So, while gangs fight over the little resources they have, the larger neoliberal systems of urban divestment continue to operate unchallenged.

Communities that suffered under the mechanics of neoliberalism and biopolitics were not completely ignorant to how their lives were adversely affected. After the death of Benjy’s friend Black Benjie, a summit is called for all the gangs.⁵² During the meeting Marvin, a Vietnam Veteran and member of the Savage Skulls, stands up to address the crowd. He says: “The whitey don’t come down here and live in the fucked up houses man. If we don’t have peace now, whitey will come in and stomp us.”⁵³ His speech bubbles extend into the nearby panels, crossing both the horizontal and vertical borders of the page.

Voloj and Ahlering alter the traditional use of the speech bubble. While speech and thought bubbles usually stay within the borders of the panel, comic artists often extend them outside the frame of the panel. In doing so Ahlering produces the effect of Marvin’s voice projecting throughout the gymnasium. I read this visual maneuver as symbolizing the

⁵¹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁵² I examine Black Benjie’s death in more depth later in the chapter.

⁵³ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 71.

sentiment of his words resonating with the audience. In his speech, Marvin draws attention to the terror that they all live under. Marvin has uncovered how necropolitics, in the form of “whitey,” is coming in to “stomp” them all down.

Benjy’s neighborhood, like other aspects of community life, falls victim to the effects of the privatization of global capitalism. New York City at the time, like other State projects, “withdraws step by step from social, cultural and public life,” which forces the public sector to look for resources from private means.⁵⁴ Necropolitics illuminates how systems of global capitalism, borderlands, and immigration discourse all exist in the continuum of “death worlds.”⁵⁵ We see how the necropolitical functions in the comic biography. Crime still continues despite gang violence in the South Bronx having subsided. For instance, Melendez narrates: “By the mid-seventies gangs began to dissolve. Despite the truce, violence returned, but it was less organized.” His narration is overlaid on several panels that show a person walking down the street, trading money for drugs, and then going to an empty lot to self-administer the drugs, which Melendez identifies as heroin. Here there are images of a shady-looking individual buying drugs; in another panel, other drug users are crouched in an abandoned lot getting high; the final panel shows a dead body being possibly scavenged by a dog.⁵⁶ There is no government intervention; neoliberalism creates the perception that “the unproductive and needy should be quarantined.”⁵⁷ Addicts are left to “shoot up” and die in

⁵⁴ Gržinić and Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism*, 28.

⁵⁵ Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁷ Yeng, *The Biopolitics of Race*, 78.

pockets of Bronx neighborhoods. Moreover, the “racial production of Latinidad” transpires because it is Latinx and Black Americans who are left to die.⁵⁸

Comic Biographies, A Comparison

In 2014 Pierre Christin and Olivier Balez published the comic biography *Robert Moses, Master Builder of New York* (2014), originally in French, under Nobrow Press.⁵⁹ Now, compared to *Ghetto Brother*, both comic biographies involve the subject of a changing cityscape, but from the diametrically opposed perspectives of those displaced by the urban planning, and those who did the displacing. The book begins with a lie. Despite not knowing how to drive, the opening illustration shows Robert Moses in a car (he had been known to pose at toll booths for photos) while a paparazzo takes his picture.⁶⁰ The opening is ironic because Moses built almost all the highways in New York City but never drove on a single one of them. Why were so many roadway projects left under the judgment of someone who would not be subjected to their design?

Both biocomics depict scenes of death. However, not all death is created equal. Primarily, *Master Builder of New York* uses a neutral tone when retelling the life of Robert Moses. Blues and golds comprise the color scheme, and the book is drawn in a realist light while maintaining the quality of illustration. The comic is realistic, but not photo-realistic. The color scheme deviates when depicting two Black children playing in the water near a

⁵⁸ Márquez, “Latinos as the Living Dead,” 492.

⁵⁹ Pierre Christin and Olivier Balez, *Robert Moses, Master Builder of New York* (London: Nobrow Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ Christin and Balez, *Robert Moses*, 9.

dock.⁶¹ The illustrations darken, taking on a more sinister tone. The sky is drawn with a deep crimson, like the color of blood. As the kids splash around in the water they do not see, and are not seen by, a small boat approaching. Tragically, they are killed. The accident takes place over several panels, across two pages; the final panel is of Moses holding up a newspaper and angrily saying, “three children killed by a towboat in the Bronx on what they dare to call a beach.”⁶² In the tradition of the medium, the drawing of Moses accompanied by the speech bubble transforms the character of Moses into a fleshed-out person with an unremorseful consciousness.⁶³ The deaths of three children—especially three Black children—do not matter to Moses. Only his ego and reputation as a city architect are offended by the space being considered a beach. Many of Moses’ highways that connected New York City to Long Island were built with overpasses at a height that would not allow charter buses to pass underneath them, making it so that low income New Yorkers who did not own cars unable not travel to “real” Long Island beaches. While the narrative of *Ghetto Brother* mourns Black death, the narrative of *Master Builder of New York* ignores it.

Subtle changes in the depictions of individuals in the two biocomics denote who is seen as significant in the narrative and who is deemed inconsequential. As Randy Duncan, Matthew Smith, and Paul Levitz assert in their book *The Power of Comics* (2015), art style is noteworthy not only as a measure of creative ability, but the use of deviation forces the reader to interpret the meaning when style changes.⁶⁴ The narrative of *Master Builder*

⁶¹ Ibid., 50

⁶² Ibid., 51.

⁶³ Gravett, *Comics Art*, 26.

⁶⁴ Randy Duncan, Matthew Smith and Paul Levitz, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 150.

preferences Moses and his socioeconomic sphere by drawing them in detail.⁶⁵ The depiction of the exodus of vulnerable New Yorkers seen throughout the comic is drawn with silhouettes of people set in front of a detailed background. They are often drawn in lighter colors and the facelessness of the group signifies them as disposable. Early in *Master Builder*, the omniscient narration appears over three horizontal panels telling the reader how Moses built public use projects like swimming pools, libraries and basketball courts, while he also leveled housing complexes where he “expelled ‘like cattle’...the city’s poor and predominantly minority populations.”⁶⁶ Those same faceless people are characters in *Ghetto Brother*. There they are depicted in detail, the comic conveys to the reader the racial tensions in the borough, made worse when they are displaced by Moses public works projects.⁶⁷ As seen in figure 2.5, Ahlering portrays all the individuals with intricate features, showing variations of race and ethnicity.⁶⁸ The use of art style in *Ghetto Brother* communicates the message that while there were gang rivalries and interethnic issues, there was also a shared sense of camaraderie in surviving decrepit conditions.

⁶⁵ Christin and Balez, *Robert Moses*.

⁶⁶ Christin and Balez, *Robert Moses*, 39.

⁶⁷ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 27.

⁶⁸ Ibid.



Figure 2.5. The Ghetto Brothers and other gangs hanging out in the neighborhood. Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 27.

Crypto-Judaism in Puerto Rican Culture

The coupling of death and transformation echoes throughout the comic. In this section I investigate how Benjy Melendez's biography as an oral history begins to consider his personal ties to Judaism. The curiosity to know where his family is from and if they are Jewish ignites an excitement in him, so much so that he feels compelled to call his parents immediately after talking with his former teacher, who tells him that she thinks he might be Jewish. He reaches his mother on the phone only to be informed of his father's failing health.⁶⁹ Again, a significant moment in the graphic narrative begins with death. In a hospital room, Benjy narrates: "I found myself again at Lincoln hospital and again I had to learn that someone close to me had died."⁷⁰ Immediately following his father's passing, Benjy has a

⁶⁹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 105.

⁷⁰ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 105.

revelation. How does the cyclical nature of death in the comic become a catalyst of transformation for him?

History and events constantly loop in the necrocomic. Ruiz's theorization of Ricanness and temporality provides a framework in which to read Benjy's narrative of cultural-religious discovery as he cycles through the history of his life. *Ghetto Brother* is not just being re-told by Melendez, but it is also a re-telling of the history of Jewish Latinidad. His friend Black Benjie's death sparked his journey for peace. Benjy as a colonial subject embodies Ricanness and a temporality in the comic that Ruiz describes as "longings for one another at the site of death."⁷¹ At moments such as this, Benjy once again confronts the death of a loved one, and according to Ruiz, this experience can be "internally transformative, wonderful and exquisite."⁷² The reoccurring encounters with death and the looping of time place Benjy in a position to endure and make change.

The reader encounters instances of the Melendez family's hidden Jewish identity throughout the narrative, but it is not until the death of Benjy's father that we confront that history. A pivotal scene happens early in the book. Melendez describes his memories of first immigrating to the New York City from San Juan, Puerto Rico. He tells the reader how "New York was nothing like Puerto Rico. Life was hard-especially in the winter time."⁷³ His narration is accompanied by two panels, the first depicting San Juan with tropical palm trees and Spanish-style buildings. The second panel shows a snowy winter-scape. His parents are holding themselves and shivering in the cold. The narration on the bottom of the second

⁷¹ Ruiz, *Ricanness*, 29

⁷² Ruiz, *Ricanness*, 29.

⁷³ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 16.

panel reads: “My parents had never seen snow before.”⁷⁴ This is a common theme in many Puerto Rican memoirs that describe the recent immigration from the island to the mainland, for example, Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). However, Melendez’s story soon diverges from the traditional Nuyorican tale.

The visual-verbal devices in the necrocomic engage in counter history-making. Benjy and his family are different than many of the other Puerto Ricans in New York in the 1960s. Later in that 7-page grid, the first image is of Benjy and his family sitting at a counter. In the next panel, Ahlering zooms in on the Melendez family. Everything in the background loses detail and there is a dotted line that outlines the drawing of the family with a small pair of scissors, as if telling the reader to cut out the family. Melendez narrates, “Even if we were all the same, my family seemed different from all the other Puerto Ricans.” Melendez then goes on to say, “I always felt it” and continues into the next panel, “but no one told me.” The final panel, as seen in figure 2.6, is a close up of a young boy, Benjy, looking out of place and forlorn.⁷⁵ We find out later in the narrative what makes Melendez’s family different than other Puerto Ricans is that his family is Jewish.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 16.



Figure 2.6. The lines of the lower two panels are slanted, showing their story is different than other Puerto Ricans immigrants at that time. Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 16.

Ahlering uses the panel shapes of the comic affectively to signify the difference the Melendez family felt. While the first three rows of panels are varying lengths of rectangles, the final two in the last row are shaped like parallelograms. As Scott McCloud observes in his book *Understanding Comics*, panel shapes “can affect the reading experience.”⁷⁶ The slanted lines of the panel, and the combination of right, acute, and obtuse angles alter the meaning of the scene. Gravett observes how the strip—the arrangement of panels in rows—is “the primary structural unit in the layout of almost all comics.”⁷⁷ When the lines of the panels in a strip, in this case the final row, change from straight lines on the sides to slanted, the lens through which the strips filter the story takes a skewed perspective. It is almost as if the reader can view Melendez’s memories askance. Stark geometric shapes set at obtuse and acute angles often denote tension in comics.⁷⁸ Benjy knows that there is something his family

⁷⁶ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994) 99.

⁷⁷ Gravett, *Comics Art*, 29.

⁷⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 119.

is not telling him, something they hid from the rest of the world, even from the diasporic Puerto Rican community in the New York City.

The Melendez family practices their Jewish faith in secret. When a friend asks Benjy to come outside to play on a Saturday, he is unable to, but he doesn't understand why. Benjy mistakes the white cloth his father puts over his head as a bed sheet.⁷⁹ It is in fact a *Tullis* (Tallit)—a Jewish ceremonial shawl used during religious services.⁸⁰ In a series of panels the reader sees Benjy's mother wave her hands over two candles she brought out, then places her hands over her eyes. In the next panel we see his father walk out with a large white blanket and proceed to put it over his head like a hood. When Benjy asks about the ritual, each parent responds that the other parent has “a strange religion.”⁸¹ In that scene both child-Benjy and the reader are not told what the ritual is. The scene could come off as quite strange to a small child who was never taught, or to reader who is unfamiliar with, Jewish religious practices.

The history that the Melendez family brings with them is that of thousands of secret Jewish migrants who came to the Caribbean fleeing religious persecution, yet who continued to practice their faith in private. Stanley Hordes, in his study “The Sephardic Legacy in the Spanish Caribbean,” describes crypto Jews as “individuals, outwardly Hispanic Catholics, [who] were descendants of the original ‘conversos,’ or Jews forced to convert to Catholicism after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.”⁸² According to Hordes, during the

⁷⁹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 18.

⁸⁰ “Tallit (The Prayer Shawl),” My Jewish Learning, accessed October 31, 2019. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tallit-the-prayer-shawl/>

⁸¹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 18.

⁸² Stanley M. Hordes, “The Sephardic Legacy in the Spanish Caribbean: Crypto-Jewish Settlement in Cuba,

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Spain when many Jewish people converted, “the transition from Judaism to Christianity was made without a great deal of inner spiritual conflict, for it represented a change of religion in name only.”⁸³ What we encounter in the comic is generations of transitional ethno-religious migration from Spain and Portugal to Puerto Rico and then to the United States. As Hordes notes, “the Caribbean served as a potential haven for crypto Jews who wished to practice their secret religious rites in an atmosphere of relative security.”⁸⁴ The graphic narrative shows this tradition continue in the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States.

Ghetto Brother as an oral history of crypto-Jewish Puerto Ricans becomes a counternarrative of Jewish history in the Caribbean.⁸⁵ It is a historical narrative that has much more to be written. The goal of Hordes’ project was to document the history of crypto-Judaism in the Spanish Caribbean. As compared to the breadth of scholarship on secret Jewish immigrants that made their way to Mexico and established lives there, he found that “very little has been published about their cousins who had to maintain their faith in secret on the islands under Spanish rule.”⁸⁶ Voloj and Ahlering use the visual-verbal medium to bring Melendez’s story to life. In doing so they add to the growing research of crypto-Judaism in the Spanish Caribbean.

Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica,” in *The Secret Jews of Spain, Portugal & Italy: Past and Present Effects of the Inquisition*, ed. Abraham D Lavender (Miami: Florida International University, 2009).

⁸³ Hordes, “The Sephardic Legacy,” 70.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 72.

⁸⁵ I examine oral history in additional detail in my final section.

⁸⁶ Hordes, “The Sephardic Legacy,” 68.

Graphic Oral History

Voloj and Ahlering's *Ghetto Brother* is similar to other narratives of oral history. While, for the purposes of this chapter, the comic in question has been referred to as a comic biography, it also approaches the life of Benjy Melendez from the perspective of oral history. It is not just his life that is being narrated, but the story of his neighborhood, the South Bronx and New York City. Lynda Goldstein, in her essay "Graphic/Narrative/History," examines how three different graphic texts grapple with the events of September 11, 2001.⁸⁷ The lines between personal and shared history become blurred in the reader's navigation of these "versions of history."⁸⁸ Contemporary history that is still remembered by those who are alive has an effect on ordinary life, as well as the process of history-making.⁸⁹ Biocomics function as a record of cultural history that is often missing from more formal accounts, like history textbooks.

Oral history has been an invaluable tool for many historians, especially those working on African American and Latinx histories. Acclaimed Black American writer and critic, Ann Allen Shockley, in her essay "Oral History: A Research Tool for Black History," defines oral history as "the recording of information through planned taped interviews" whose results are "broader in scope and are archival source documents."⁹⁰ In his book *Latino Voices in New England* (2009), David Carey Jr. notes how oral history has allowed him to "gain access to perspectives, insights, and empirical information unobtainable through

⁸⁷ Lynda Goldstein, "Graphic/Narrative/History: Defining the Essential Experience(s) of 9/11," in *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment*, ed. Annessa Ann Babic (Madison: Dickinson University Press, 2014).

⁸⁸ Goldstein, "Graphic/Narrative/History," 124.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ann Allen Shockley, "Oral History: A Research Tool for Black History," *Negro History Bulletin* 41 (January 1, 1978): 787.

traditional historical sources.”⁹¹ Voloj uses the methodology of oral history to create a history of Jewish Puerto Ricans in New York City in graphic form. In what we might call an epilogue, following the conclusion of the graphic narrative, there is the section “The Story Behind the Story.” Voloj writes about the various historical landmarks in the comic, like the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting and the Intervale Jewish Center. In the final paragraph, Voloj writes:

Over the course of three years, I had dozens, if not hundreds of conversations with Benjy Melendez and other people involved with the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting. Even if some names were changed...and some details were modified for a better narrative, this tale about the Puerto Rican migration to the U.S., this history of economic decline in the South Bronx, and this coming-of-age story about a young man struggling with his many identities in a true story. It is a piece of Bronx history that should not be forgotten.⁹²

Voloj conducted hundreds of interviews. Oral history traditionally consist of numerous interviews. It is clear that he wrote *Ghetto Brother* as a history of the Bronx, one that he felt very strongly should not be forgotten. I argue that *Ghetto Brother* is an oral history that presents a counternarrative of communities in the South Bronx. Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso, in their essay “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” examine what counter-stories are and how they are used in Critical Race pedagogy. They write, “to create our counter-stories, we begin by finding and unearthing sources of data.”⁹³ For Voloj, he creates his counternarrative by

⁹¹ David Carey, “Introduction: Situating Latino Voices in a New England Community,” in *Latino Voices in New England* ed. David Carey and Robert Atkinson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), PDF ebook, 10.

⁹² Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 126.

⁹³ Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, no. 1 (2002): 33.

completing hundreds of oral histories with Benjy Melendez and other participants of the Hoe Avenue Peace Summit.

Graphic Narratives, with their use of text and image relationships, engage history on spatial, temporal, and historiographical levels. They simultaneously layer timeframes, utilizing page layouts and various narrative elements.⁹⁴ When Benjy is a young man, he decides to read about the crypto-Jews that he believes his family descends from. The comic depicts Benjy visiting the New York Public Library; the top left panel is of Benjy simultaneously looking to the left, right and up, as seen in figure 2.7.⁹⁵ He is overwhelmed by both the interior of the library and also of the wealth of information. Soon his narrative transitions into a third person account of the expulsion of the Jewish population from Spain.⁹⁶ In Ruiz's theory of Ricanness, histories fold on top of each other; the transition communicates how Benjy's education of his familial history, or personal history, is intertwined with the larger anti-Semitism of Europe during the fifteenth century (which the reader also might be unaware of). This is not the only definitive version of historical events, since comics, by their very nature of being illustrations, convey "the constructedness of narratives."⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the comic does add to the historiography of the Bronx and of crypto-Jews in the Caribbean, illustrating how while some might migrate from the island, there is and always has been a journey back, in this instance, a recuperation of history.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁹⁵ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 102.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 102-103.

⁹⁷ Goldstein, "Graphic/Narrative/History," 130.



Figure 2.7. Benjy's narration moving through time and history. Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 16.

Conclusion

In 2019 Vivian Vázquez Irizarry released the documentary *Decade of Fire* on PBS. It chronicles how the Bronx in 1970s was on fire. Using archival footage and interviews, Vázquez Irizarry presents a history of the Bronx that centers the actions of Black and Puerto Rican communities, who worked together to rebuild what was destroyed. Like *Ghetto Brother*, *Decade of Fire* uses oral history and the multimedia form to recover marginalized communities

in New York City.⁹⁸ The two projects were produced within five years of each other. I argue the increase in new stories of the Bronx is indicative of a larger trend in comics and documentary filmmaking that addresses how we remember events and the politics of history-making.

Comic anthologies like *Puerto Rico Strong* (2018)⁹⁹ and *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico* (2018)¹⁰⁰ use the graphic medium as both a response to the devastation of Puerto Rico by Hurricane Maria and a record of the community action in the aftermath—on the Island and in the diaspora. In the long colonial history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, the post-Maria exodus is one more manifestation of imperial rule. I believe literary works, in this case comics, provide a space to view these different migrations side-by-side, across time to better understand how western imperialism continues to cannibalize the Island. However, comic narratives also offer a space to witness resistance. *Ghetto Brother* shows how previous generations of Puerto Ricans were left to die, yet many choose to live in opposition to state-sanctioned death.

One of the most significant community responses to Moses's urban planning happens after the summit of Bronx gang leaders. Eventually, the violence becomes untenable. Benjy and other gang leaders hold a meeting to discuss the issues plaguing their communities. Benjy helps to draft a treaty, and in the ensuing weeks he notices a change, which includes the rise of music. Soon turf boundaries began to break down, and Benjy

⁹⁸ Vivian Vázquez Irizarry and Gretchen Hildebran, *Decade of Fire*, Red Nut Films, and PBS Independent Lens, documentary, 2019.

⁹⁹ Marco Lopez, Desiree Rodriguez, Hazel Newlevant, Derek Ruiz, and Neil Schwartz, eds, *Puerto Rico Strong* (New York: Lion Forge, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ed, *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico* (New York: Somos Arte, 2018).

reminisces about the parties that the Ghetto Brothers would have, inviting gangs from all over the city.¹⁰¹ One depiction is drawn with panels that shift from scene to scene; people dancing, playing music. There are no borders. This is what Aldama, in his book *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, calls a “gel,” which creates the mood that seeps in between emotions in a comic.¹⁰² The panels, in relation to each other, evoke “cognitive and affective reactions.”¹⁰³ Now free of arbitrary borders, Benjy and his community living in the Bronx use music as a way to transcend the conditions of what Mbembe calls a “death-world.”¹⁰⁴ Benjy and his community in the Bronx use music as a way to connect, which creates the condition for coalition building.

It is not enough to say the Bronx was left to burn. The biocomic of *Ghetto Brother* shows a community healing from that trauma. Non-fiction comics produced in the 2010s participate in a remembering project. Historically informed, they warn us of the threat of forgetting. The fact that communities like Benjy’s were able to survive and build a space somewhere between death and life attests to the perseverance of his community. Ultimately, when it seems that the hyperbolic (boroughs that look like bombed cities) blurs the line between “true events” and “based on true events,” the question arises: who set the Bronx on fire? And who was there to put the fire out?

¹⁰¹ Voloj and Ahlering, *Ghetto Brother*, 86.

¹⁰² Fredrick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009), 93.

¹⁰³ Duncan, Smith and Levitz, *Power of Comics*, 151.

¹⁰⁴ Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

CHAPTER THREE: Life Out Loud in the Closet: The Grotesque, Punk Rock and Joy in Cristy C. Road's *Spit and Passion*

Cristy C. Road's 2012 graphic memoir *Spit and Passion* is a grayscale rebellion depicting adolescence lived out loud in the closet. Road's non-coming-out/coming-of-age graphic memoir enters the genre of other queer graphic narratives dealing explicitly with bisexuality.¹ It is not a coming out story. It is diary pages ripped out, skeletons blasted from the closet and a mix-tape of adolescent sexuality. Road crafts a comic that contests queer and Latinx histories as it navigates the genre of life story within the larger counter histories marginalized people tell. Road narrates the imagined world of her adolescent self, Cristy, who takes solace in her bedroom closet. I argue that Road's graphic memoir uses the trope of the closet, the style of the grotesque, a punk rock sensibility, and the expression of joy to explore interwoven issues of queer sexuality and mainstream culture. The metaphor of the closet becomes the physical setting, drawn on the page in full detail. *Spit and Passion* takes the image of the closet and uses the comic medium to show readers how and why the closet was necessary for queer children and adolescents growing up in hostile, homophobic cultures. However, Road as a queer Latina must rectify her love for her Cuban culture with its conservative Catholic values that often violently erase her sexuality.

I'm interested in how Road uses her graphic memoir to experiment with style and form. Some pages in *Spit and Passion* have the more traditional three panel layout of a graphic novel (such as three panels in a row and three panels in a column). While other times it forgoes all comic page convention, sometimes having no borders or clear panels at all. The

¹ Cristy C. Road, *Spit and Passion*, (CUNY Feminist Press, 2012).

comic layout is connected to how the story is told. In instances when the text is often outside the panels, the narrative is more like diary entries ripped from the binding and pasted into the memoir like a zine.² I liken this to how the text-image relationship shows Cristy's identity formation. In her book *Autobiographical Comics* (2012), Elisabeth El Refaie observes how graphic memoirs often require the author-artist "to produce multiple drawn versions of one's self" so then we see on the page "an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity" as the author-artist uses the medium to incorporate "the sociocultural models underpinning body image."³ Through the use of portraiture, the form simultaneously reflects Road's state of mind as the adult-narrator and Cristy as adolescent-narrator. Often Road as an adult narrates what is going on in the current scene, informing the reader of what Cristy as a child is experiencing and feeling. I distinguish the dominant historical narratives taking place in *Spit and Passion* as the accounts that have been privileged and authorized in popular imaginations of punk music and its listeners. Angela Laflen takes a similar approach to Road's graphic memoir in her essay "Punking the 1990s: Cristy C. Road's Historical Salvage Project in *Spit and Passion*." She observes how Road's autobiographical comic "questions whether it's possible to recover a history that has been edited to silence divergent voices and experiences."⁴ Laflen positions *Spit and Passion* as a historical salvage project, in which Road uses pieces of pop culture, family history, and heterosexual hegemony to create her own

² A zine is a homemade magazine, usually bigger than a pamphlet. Often the makers use cutouts of photos or images from mainstream print materials. They include artwork, prose, poetry and/or social criticism. Some take overtly political tones, while others are done for personal reasons. Sometimes serialized, the author(s) will produce them over a period of time.

³ Elisabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Writing in Pictures*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012) 4.

⁴ Angela Laflen, "Punking the 1990s: Cristy C. Road's Historical Salvage Project in *Spit and Passion*," in *Redrawing the Historical Past: History, Memory, and Multiethnic Graphic Novels*, eds. by Martha J. Cutter and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

version of history. Like me, Laflen is concerned with how Road's memoir "directly confronts the process through which historical narratives are created."⁵ Road's work constructs new Latina perspectives in comics. I place her work with other queer and/or Latina graphic narrative artists, such as Gabby Rivera, Kelly Fernandez, and Breen Nuñez. Graphic narratives are at the forefront of counter historiography. Laflen argues how Cristy "realizes that perspectives like hers are missing from the consensus narratives of American history."⁶ What Laflen calls "consensus narratives" I have termed dominant historical narratives. Outlooks like Cristy's, and other Latinx and queer adolescents, are not only left out of the larger historical accounts of pop music, but as mentioned previously, they are also left out of the minor histories of subcultures like punk rock. Latinx graphic memoirs, told primarily through an individual story, have larger historical implications. Historians have moved away from a "consensus history" to historical narratives that include people from subjugated backgrounds.⁷

Cristy as the queer adolescent protagonist of *Spit and Passion* fashions her own imagined world. Road offers the reader a counternarrative of what it means to be gay, Latina, and working class in Miami in the 1990s.⁸ I examine how Road constructs Cristy's marginalized identity in the graphic memoir by drawing from José Esteban Muñoz's work on performativity, visual culture and Queer theory from his book *Disidentifications*. Muñoz articulates a theory of disidentification where queer individuals of color not only reject

⁵ Laflen, "Punking the 1990s," 219.

⁶ Laflen, "Punking the 1990s," 218.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gay is the umbrella term that Road often uses in the comic, which I take to mean attraction to the same gender (either women or men). Other times the term queer is used, in which I am referring to the term "queer woman of color" as articulated in Anzaldúa, Lorde, Muñoz and Rodríguez's work cited throughout this project.

notions of whiteness and heterosexuality, but they also choose which aspects of dominant culture to take on, resist, or contend within the context of their survival.⁹ Muñoz goes on to emphasize how “these understandings of the self have come to be aligned with each other as counternarratives.”¹⁰ Cristy disidentifies with the rampant homophobia on TV and at her middle school. While simultaneously protecting herself, she connects with the pop-punk band Green Day, allowing her family to assume she is attracted to the white, cis-male lead singer, Billie Joe Armstrong. Even though she is not dating, her family encourages the attraction so long as it conforms to heteronormative behavior. It is a way for her to assimilate or identify with dominant white culture.

While the idea of the grotesque usually evokes negative connotations in the popular imagination, I instead refer to the style in classical art as a means to critique. According to Nancy Marie Blain’s definition, the grotesque is a visual tool “used to describe characters that are considered ludicrous or incongruously distorted in their appearance or manner, and outlandish or bizarre.”¹¹ I contend the grotesque in comics can be a visual-verbal tool to reshape and resist oppressive ideologies in media and secondary education, as demonstrated in this chapter’s reading of *Spit and Passion*. Road’s detailed drawings of mouths, bodily fluids and innards shows what Charles Hatfield, in his book *Alternative Comics*, observes as “the intimacy of an articulated first-person narrative” in autobiographical comics that “may mix

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁰ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

¹¹ Nancy Marie Blain, “The Picaresque and the Grotesque: Two Beauties and the Their Beasts,” *Romance Notes* 51, no. 2, (2011) 161.

with the alienating graphic excess of caricature.”¹² There is the possibility of the grotesque to reclaim a queer subjectivity in Latinx graphic narratives.

I see the grotesque as a visual-verbal tool in comics that operates on both a formal and informal level in *Spit and Passion*. Grotesque expressions within both the context of queer sexuality and Latinidad allow Road to portray Cristy in a more full and complex way. Scholar of Queer Theory and Latinx Studies, Juana Maria Rodríguez, in her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, asks us to think of what a queer Latina imagination could be; “if we wish to truly investigate the social and sexual gestures of queer racialized female yearnings, as scholars we need to open ourselves to the informal and illegitimate.”¹³ In the comic medium, Road presents her young protagonist in all her “queer racialized female yearnings.”¹⁴ On the cusp of puberty Cristy enters middle school with the desire to “reclaim the idealistic image of ‘women’—the women I dreamed of and the women who never spoke.” She is drawn hugging a geography book with a daydream look. Road surrounds herself with an illustration of stereotypical heavy metal music video “girls,” both of whom are wearing very little clothing.¹⁵ The images of the women are both an object of attraction and inspiration for Cristy.

Spit and Passion depicts a Latina punk music story which challenges the image of punk music fans in the popular imagination. Often the mainstream media portrays punk fans as white, working-class boys who rebel against normative values of their parents and peers. The

¹² Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 114.

¹³ Juana Maria Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Road *Spit and Passion*, 37.

term punk has a long and varied social and entomological history. I'm working from the historical definition of punk, as formulated by Kristiansen et al., where those whose self-identification with the term "stems from a deep desire to state their discontent with society's power structures, particularly the lower-status social groups' lack of power to partake in the process of defining and labeling social entities."¹⁶ Cristy's love for Green Day shows that Latinx punks exist. And like other historiographies on Chicanx and Latinx punk musicians and fans, like Michelle Habell-Pallan, Patricia Zavella, and Nidia Melissa Bautista, which often focus on personal perspective documentaries, Road's graphic memoir is a counternarrative of punk history that includes the ethno-racial group of Latinxs in the United States.¹⁷

Lastly, I examine how graphic forms like memoirs of one's youth often establish alternative ways of being in their expression of joy. I use Audre Lorde's 1979 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" to read expressions of joy in the comic as acts of visual resistance to childhood trauma. The violence often encountered in youth happens at school. Elizabeth Marshall in her book *Graphic Girlhoods* (2018) argues that "violence is a key element of the girl's education, and that this curriculum, and resistance to it, circulates in familiar storylines and images across visual culture, especially in texts for or about the girl."¹⁸ *Spit and Passion* chronicles Cristy's journey through middle school, where she has to hear both homophobic slurs from her classmates and anti-queer sentiment from her teachers.

¹⁶ Lars J. Kristiansen, Joseph R Blaney, Philip J. Chidester, and Brent K. Simonds, *Screaming for Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), ebook.

¹⁷ I use the term ethno-racial from Linda Martín Alcoff, "Latinos beyond the Binary," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48 (2009): 112-128.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Marshall, *Graphic Girlhoods: Visualizing Education and Violence*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.

Out Loud in the Closet

There is a door nailed shut by half a dozen wooden boards, an indiscernible sticky residue leaks from the crevices, and another substance oozes down the boards and seeps from underneath the door itself. In the middle of the door, on top of the nailed boards, is a sign pinned up. It says: "CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS."¹⁹ The wall that surrounds the door is covered in pretty, dotted flower-patterned wallpaper. As seen in figure 3.1, the door and wallpaper stand in stark contrast. Many households have this door. Road has drawn the literal door from her childhood bedroom closet. It is the first place she can explore her sexuality and ideas of pleasure. The phrase "in the closet" is used to describe how queer people are unable to openly express their sexuality when it doesn't conform to a strict heterosexual definition. Heterosexual people never have worry about the fact that they are straight. Here, Road uses "the closet" in both the figurative and literal sense. From the perspective of the reader, the closet is a physical place that Cristy returns to in the narrative. Scenes in the closet appear a total of seven times in the memoir. The "iconic repetition" of the closet functions as the verbal-visual device of "braiding," where an image or theme repeatedly appears throughout the comic narrative.²⁰ The closet as a visual cue indicates to the reader that it is a place of significance.

¹⁹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 29.

²⁰ Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri, "Focalization in Graphic Narrative," *Narrative* 19, no. 3 (2011): 330-357.

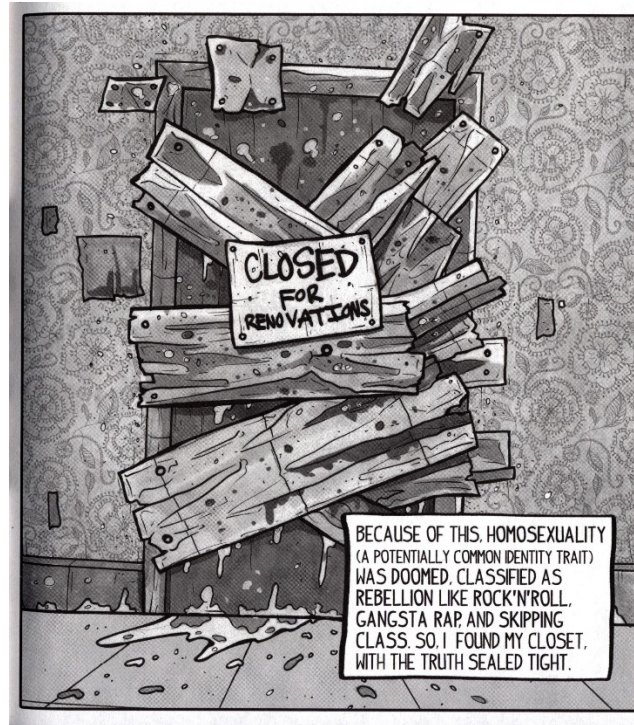


Figure 3.5. Cristy's bedroom closet door boarded up. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 29.

Like many queer adolescents, the closet becomes a sanctuary for Cristy. Road grew up in a conservative Catholic Cuban immigrant household. The comic opens with an altar to the La Virgen de la Caridad, candles and figures in a boat with the word Cuba surround the saint.²¹ The first time that Road introduces us to her closet, she explains the need for one. The caption above the panel with the closet reads: "All we need is love. It's true. But there is a monster rumbling beneath the surface of any Cuban household with traditional Catholic values. Casual homophobia."²² Like other Latina writers, Road reconciles her sexuality and ethnicity in cultural communities with rampant homophobia and dominant cultures of white supremacy. This includes the recent example of Colombian-Cuban writer Daisy Hernandez's 2015 memoir *A Cup of Water under My Bed*.

²¹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 9.

²² Road, *Spit and Passion*, 29.

How does the closet function as a queer space of imagination in *Spit and Passion*?

Muñoz reads Marga Gomez's 1992 performance, set in her bedroom, observing how

The space of a queer bedroom is thus brought into public view of dominant culture...her performance permits the spectator, often a queer who has been locked out of the halls of representation or rendered a static caricature there, to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity.²³

The bedroom as a private-turned-public space employs significant imagery in queer comics, as in Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, where the artist-author draws the home for the reader, making a once-private space public for all to see. In doing so, Road appeals to other queer Latinx people to view their selves in her narrative. I turn to Muñoz's work on queering mainstream culture in my analysis of how Road uses pieces of pop culture and mass media (TV, movies) to reconstruct her own queer identity in plain sight of her family. The bedroom closet represents a tenuous position for queer subjects who are unable to fully present their sexuality in dominant culture. Unlike heterosexual adolescents, who are permitted to explore their sexuality, queer children are not supported in a heteronormative culture.²⁴ The closet in comics offers a space for queer adolescents to imagine what their queerness might be.

The bedroom closet represents a tenuous position for queer subjects who are unable to fully present their sexuality in the dominant culture. Unlike heterosexual adolescents, who are permitted to explore their sexuality, queer children are not supported in a

²³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

heteronormative culture.²⁵ The closet in comics offers a space for queer adolescents to imagine what their queerness might be.

Chapter 3 of Road's memoir is aptly titled, "Skeletons Come to Life in My Closet." Road makes a play on words with the term "in the closet" by combining it with another well-known figure of speech: "Skeletons in the closet," meaning, "a secret source of shame or pain to a family or person."²⁶ Cristy has a shameful secret: she might be gay. Cristy's closet is the place where she can make sense of a world that hates LGBTQ people. For example, a single vertical panel that takes up two-thirds of the page, as seen in figure 3.2, accompanied by what Robyn Warhol calls "the extradiegetic voice-over narration, which is printed in a font that looks like free-hand capital letters, always filling borderless horizontal boxes that run above the panels of the cartoon."²⁷ In this case it fills up the borderless space of the vertical box on the page. Road in the "the extradiegetic voice-over narration" writes:

There was no way on earth that homosexuals could be powerful enough to anger an entire nation, because I for one usually felt fucking silenced. But I tried to see through reality—when I sat alone in my closet, which I could decorate and re-decorate as often as my serotonin needed a jump-start. In a way I justified my existence through Mimita's projected way of thinking.²⁸

In the panel we see a preteen Cristy sitting among old board games (Life, Trouble, and Connect Four), a doll of the cat from the cartoon show *Ren & Stimpy*, and boxes labeled in Spanish. There are lights strung up among her clothes and near the back wall of the closet

²⁵ This is not to say discovering one's sexuality for straight kids is without issue. But, as Road explores in her memoir, heterosexuality is constantly enforced through homophobia.

²⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "a skeleton in the closet, a skeleton in the cupboard," accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/180700?rskey=9WHAaB&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

²⁷ Robyn Warhol, "The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *College Literature* 38, no. 3 (2011): 5.

²⁸ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 47.

hangs a Cuban flag. The reality that Cristy strives to see through is a mixture of her conservative Catholic Cuban family and the larger conservative Christian Right in Florida in the 1990s. Road draws Cristy's face with her eyes closed, and a serene expression on her face. In the closet Cristy feels safe. She "disidentifies," which allows her to preserve her kinship to her Cuban heritage while also surviving its homophobic conditions.²⁹ Cristy justifies her existence using "survival strategies...to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides and punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."³⁰ Her closet includes aspects of both U.S. culture and Cuban culture, showing that Cristy hasn't forsaken one for other. However, both are oversaturated with homophobia.

²⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

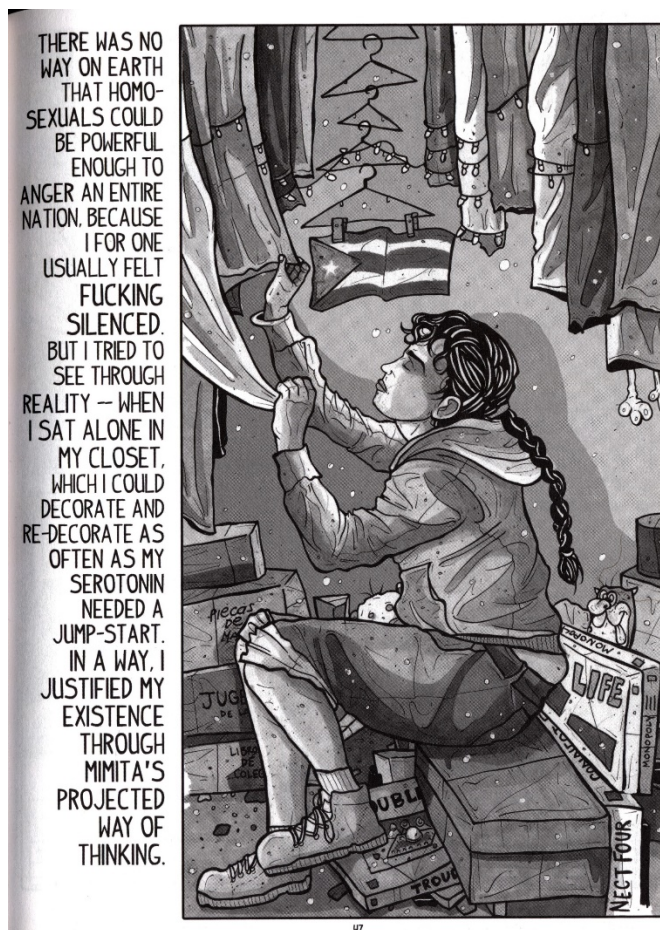


Figure 3.2. Cristy holds onto a piece of clothing as if prayer. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 47.

Road's non-coming out story does deal explicitly with bisexuality. The next panel to feature Cristy in the closet is in Chapter 4, "Am I Just Paranoid? Or Am I Just Bi?" Despite *Spit and Passion* being a graphic memoir about bisexuality, it does not make *Book Riot's* list of "100 Must-Read Bisexual Books" by Casey Stepanuik or *Comicosity's* "Queerer Than Ever: 30 MORE Indie Titles Doing Right by LGBT+ Fans" by Matt Santori."³¹ Either these online publications don't think Road's memoir is considered a bisexual story and it is not "doing

³¹ Casey Stepanuik, "100 Must-Read Bisexual Books," *BookRiot.com*, September 2017. <https://bookriot.com/2017/09/21/100-must-read-bisexual-books/> and Matt Santori, "Queerer Than Ever: 30 MORE Indie Titles Doing Right by LGBT+ Fans," *Comicosity.com*, April 2017. <http://www.comicosity.com/30-more-lgbt-indie-comics/>

right by LGBTQ fans.” Or, which I suspect is really the case, they just don’t know about *Spit and Passion*. This speaks to erasure of Latinx queer graphic narratives from mainstream media websites, which is exactly the erasure that Road is countering by making this graphic memoir. Cristy isn’t just dealing with figuring out her sexuality as a queer person within a homophobic society, but she is also figuring out her cultural identity as a queer Latina in a white supremacist society. Cristy’s story exists within the multiple axis of oppressions as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins.³² Cristy’s sexuality cannot be separated from her Cuban heritage.

After finding out about the punk-rock-turned-pop band Green Day, the reader finds Cristy in her closet again, devouring a cover story on Green Day from the magazine *Rolling Stone*. The panel takes up about two-thirds of the lower part of the page. We see Cristy sitting crossed legged with a curtain of clothing behind her. On either side of her Road has drawn a skeleton.³³ Cristy’s expression shows gritted teeth and knitted eyebrows while she clutches the magazine. In the “extradiegetic voiceover narration” at the top right-hand corner of the panel, Road writes: “Despite these inevitable insecurities that came with being a gay Cuban girl in 1994—I knew that I was mature now.”³⁴ In the lower right-hand corner, she continues: “Now that I had found a favorite band—an identity.”³⁵ Cristy continues to “disidentify.” She conceives of her identity within the dominant media to connect with parts of it.³⁶ In this case, a connection with the lead singer of the band—Billie Joel Armstrong—

³² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 225.

³³ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 60.

³⁴ Warhol, “The Space Between,” 5.

³⁵ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 60.

³⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

while also rejecting the heteronormative conditioning, Road in the voiceover explicitly claims a “Gay Cuban Girl” identity.

Calaveras also appear throughout Redfern and Caron’s 2011 Cuban American comic biography *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* Both *Ana Mendieta* and *Spit and Passion* were published by the CUNY Feminist Press. Road’s depiction of Cristy among the calaveras is akin to Caron’s drawings of a calavera that guides Ana Mendieta through the biography.³⁷ Road drew the calaveras with their backs to Cristy and hands together as if in prayer. They frame the young girl like the skeletal wings of a chimera.³⁸ As many comics scholars have observed, graphic auto/biographies use drawing to point out the constructed nature of non-fiction. While they do not claim an objective reality, in being up front about their construction they signal to the reader that this account is one of many accounts of the topic.

Caron’s and Road’s uses of the calavera add a fantastic element to their narratives. The calaveras appear at times in each graphic narrative when the protagonist has to make an existential choice in her journey. In *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* the artist is scooped up by a large skeletal hand during her art thesis performance. This happens at a time in her artistic journey when Mendieta begins to distance herself from white feminist art and begins to incorporate Caribbean and Latin American practices in her work.³⁹ For Cristy they appear in *Spit and Passion* when she begins to explore her sexual identity. First, believing she is gay, or a lesbian. Then finding her attraction is to both girls and boys, Cristy, like Hernandez in *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, navigates her bisexuality in a Latinx family.

³⁷ Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, illus., *Who is Ana Mendieta?* (New York: CUNY Feminist Press, 2011) 28-29.

³⁸ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 60

³⁹ Redfern and Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?*, 28-29.

The final example of the closet I examine occurs in Chapter 5 of the memoir, “One of My Lies.” In a full-page panel Road draws her adolescent self-standing timidly at the threshold of her closet, the door halfway ajar. The composition of the panel is so the door occupies 50% of the page while Cristy stands off-center, aesthetically following the rule of thirds.⁴⁰ In the final third of the page, on the left, is Road’s voice-over narration.⁴¹ Visually the closet is an ever-looming presence, as half the page is devoted to viewing it. Road mentions the ramifications of getting her period. Now, that she is in puberty, her family will begin to treat her less like a child, which results in her “butch aesthetic” being placed within the realm of childhood. Road laments, “I was turning 13 years old that year. So *then* what happens?”⁴²

The Grotesque Latinx Imagination

In this section I argue that the concept of the grotesque in the comic medium forces readers to engage the ugly truth of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Exaggeration, or hyperbole, is one style of comics that has evolved out of the oppressive realm of racial caricature, and now it is a tool used to challenge marginalization and push for social critique. For example, Road’s *Spit and Passion* often draws her pre-teenage self as both earnest and grotesque when narrating how her 12-year-old personality relied on identification with punk music to cope with her repressed queerness—for example, when Road’s friend Carlos says in

⁴⁰ In photographic technique, this follows the “rules of thirds.” The frame of the shot is divided into three sections by grid lines, and subject of the photo is placed at one of the grid lines, so that it is off-center. It is generally agreed that produces a more visually appealing shot.

⁴¹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 119.

⁴² *Ibid*, 119.

the comic, “Punk Rock is psychotherapy for psychos.”⁴³ Carlos’ face is slightly distorted as he yells it with enthusiasm. For Cristy, punk becomes an outlet to process her feelings of alienation. How does Road use the grotesque in comics to critique homophobia, but also imagine possible queer futurities? Punk as a socio-cultural identifier has often resulted in “punks becoming the prophesized ‘monster’ society itself had created.”⁴⁴ The comic narrative is able to contest the idea of the monster, or the grotesque body, and re-form it into a tool to reimagine survival.

When we talk about the body in comics, I question how the racialized body has been dehumanized in dominant historical narratives. Looking to autobiographical comics more generally within this context, how do these artists reclaim caricature as way to resist dominant histories that have used cartoons to strip the body of its humanity? Here, I extend Hillary Chute’s analyses of the body on the page in autobiographical comics when she says, “The form of comics in this way lends itself to the autobiographical genre in which we see so many authors—and so many women authors in particular—materializing their lives and histories. It is a way to put the body on the page.”⁴⁵ El Refaie makes a similar observation, writing: “our bodies do not constitute a prediscursive [sic] material reality; rather, they are constructed on the basis of social and cultural assumptions about class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, age, health, and beauty.”⁴⁶ How do we understand a gendered and racialized body within the historical context of racial caricature (which was often used as a tool of dominance in print media)? Historically, newspapers used caricatures of Black and Jewish

⁴³ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 40.

⁴⁴ Kristiansen, et al., *Screaming for Change*.

⁴⁵ Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 11.

⁴⁶ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 72.

people to uphold anti-Black and antisemitic racist ideology throughout Europe and the Americas.

Road often draws her younger self as both hopeful and distorted in the graphic memoir. When narrating how her 12-year-old personality relied on identification with punk music to cope with her emerging queerness, she depicts herself with a gaping chest wound covered in duct tape—a common material used in DIY punk culture.⁴⁷ Her head, which is covered in a Florida Marlins hat, has a chunk of the top part of the skull missing. The Golden Gate bridge emerges from the brain matter.⁴⁸ Laflen reads this image as Road giving “visual form to the process of consciousness raising as Cristy’s head is depicted as literally exploding.”⁴⁹ I’d like to linger more on the gory aspect of the image. How does Road use the unsettling quality in her drawing in remembering her childhood?

The counternarrative in *Spit and Passion* is most evident in how the grotesque takes form through the comic medium: a distorted body with the insides showing. On one hand, “these images are important visual indicator of Cristy’s emotional state.”⁵⁰ Cristy tries to cope with her developing sexuality that is at odds in the heterosexual dominant society, which clearly produces emotional turmoil the reader can quite viscerally see on the page. On the other hand, how can we read Road’s illustrations as extensions of *Latinidad*? We can read it as, to use Rodríguez’s conceptualization, the “colorful extravagances of *Latinidad* and the flaming gestures of queer fabulousness are ways to counteract demands for corporal

⁴⁷ I know from first-hand experience as a teenage punk/goth.

⁴⁸ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 61.

⁴⁹ Laflen, “Punking the 1990s,” 230.

⁵⁰ Laflen, “Punking the 1990s,” 222.

conformality.”⁵¹ Rodríguez’s queer gestures within Latinidad are a useful frame of reference for how the grotesque functions in *Spit and Passion*. You cannot separate Cristy’s *Cubanidad* from her grotesque renderings of her childhood.

How does the queer and Latinx body,⁵² or the marked body, rebel against heterosexual white hegemony in Road’s graphic memoir? In the Introduction to the special issue “Freaked and Othered Bodies in Comics,” Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec write, “the unmarked body, then, is the body that easily and unobtrusively negotiates its environment.”⁵³ Cristy inhabits a clearly marked body, and Road’s drawings use the grotesque to both literalize her adolescent trauma on the page and push back against dominant heterosexual culture. The reader sees Cristy’s body transformed, chest broken open and brain exploding.⁵⁴ The grotesque rendering of the body allows Cristy to reconfigure conceptualizations of the queer as other stereotype in comics.⁵⁵ This transformation is not negative or corrupt; I argue quite the opposite. Cristy’s face is serene, her head is slightly tilted and her eyes and mouth smile in agreement, as seen in figure 3.3. The narration box in the lower part of the panel reads: “But I would try to be as free as I could. Contained, but free—trying not to turn my soul and brain to dust.”⁵⁶ I read this image as “queer gesture” that exists “in the interstices between sexual desires and political

⁵¹ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 6.

⁵² Lazaro Lima examines the idea of the “Latino body politic” as it came to exist on the Mexico-US Border and is conceived in a large national context. See more in *Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁵³ Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec, “Introduction: Freaked and Othered Bodies in Comics,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 8, no. 5 (2017): 402-416.

⁵⁴ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 61.

⁵⁵ Diamond and Poharec, “Freaked and Othered Bodies in Comics,” 408.

⁵⁶ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 61

demands.”⁵⁷ If as Rodríguez posits, Latinidad is already queer,⁵⁸ then Road’s interpretation of Cuban exile as having an “internal sympathy for homos” coheres to her rebellion against white heterosexual hegemony.

Cristy’s public identity as a Green Day fan presents an opportunity for “utopian longings,” of one day being in a queer relationship alongside the “everyday failures” of not being able to identify openly as gay, or bisexual.⁵⁹



Figure 3.3. Cristy clings to magazine, overjoyed to find an identity in punk music. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 61.

The interstice that Rodríguez mentions, between sexual and political, is a powerful concept that I first saw articulated in Anzaldúa’s *La Frontera/Borderlands*. For Anzaldúa, “Los Intersticios” meant inhabiting an in-between space, a place that provides sanctuary. She writes: “the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between different worlds

⁵⁷ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

she inhabits.”⁶⁰ That in-between space is the threshold of a doorway. Los intersticios is a transformative space articulated in the comic as the closet. As mentioned in the previous section, it is a sanctuary for Cristy. In the graphic form, Los Intersticios also signals to the reader how Cristy inhabits an in-between identity. Firstly, she inhabits an identity as a queer girl in a Latinx family, similar to how Anzaldúa had to reconcile her sexuality with her family’s misogyny and homophobia.⁶¹ Secondly, Cristy inhabits an identity as a queer Latina in a white heterosexual culture. Los Intersticios is a way to exist for Cristy when the multiple conflicting identities that are ascribed to her by her family and mainstream culture are ripping her apart.

The lines that make up the borders of panels are physical interstices of the page. How do drawn borders function in Road’s memoir? Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, explains that when an image isn’t fully pictured in a frame, we as readers still assume that image is there, even if we can’t see it; he calls this phenomenon “closure.”⁶² How does the use of the grotesque allow artist-authors to distort closure? Can this be a sort of anti-closure? The reader is not given enough information to make that intuitive leap, to connect the two panels via the gutter. The verbal-visual maneuvers in comics make pictorial metaphors, like the stereotype, the drawn narrator, and the monstrous other, culminating in how the grotesque in graphic non-fiction becomes a pathway to remember and rectify violence and trauma. As Frances Gateward and John Jennings in their analysis of Black comics, from their

⁶⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 42.

⁶¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

⁶² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 60-63.

book *The Blacker the Ink* (2015), observe, “comics traffic in stereotypes and fixity.”⁶³

Historically, while comics such as caricatures have been used to dehumanize people of color in the United States (look to any newspaper from the early American press), they are also capable of challenging existing stereotypes of marginalized groups. Additionally, comics utilize iconography and hyperbole to satirize and critique—imagine political cartoons. I am interested in how, as Aldama suggests, the visual-verbal devices of comics negotiate “recognizable types” in order “to undermine stereotypes.”⁶⁴

Mouths often feature prominently in Road’s graphic memoir. In one such instance Road recounts a time in class when her peers used derogatory words for gay people. In the first caption of a four-panel arrangement, she writes: “The word terrorized me, despite its [the F-word’s] inclination toward males.”⁶⁵ Each panel depicts a close shot of one of her classmate’s mouths, on full display for the world to see: their blemishes, saliva-crusted tongues, and crooked teeth. Each mouth connects to a person, extending outside of the frame. Each mouth has used the word either in direct hostility toward a gay person, or as a means to emasculate fellow classmates. The distorted mouth is a common trope of the grotesque in classical art, such as in Goya’s “Saturn Devouring His Son.” Often figures on metropolitan buildings wore “grotesque masks, monstrous faces, with great mouths wide open.”⁶⁶ Autobiographic comics coming out of the 1990s, according to Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics*, “stress the abject, the seedy, the antiheroic, and the just plain nasty.”⁶⁷ We

⁶³ Frances Gateward and John Jennings, eds, *The Blacker the Ink* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2.

⁶⁴ Aldama, *Latino Comics*, 21.

⁶⁵ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 76.

⁶⁶ Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature & Grotesque: In Literature and Art* (Virtue Brothers & Co., 1865) Google book, 29.

⁶⁷ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 111.

see the influence of the 1990s in the comic in the visual pop cultural reference like *Ren and Stimpy*. The cartoon often centered around the two cartoon characters' absurd hijinks, which often involved humor involved that referenced bodily functions (such as flatulence). Road, drawing within this tradition, details the ugliness of her terrorizers, showing how aggressive heterosexuality turns straight people into monsters. The grotesque becomes a visual metaphor for the violence of sexual and gender conformity enacted on both gay and straight people alike.

Viewing marginalization of characters in literature through the frame of the grotesque is an important tool for many scholars, including Mary Catherine Harper, in her article, "Figuring the Grotesque in Louise Erdrich's Novels." For Harper, the grotesque highlights "themes of alienation, untenable social strictures, marginalization, abuses of power within family and community."⁶⁸ Similarly, the distorted, ugly mouths in *Spit and Passion* used the F-word without pause;⁶⁹ the word "dripped like poison from their mouths everytime [sic] it was spoken."⁷⁰ How can Road draw her adolescent self that reflects her desire for queer romantic that is stifled by the shame from media, her family and school. I connect the distorted mouth to how Road illustrates Cristy's queer Latina adolescence in a larger context of what Rodríguez describes as "racialized female subjects" who are "filled with rage, terror, shame and crushing sadness."⁷¹ In the following two panels, Road draws the grotesque mouths of her classmates. First, Road positions them in a typical class situation where they are playing around using the homophobic slur. One of the boys raises his hand, about to

⁶⁸ Catherine Harper, "Figuring the Grotesque in Louise Erdrich's Novels," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 23.

⁶⁹ I refer to the derogatory homophobic slur, not the expletive enjoyed by many of us.

⁷⁰ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 76.

⁷¹ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 14.

strike a floral cup out of his friend's grasp. His classmate, not surprisingly, has a sad look on his face. Road narrates: "If I got a dime for every time Marco or Laz called one another 'faggot' whenever either one did anything mildly emasculating (such as drinking out of a floral-printed cup), I would be rich."⁷² Then in the second panel, they are transported into a fantasy situation where Cristy has linked them romantically: the aggressor in the previous panel offers his friend a bouquet of flowers, and his friend swoons. Road continues: "Then, I would spend the money bribing Laz and Marco to come out of the closet and become my best friends," as seen in figure 3.4.⁷³ Laz and Marco go from homophobic preteens to endearing lovers in Cristy's counternarrative of grotesque imaginations.

⁷² Road, *Spit and Passion*, 77

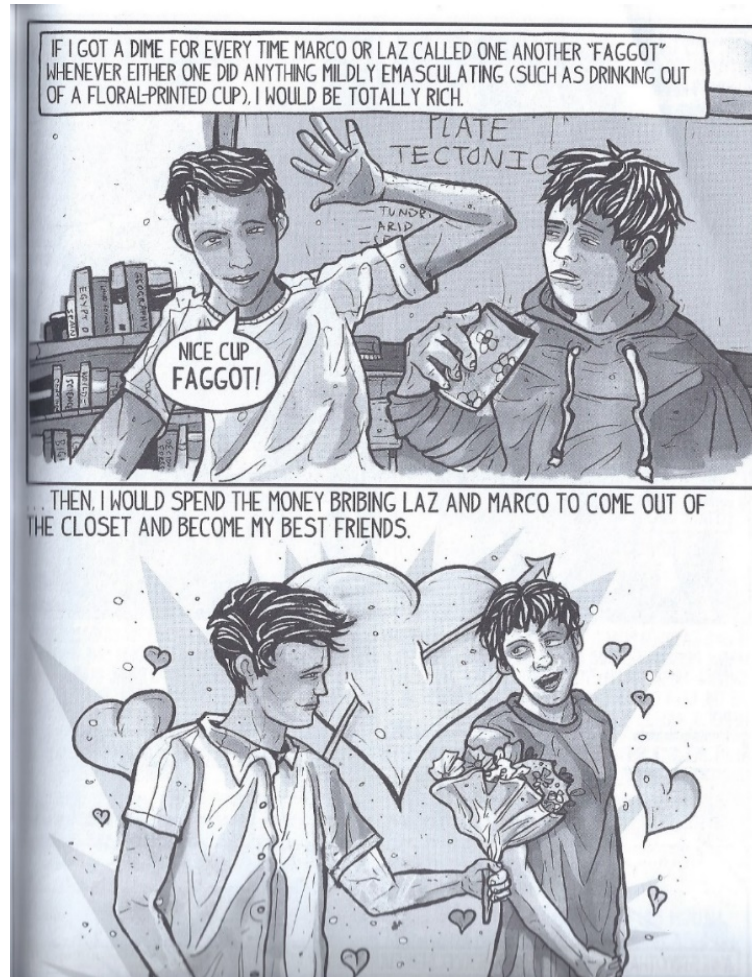


Figure 3.4. The two panels mirror each other showing how Cristy turns aggression into affection in her queer Latina imagining. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 77.

At this point in the narrative Cristy is unable to come out to her friends and family.

In composing the graphic memoir, Road can rewrite her history to make clear the possibilities of future sexual alterities. Cristy's fantasies supplement her graphic life story as they reference a kind of sexual future where, as Rodríguez writes, "interdependence and mutual recognition constitutes the daily labor of making lives livable for ourselves and each other."⁷⁴ The grotesque body in the comic form of the memoir is transformed from

⁷⁴ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 27.

disembodied monstrous mouths to fully formed human boys. While Cristy as the protagonist does not appear in this two-panel scene, she is still part of the fantasy, in what Muñoz might call “a melancholy subject,”⁷⁵ as she disidentifies with the “ideological contradictory elements” of the situation so she can grip her “lost object,” which in this case is a friendship with the two boys “and invest it with new life.”⁷⁶ Ultimately, Cristy’s fantasy subverts heteronormative policing of boys’ behaviors to engage a counter history of the 1990s that responds to “collective histories of shame and abjection.”⁷⁷

Punk Rock Sensibilities

I want to use Chicana punk theory to analyze how Road constructs a queer Cubana punk identity in her graphic memoir. Road’s detailed, expressive, portrait-style drawings coupled with her obsession with the punk band Green Day in *Spit and Passion* shows us the twin roles of portraiture and music in queer identity formation. Comics portrayal of visual and sonic alterities opens the narrative devices of the verbal-visual in new ways to interpret graphic life writing about queer adolescence. I invoke the restorative work from other Latinx Studies scholars who have examined the music and biography of Chicanx/Latinx punk musicians Molly Vasquez, Martin Sorrondeguy, and Alice Bag. They recuperate the contributions and presence of Latinas in the overrepresented white and male punk rock scene in Los Angeles, California.

⁷⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12. See also his work on brownness and depression.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁷ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 27.

Road's graphic memoir acts as a counternarrative of punk rockers in the 1990s United States, and in doing so it is part of a larger counter history of punk music I see taking place. I position *Spit and Passion* as both a comic about punk rock as well as a punk rock comic. It is significant to do so because punk rockers are typically portrayed in mainstream media as white, working-class male teenagers, emerging around the early 1970s. Seeing as Road's graphic memoir is not unlike other narratives of adolescents of color, Cristy is a queer Cuban American girl who is often neglected in the subculture. Viewing the comic as a punk rock text rejects the notion that Latinx teenagers were not present in the various punk scenes in the United States between the 1970-1990s.

Latina Punks are not new. Chicanas in Los Angeles have been part of the punk scene since the early 1970s. Michelle Habell-Pallan maps a spatial history of Chicana punks in 1980s East Los Angeles and the "wealthy West Side" in her essay, "Soy ¿Punkera, Y Que?"⁷⁸ Habell-Pallan's case study is the film *Pretty Vacant*, which follows the Chicana feminist Punkera Molly Vasquez over several days. The film is a medium in which Vasquez can "re-write rock 'n' roll history by inserting herself and Tejano culture into its narrative."⁷⁹ In examining *Pretty Vacant*, Habell-Pallan's goal is:

By disrupting the status-quo narrative of popular music production (in this specific case, that of United States punk), through granting a young Latina (more specifically, a Tejano) the authority to chronicle the history of punk, the film compels scholars to acknowledge the complexity of popular music and popular music studies in the United States. Ultimately it viscerally unsettles long-held assumptions that have

⁷⁸ Michelle Habell-Pallan, "Soy ¿Punkera, Y Que?: Sexuality, Translocality, and Punk in Los Angeles and Beyond," in *Rockin Las Americas: The Global Politics of Rock in Latin/o America* eds. Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Héctor Fernández L'hoeste and Eric Zolov (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 163.

⁷⁹ Habell-Pallan, "Soy ¿Punkera, Y Que?," 162.

unconsciously erased the influence of United States Latinos from popular music's sonic equation (and asks what is at stake in reproducing that erasure).⁸⁰

Film Studies, like Comics Studies, provided artists a medium to challenge academia's canonization of certain hegemonic perspectives. Habell-Pallan points to the authority that is given to Vasquez as the subject of the film, which becomes a testament to her presence and Chicana influence on punk rock. By redefining who can tell a history, in this case the history of punk in United States, we can change who is designated a cultural authority. These authorial shifts often start with counternarratives. As Laflen suggests, Road resists dominant historical accounts of punk by "offering her own alternative history of the 1990s."⁸¹ In my reading of Road's graphic memoir, I contend that it is specifically a counternarrative positioned within Latindad in that it explicitly recognizes those dominant historical accounts that Road is contesting. In the same manner as *Pretty Vacant*, Road's graphic memoir uses the visuals of the comic medium to show how a personal story is told, how a history is told.

Another Latinx punk study by Latin American and Latinx Studies scholar Patricia Zavella, "Beyond the Screams: Latino Punkeros Contest Nativist Discourse," examines how punk music was used as a form of protest against racist immigration policies and anti-Mexican sentiment.⁸² Zavella focuses on the 1990s Chicago punk band Los Crudos—specifically, the 1998 documentary *Beyond the Screams/Más allá e los gritos* by Los Crudos band leader Martin Sorrondeguy. Influenced by his Uruguayan mother's criticism of U.S. presidents, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, punk made sense for Sorrondeguy since

⁸⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁸¹ Laflen, "Punking the 1990s," 219.

⁸² Patricia Zavella, "Beyond the Screams: Latino Punkeros Contest Nativist Discourse," *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 2 (2012): 27-41.

it “represented oppositional politics, particularly the display of the body.”⁸³ Zavella also sees the parallels between subcultures like punk music and Latinx counter history in quoting Sorrondeguy: “for us, being punk didn’t mean letting go. It meant listening to their history and getting somewhere, to get to a new level.”⁸⁴ Road reconstructs her adolescence in comic form to present to the reader evidence that punk history includes queer Latinx people.

The new level that Sorrondeguy says punk facilitates is explored in Road’s graphic memoir. In the summer of 1994, Road narrates, “I had found myself.”⁸⁵ The panel above the caption is of Cristy holding several Green Day CDs, magazines with the band on the cover falling from her arms and out of view. Her eyes, like a 1990s cartoon character, pop out of her head, as seen in figure 3.5.⁸⁶ Her protruding eyes signify a new perspective. Learning of a new musical genre alters Cristy’s perspective of herself as well as her worldview. In the next panel, which appears below the narration, we see Cristy in profile with earbuds in, her hands near her face, and blood dripping down from her ears and onto her fingers and face.⁸⁷ I read the violence depicted, when combined with the narration (Cristy finding herself in punk music), as what Julia Kristeva’s calls abjection: “and yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”⁸⁸ Eyes and ears function as seeing and listening, Cristy’s discovery of Green Day and punk music leads her to new ways of seeing the world and listening to history. She is cast away from mainstream society but contests the authority that shapes that world and its history.

⁸³ Zavella, “Beyond the Screams,” 30.

⁸⁴ Zavella, “Beyond the Screams,” 38.

⁸⁵ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 51.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 51.

⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection” in *The Power of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.



Figure 3.5. The unsettling nature of body parts signifies a shift in Cristy's perspective. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 51.

Habell-Pallan and Zavella are a few of the scholars and writers working to document the history of Latinx punk rock. Another writer, Nidia Melissa Bautista, a freelance reporter on Chicanx and feminist issues, writes about the frontwoman of the LA punk band The Bags, Alicia Armendariz, also known as Alice Bag. Bautista points out how “on a global level, women have been present in punk scenes for decades,” which is reflected in the “the diversity of the late '70s.” She insists that studying Bag’s memoir shows how “women and queer people of color were present at those early shows in L.A.”⁸⁹ In writing about Alice Bag, Bautista pushes back against the dominant narrative, which according to the “vast majority of people, [is that] punk is the singular creation of white dudes, while women have

⁸⁹ Nidia Melissa Bautista, “Xicana Women Claim Their Rightful Place in Punk,” *The Establishment*, June 30, 2016, <https://medium.com/the-establishment/xicana-women-claim-their-rightful-place-in-punk-4337881e68ee>.

had to fight for space and recognition.”⁹⁰ The problem that then arises is “the continuing contributions of Xicanas and women of color in punk remains invisible and absent in much of the documentation of the emergence of punk in America.”⁹¹ Revising punk history, or any historical narrative, often begins at a point of deficiency. Latinx Studies and Feminist scholars must start with the question of “who is missing?” in these narratives.

As opposed to the mainstream punk rock music that Cristy is exposed to in the 1990s, which reflect the dominant narrative that punk is for and by white boys, there were plenty of Latinx and Chicanx punk music produced during that time. As noted by Habell-Pallan, Zavella, and Bautista, Punk rock culture in the United States included many white women, queer people, and people of color. The issue of erasure continues. Despite a proliferation of people of color in the punk scene in the 1970s as recognized by Bautista, the 1980s as documented by Habell-Pallan, and 1990s as observed by Zavella, there lacks in the present day a full picture of the wide variation of punk rock. For girls like Cristy, while punk rock as an identity is inviting, it still continues to exclude the other intersecting identities that they bring with them. *Spit and Passion* as a counternarrative is important. As a comic testimonio it refuses to be silent on the participation of Latinx people in punk rock in the 1990s.

Punk music and culture was always a space for social outcasts to converge on their overlapping marginalized identities. Using folklore and media analyses in his book *Visual Vitriol* (2-11), David Ensminger examines the history of punks and their self-perceptions.⁹²

⁹⁰ Bautista, “Xicana Women Claim Their Rightful Place in Punk.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² David Ensminger, *Visual Vitriol: The Street Art and Subcultures of Punk and hardcore Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

With this book, which is a content analysis of band posters, handbills and flyers,⁹³

Ensminger attempts to “refocus the way in which we encounter that personal history and recall the in-between spaces—the voices that often get lost, misunderstood, or forgotten in North American Punk.”⁹⁴ Again, note the perspective of the “in-between” voices mentioned in historical recovery projects. Punk culture is another interstitial space; individuals who occupied various intersecting identities were able to engage specific aspects of the punk culture, while leaving others.

Punk, at its core, is an identity for those who are excluded from mainstream forms of culture such as “organized sports, religion or studies.”⁹⁵ For first generation and immigrant Latinx people, punk “functioned as a site of possibility.”⁹⁶ One such possibility was the opportunity for Latinx punk musicians to show solidarity with undocumented Latinx punks, such as the Los Crudos frontperson wearing a shirt during a performance that said “¿Illegal y que?” As Zavella concludes, “in defending the rights of undocumented migrants, Los Crudos was defending fellow punks.”⁹⁷ In today’s political climate of renewed xenophobia and racist violence, counternarratives are more important than ever.

When viewed through the lens of print culture, *Spit and Passion* becomes an archive of queer, Cuban punk adolescence. Similarly, working within an archive of punk band print material, Ensminger has “built a repository without walls.”⁹⁸ The politics of the archive

⁹³ Before mass telecommunication technology, band flyers were used announced the date, time and place of when a band would be performing. Punk band flyers often included artwork, cut out lettering or other collage material.

⁹⁴ Ensminger, *Visual Vitriol*, 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹⁶ Habell-Pallan, “Soy ¿Punkera, Y Que?,” 164.

⁹⁷ Zavella, “Beyond the Screams,” 32.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

emerge. The graphic memoir builds its own foundation of punk material. When Cristy is introduced to punk music by her friend Carlito, Road has re-created the album art of the three CDs her friend lent her: *My War* by Black Flag, *Dookie* by Green Day, and *Rock N Roll Nightmare* by Rich Kids on LSD.⁹⁹ As an adult, Road would later go on to have a career as a music flyer designer. The reader now has an image of what these albums looked like. Album art, like flyers, is an important visual material for music fans. Road's reproduction of the cover art adds another layer to the narrative, one that shows the reader, who may or may not be familiar with these bands, what a punk music aesthetic is.

Road reconstructs an alternate history in *Spit and Passion*, where Cristy embodies a similar punk sensibility for community-building. For example, Road juxtaposes Green Day's early beginnings at the DIY punk club 924 Gilman St. in Berkeley, California, with her great-grandmother Mimita's Catholic beliefs that sustained their family. Visually, Road draws a saint's card of La Virgen de Caridad (which she braids throughout the comic) alongside a band poster of Billy Joe Armstrong (Green Day's lead singer). La Virgen and Billi Joe hang side-by-side in Road's comic archive of personal history.¹⁰⁰ As a personal history that also contests a larger history of conservative Cuban families and the punk music movement in the 1990s, this new visualization allows Road to assert: "My findings were the same: honest and decorative, with an interest in providing a shoulder to those with less to lean on, a token of salvation, but constructed for the biological shifts and spiritual splits of MY QUEER GENERATION."¹⁰¹ For Road, gender and sexuality, and the community that she finds after leaving home, are in constant flux. Catholic religious underpinnings from her family entwine

⁹⁹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 111.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

with biological sex and social constructions of gender. The punk community that Road envisions for herself is one that includes both her Cuban and queer identities, and in accepting both she can find solidarity with each.

Joy as Alternative Expression

In my final section, I implement Black lesbian feminist thinker Audre Lorde's 1979 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"¹⁰² to read scenes in *Spit and Passion* that depict the expression of joy—specifically, sections that express a yearning to touch, interactions with bodily fluids, and overwhelming feelings, such as passion and obsession. Passion, as part of the title, is quite significant to Road's graphic memoir. Cristy experiences passion for punk rock and Green Day, LGBTQ rights, Latina working class feminism in her family, and a personal desire for a romantic connection that fully honors her queer/bisexual identity. I argue that Cristy is manifesting a queer erotic power in each of her passions that intersect and overlap in the memoir. According to Lorde, "the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings."¹⁰³ The erotic can then be a way to analyze queer adolescence in Road's memoir. Pop cultural and Cuban images and symbols whirl together throughout the graphic narrative, often distorted or cut and pasted together as the Road's words on the page surround them.

Before I get into the core of my analyses of the erotic as power in *Spit and Passion*, I want to spend some time on Lorde's definition of the erotic, especially as it pertains to my

¹⁰² Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007).

¹⁰³ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.

claim about the erotic in graphic narratives about queer adolescence. Lorde explicitly states a difference between the erotic and pornography. The erotic is “replenishing and provocative” for women and is a “a source of power and information” but it should not be confused with the pornographic, which “is a direct denial of the power of the erotic.”¹⁰⁴ Pointedly, she writes: “pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.”¹⁰⁵ So here, the erotic does not merely refer to sexual desire or excitement. While it includes these aspects, it expands to encompass all elements of one’s life.

When it comes to developing their sexuality and personality outside of the family structure, queer adolescents have to negotiate both the storm of hormones in puberty and the dangers of a heterosexist society which at its best tolerates queer sexuality, and at its worst is violently homophobic. Cristy’s first romantic encounter happens at school, when she is walking down the hall during a bathroom break, as seen in figure 3.6. She peeks into the counselor’s office and sees for the first time a gender non-conforming girl. Road narrates: “I ran off. I started sweating and wondering if I was still at Marina Hernandez Junior High. Or a fucked-up fantasy kingdom channeling high contrast between misery and ecstasy.” The narrative caption appears vertically between two panels. The first is a close-up shot of Cristy. Her mouth is slightly ajar in surprise, she says, “Uh, I’m sorry, I’m in the wrong room. Sorry!” The second panel is also a close-up of her classmate, Alex. Small hearts float around her shaved head.¹⁰⁶ In the middle of Cristy’s middle school misery she encounters a chance to feel ecstasy in finding someone who shares her fluidity of gender.

¹⁰⁴ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 85.

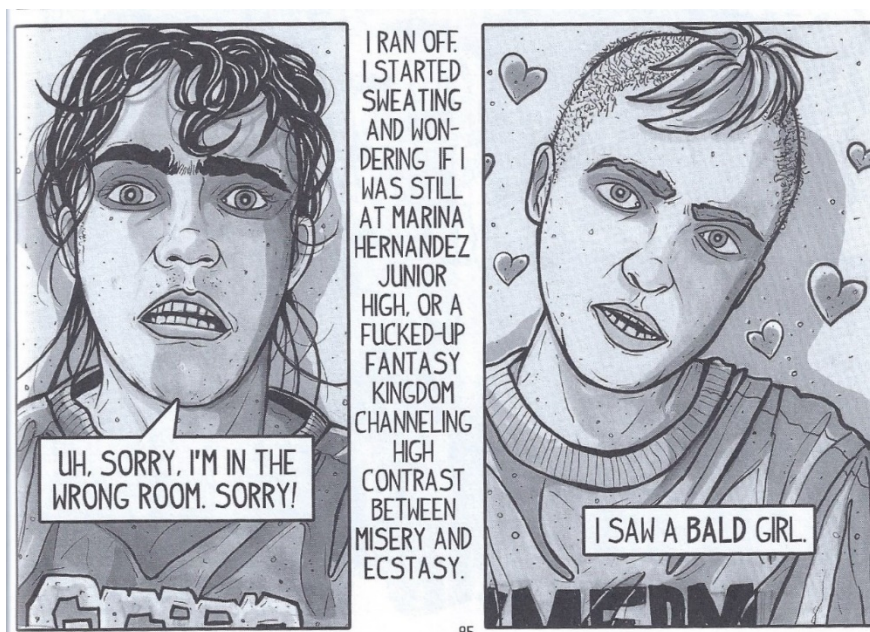


Figure 3.6. Cristy is surprised and elated to find a peer who might share her own queer desires. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 85.

The graphic narrative is populated by many strong woman figures, which are familial, religious, and pop cultural for Cristy. Mimita was the matriarch the of family. Road believed that the family “created their own version of Mimita’s value system,” one that felt “internal sympathy for homos.”¹⁰⁷ Road draws a bust of her great-grandmother, an elderly Cuban woman who wears a stern but welcoming look. In the next panel, which appears on the following page directly opposite the portrait of Mimita, Road has drawn busts of Rosanne Barr and La Virgen, each wearing a figure of women’s suffrage: a raised fist within a circle. Rosanne Barr was a television star on the popular sitcom *Roseanne* that ran from 1988 to 1997. According to Road, it featured some of the first positive representation of gay people on network television.¹⁰⁸ La virgen, according to Road, recognized “that there’s a billion

¹⁰⁷ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 44.

¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, Roseanne Barr, despite being pro-LGBTQ on her show, would go on later to make anti-Black racist comments in 2018 resulting in the recently rebooted *Roseanne* show to be canceled.

kinds of people on earth.”¹⁰⁹ Road queers the saint by drawing her with hands clasped, covered in a shawl and wearing a pin with a feminist symbol (the sign for women with a fist in the middle). Catholic mythology, like the stories on TV, provides a belief system. To Cristy, Mimita, Roseanne, and La Virgen were all powerful woman figures, which I read as encapsulating erotic power that is often separated “from the most vital areas of our lives other than sex.”¹¹⁰ The erotic power was enough for Cristy to survive the homophobia in her family’s religion and mainstream culture. Whether it is familial, religious, or entertaining, embracing passion has been able to fulfill and strengthen women’s lives.

Despite feeling silent and powerless through much of her adolescence, Cristy harnesses power in her alternative perspective of the world. In what might seem like an unlikely place, it is her identification with her late great-grandmother Mimita that allows Cristy to live in her truth as a queer Latina. In one instance, Road illustrates Cristy’s similarities to Mimita through food, as seen in figure 3.7. Specifically, the first caption in a panel that shows a bowl filled with candy corn reads: “Mimita kept candy in a tin in her drawer.” The second caption, below an image of a nightstand drawer pulled open to reveal a few pieces of wrapped hard candy reads: “I too hid forbidden sugar, leftover from several Halloweens ago.”¹¹¹ Here, the words and images contradict each other on first glance. Candy corn is a common Halloween candy, and the nightstand candy most certainly belongs to Mimita. The switch up visually signals to the reader how Cristy and Mimita, while seemingly different, on closer inspection live very similar lives.

¹⁰⁹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 45.

¹¹⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

¹¹¹ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 48.

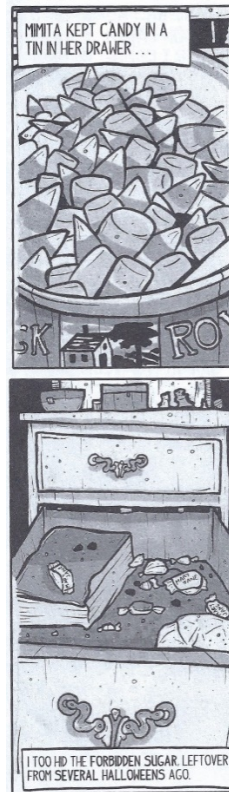


Figure 3.7. The text does not match the images that are paired with in the panel. Road, *Spit and Passion*, 48.

Cristy's identification with her great-grandmother becomes a recognition of her own queer identity. She disidentifies with popular culture, acknowledging similar interests with Mimita because, as Muñoz argues, "disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival."¹¹² Road tells the reader that one of Mimita's "favorite pastimes was watching boxing matches on television." In the next panel, Road narrates, "I too enjoyed a diversion from the falseness of usual television." The first panel comprises a clip from a televised boxing match. Two shirtless men throw punches at each other, they wear anguished expressions, sweat drips down their face and bodies. The second panel is a close-up, in profile, of the lead singer of Green Day. He bites the fingers of one hand while the other

¹¹² Muñoz, *Disidentification*, 161.

grips the neck of his guitar, sweat drips down his face.¹¹³ Each male figure, either for Mitmita or Cristy, is steeped in erotic and sexual overtones. The object of passion is the same for great-grandmother and great-granddaughter alike. It is in this shared passion that Cristy is able to make meaning, find a connection to the matriarch of the family that honors Cristy's sexual identity.

Audre Lorde argues that the power of the erotic lies in the ability for women to reinscribe difference. She writes:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared among them, and lessens the threat of difference.¹¹⁴

The metaphor of the bridge is a shared one in queer women of color feminist theory.¹¹⁵ For Lorde, the erotic is the bridge for people, specifically women, to connect. This is not in spite of difference—here difference isn't seen or felt as intimidation. As it functions in *Spit and Passion*, difference becomes a vehicle for Cristy as a queer (or bisexual) pre-teen to connect to her conservative Catholic Cuban great-grandmother, who might have been “Ok with homos” but “didn't talk about it because *the bible* told her not to.”¹¹⁶ While Cristy cannot, or does not, want any reconciliation with the church, she bridges an understanding with her family through a shared passion for pop culture.

¹¹³ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 48-49.

¹¹⁴ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

¹¹⁵ See specifically the edited collection *The Bridge Called My Back* edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, Berkeley: Third Women Press, 1981.

¹¹⁶ Road, *Spit and Passion* 44.

Where does joy fit in when narrating the unhappiness of childhood? For Cristy we see it in every panel that pictures her pre-teen fantasy or small glimpse of a satisfying real life. An example of one of Cristy's daydreams (as indicated by the wavy lines of the panel borders) occurs near the end of the memoir. Cristy and her crush Alex, the bald girl who embodied Cristy's ideals of gender nonconformity, attend a Green Day concert. Road draws a three-panel page; the first two panels are of Billie Joe Armstrong. The first frame (or panel) includes a profile shot of the lead singer with his head tilted back, a large spitwad propels from his mouth. The second frame is a close-up shot of Armstrong, wide mouth agape, sweat pours down his face and the saliva projectile cruises toward the top of the frame's border, heading toward the audience. Spanning the length of the first upper two frames, the bottom third is of Cristy and Alex, each teen with their eyes closed, bodies moving to the music as Armstrong's spittle rains down on them. They open their mouths, ready to receive the spit, as if accepting the body of Christ during communion.¹¹⁷ Road, in the extradiegetic voiceover narration says: "Billie Joe hawked a gentle lugie into the air while gravity defied time and space." Then Road says in the caption (which includes the title of the memoir): "We reveled and cried among the holy waters of conviction. We drowned beneath all the spit and passion a 12 year old [sic] could ever dream of."¹¹⁸ Cristy's punk show dream shows the reader what boundless joy looks like.

Portrayals of Cristy's joy as a queer child in *Spit and Passion* stand as a counternarrative to the dominant stories of queer youth that only focus on trauma and violence. While Cristy's childhood and adolescent is difficult because she must navigate life

¹¹⁷ This religious metaphor is accurate considering Road's Catholic upbringing.

¹¹⁸ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 133.

as a queer Latinx child. Moments of joy, like the one previously mentioned, offer the opportunity for both solace from racist and homophobic trauma and a chance to imagine a world where she can enjoy her identity more fully. Lorde says that the erotic is often feared because, when it is acknowledged, “we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our life” which leads us to “demand of ourselves and from our life-pursuits that we feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”¹¹⁹ To engage in joy becomes an act of resistance for racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects living in white heterosexist society. An example is #BlackBoyJoy,¹²⁰ which according to Danielle Young, is a social media tool to “celebrate this idea that young black men can be happy, too.”¹²¹ #BlackBoyJoy becomes a way for Black men and boys to “revel in their childhood” even though too many of them are victims of police violence.¹²² Like #BlackGirlMagic, these hashtags act as counternarratives against the dominant stories that only focus on the tragedy and trauma of Black life. Expressions of joy become purposeful opposition to stories solely focused on childhood trauma.

The punk rock show in *Spit and Passion* is an adolescent dream for Cristy that allows her to fully inhabit a world that accepts her complete identity as a queer Cubana punk. The visual-verbal devices of the graphic memoir, as El Refaie observes, “offer memoirists many new ways of representing their experience of temporality, their memories of past events, and

¹¹⁹ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 57.

¹²⁰ Social media hashtag that Black men and boys use to show instances of joy and carefreeness as a way to respond to anti-Black violence.

¹²¹ Danielle Young, “Watch Out Loud: What Is #BlackBoyJoy and Why Do We Need It?,” *The Root*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.theroot.com/watch-out-loud-what-is-blackboyjoy-and-why-do-we-need-1794180141>.

¹²² Young, “Watch Out Loud.”

their hopes and dreams for the future.”¹²³ Road can shape her childhood memory using the pliability of time that the graphic medium affords. The interjected dream makes visible for the reader Cristy’s childhood experience. Her erotic knowledge is laid on the page for her readers, showing them her full capacity to share her punk rock passion with another person, a person whom she can also have romantic feelings for, erotic feelings that are not centered on sex, but on shared musical interest.

Road’s picturing of Cristy’s adolescent joy creates an alternative expression that acknowledges the erotic power of joy and touch. When the mainstream view of sexuality taught in school privileges white heterosexual couplings, then, as Marshall, endorsing Kathryn Bond Stockton’s argument, writes: “queer children and children of color may be excluded from such paradigms and instead ‘grow sideways’ rather than up and out of childhood.”¹²⁴ Growing sideways, as opposed to up (or straight), is a metaphor for infantilization. Queer children are not allowed to group up into queer adults. Listening to punk music is a way that Cristy has resisted growing sideways within her mainstream education. Cristy’s yearning to touch, or—going back to Rodríguez—her “queer racialized female yearnings,”¹²⁵ as illustrated throughout the graphic memoir, stand as a counternarrative that offers marginalized children and adolescents the chance to learn in an environment that does not harm or stunt the growth of their complex identities.

¹²³ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 4.

¹²⁴ Marshall, *Graphic Girlhoods*, 5.

¹²⁵ Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 15.

Conclusion

Among the final scenes of *Spit and Passion*, the closet bursts open, spilling forth all Cristy's baggage. Skulls tumble forward, flies buzz around clothes, garbage bags fall into the room, boxes inch forward, and mysterious liquids ooze from the ceiling and floor.¹²⁶ Road remarks on losing friends and coming to terms with her identity. The narration reads: "Surrounded by my things, I felt like I was drowning in the back corner of my closet—the dampest closet in the house."¹²⁷ The reader is confronted with Cristy's emotional baggage; she can no longer hold it all in. Road, in remembering her trauma, also contextualizes it for the reader. She gives her trauma a physical place to exist, because "memories of traumatic events have a distinct quality."¹²⁸ Road does not "come out" at the end of the narrative, but she does not keep quiet about the ugliness and distortion of living as a queer child under the weight of homophobia. As Road exposes her emotional trauma to the reader, her grotesque imagings help to retell her coming-of-age story. Her expressions of joy resist the danger of only telling stories of trauma.

In March 2017, *America #1* hit comic book shelves as the first standalone comic to feature the queer Latina superhero, Miss America (alter ego America Chavez). The limited run was written by queer Latina YA author Gabby Rivera and drawn by Joe Quinones. The significance of giving a curly haired, brown skinned Latina the superhero name Miss America speaks to the present-day state of comics to as they question and reinvent ideas of what it means to be American. How have Latina artists like Cristy C. Road created new narratives of what it means to be Latina and queer in the United States? Similar stories from

¹²⁶ Road, *Spit and Passion*, 142.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 99.

Latina comic artists fill the pages of *Tales From La Vida* (2018), like Kelly Fernandez's "The Ciguapa," in which a young Afro-Domincana follows the ravenous, long-haired creature into the woods only to encounter the creature who is equally curious of about her.¹²⁹ Similarly, in "They Call Me Morena," Breena Nuñez explores the seeming contradictions of being Latina, Afro-descended and queer: "Can I even claim AfroLatinx as part of my identity even though the anti-Blackness runs deep in our history? Was queerness always there too?"¹³⁰ Road, like these other Latina artists, uses the comic medium to alter, critique, and retell the complexity of queer Latina experience in all its grotesque, traumatic joy.

¹²⁹ Kelly Fernandez, "The Ciguapa," in *Tales From La Vida*, ed. by Frederick Luis Aldama (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 58-61.

¹³⁰ Breena Nuñez, "They Call Me Morena," in Aldama, *Tales From La Vida*, 20-21.

CHAPTER FOUR: Graphic Vignettes of the Civil Rights Movement: History, Memory and Testimonio in Lila Quintero Weaver's Graphic Memoir *Darkroom*

Lila Quintero Weaver begins *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* with a memory of how she learned the photograph developing process with her father in the darkroom.³⁸⁶ The opening scene of the first chapter is an endearing moment. A father and child together in the darkroom, exposing paper to light and revealing the shades of black and white that compose an image. Photographs, like scenes from historical narratives, seem objective records. Yet, they are highly constructed stories that reveal certain parts while obscuring others. Quintero Weaver's drawings of photographs in her comics points to this construction, or the fabrication of memory. Memory doesn't merely present sterile private memories free of political context. I argue that Quintero Weaver's drawn photographs in *Darkroom*, as compared to other graphic memoirs, present a narrative of childhood that engages with complicated and troubling elements of civil rights history in the U.S. South.

Graphic memoirs can act as a counternarrative to stories erased from mainstream history. *Darkroom* not only addresses that gap in mainstream history that leaves out Latinx people in the U.S. South, but also offers readers a complicated portrayal of Latinx involvement in the civil rights movement. When I refer to mainstream narrative, I do not mean narratives by Black Americans, who are not imbued with institutional power in mass media.³⁸⁷ Instead, I am referring to the films, textbooks and educational material that often

³⁸⁶ Lila Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

³⁸⁷ When I say institutional power, I mean structures (TV networks, writers' rooms, show runners) that are primarily controlled by white people. As opposed to a handful of Black media producers, such as Oprah Winfrey, Ava Duvernay, or Shonda Rhimes. Who, as individuals may have some creative control in the media, but as individuals cannot compare to the system of power in entertainment media.

presents a sanitized version of the civil rights movement. For example, the 2018 film *Greenbook* written and directed by white American Peter Farrelly that came under much scrutiny because it presented a version of the Jim Crow south from the perspective of the white savior character played by Viggo Mortenson. Graphic memoirs are inextricably tied to the histories we tell about perseverance in the face of oppression. *Darkroom*, like other comic histories of racial injustice in the United States, participate in the shift to complicate how we remember certain civil rights moments in the popular imagination.

When remembering childhood through a visual medium like comics, what better source than to look at then photographs? Photographs are visual representations of framed and frozen moments in time. Although photos may make claims to objective representations of truth, they—like comics—are a remediated form that uses light, lines, and shading to construct a specific version of reality. Just like memory is not static, photographs or illustrations of a specific memory are not objective. Often there are conflicting accounts of the same memory. The task of the graphic memoirist is to present a constructed narrative that simultaneously presents a version of truth and its own unreliability in creating that narrative before the reader's eyes.

I believe that in remediating photos in drawn form, comic artists are pointing to the failure to strive for objectivity in photographs. That is to say: it doesn't matter that what we remember, either in photographic or comic form, is true per se, but that it strives to capture a moment that we find significant in the present or believe will be significant in the future. Therefore, we record it. Barbara Harrison, in her essay "Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry," investigates how the visual methodology of photographs is useful in research on

narrative and counternarratives.³⁸⁸ Thinking of possible viewers in the future, photographs aren't just for the photographer but, as Harrison concludes, "there is the idea that photographs will have audiences beyond the present."³⁸⁹ Quintero Weaver's father, in taking and storing their family photos, maintains a private archive, so that at an indeterminate time in the future someone will look back and view these photographs.

Currently, there are two scholarly studies on *Darkroom*.³⁹⁰ The first is an article by Janis Breckenridge and Madelyn Peterson entitled "Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom: A Memoir In Black And White*: Envisioning Equality,"³⁹¹ and the second is the chapter "On Photo-Graphic Narrative: 'To Look—Really Look' into the Darkroom" from Jorge J. Santos' book *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement* (2019).³⁹² My analysis looks for how the portrayal of childhood, memory, and violence, through family photos and testimonio in presented comic art, is used in a Latinx graphic memoir set during the civil rights movement.

Darkroom becomes a clear counternarrative when compared to other graphic memoirs like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, that do not engage with larger historical narratives. Specifically, we can compare how each author/artist meticulously draws family photos to illuminate the careful composition of the photograph, not as an objective snapshot of reality, but as a constructed narrative tool. The graphic memoir pushes the reader toward parsing

³⁸⁸ Barbara Harrison, "Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry," in *Considering Counternarratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, eds. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), ebook, 113-136.

³⁸⁹ Harrison, "Photographic Visions," 122-123.

³⁹⁰ Aside from several book reviews.

³⁹¹ Janis Breckenridge and Madelyn Peterson, "Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom: A Memoir In Black And White*: Envisioning Equality," *Confluencia* 29, no.1 (2013): 109-125.

³⁹² Jorge J. Santos, "On Photo-Graphic Narrative: 'To Look—Really Look' into the Darkroom," in *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 2019, 78-108.

out the larger political implications, like racial injustice in private recollections of Latin American immigration, which marks the graphic memoir as a Latinx counternarrative. Although Santos does not consider *Darkroom* “a counter to popular narratives”—instead positioning it “as a contribution,”³⁹³ I argue that within a critical race discourse the graphic memoir is a counternarrative. Quintero Weaver’s use of the graphic form, which has the ability to interlace intimate family history with larger moments of nation-building stories, is intentional in every comic convention that she implements or breaks, such as when she recreates history books, newspapers, and other archival source documents within the narrative of the graphic memoir. The metaphor of the photograph is braided throughout *Darkroom* as Quintero Weaver challenges both her childhood memories and our collective public memory of the civil rights movement.

Quintero Weaver uses the graphic medium to sort through her childhood amid the turbulent time of African Americans’ struggle for voting rights. She interrogates not only her own actions and identity, but the inconsistencies in the very material conditions of segregation in the South. As Santos writes, *Darkroom* filters the narrative through the “child’s curious but not fully cognizant perspective” while positioning the story within the “tense historical period and struggle for civil and human rights.”³⁹⁴ Quintero Weaver constructs memories of her childhood through the historical lens of the civil rights movement in the South, which places a Latinx subjectivity as an integral part of U.S. history.

While my focus is on Latinx graphic narratives, there are other scholars like Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted who have done work on specific geographical locations, such

³⁹³ Santos, “On Photo-Graphic Narrative,” 107.

³⁹⁴ Breckenridge and Peterson, “Envisioning Equality,” 109.

as their book *Comics and the U.S. South* (2012).³⁹⁵ Costello and Whitted address the oversaturation of comics scholarship on the Northeast and challenge “limiting assumptions about” the U.S. South to illuminate the “aesthetic, complexity, storytelling potential, and modern relevance” of the region.³⁹⁶ Quintero Weaver adds to the complexity of Latinx narratives in creating a graphic memoir about her family’s time in Marion, Alabama, extending the geographical breath of Latinx narratives to include the Deep South.

Family Photographs Redrawn

The title of Quintero Weaver’s graphic memoir is *Darkroom*, the place where photographic film is developed, processed, and made into pictures. Before the invention of digital photography, film photography was a slower, more costly process. However, the advent of disposable cameras and one-hour-photo shops made the technology accessible to most people. Film photography, like the process shown at the beginning of *Darkroom*, was time consuming and required a dedicated space. It would then make sense for the memoir to use that place as a title, since the comic has painstakingly rendered Quintero Weaver’s memories of childhood and the protests for voting rights on the page. The graphic memoir becomes the dedicated space in retelling the story of one small town’s place in the larger national history of civil rights in the 1960s.

Family photos are the building blocks of the graphic memoir. Harrison sees the value of family albums, like “generated visual diaries,” to better understand how individuals

³⁹⁵ Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, eds., *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

³⁹⁶ Costello and Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South*, vii.

construct their identity and the narratives around how that identity came to be.³⁹⁷ Visuality is prominent in U.S. Southern culture, though misconceptions persist from the “emphasis on the oral dimensions.”³⁹⁸ *Darkroom* as a comic contributes to the visual culture of the South, especially in how Quintero Weaver reproduces the image of the photograph in the comic.

In chapter 1, “In The Dark,” Quintero Weaver tells the reader how much of her childhood was photographed. In a full page panel, she has drawn a closet, like any other closet, filled with a rack of clothing and boxes piled on the top shelves.³⁹⁹ The boxes are labeled in hand drawn lettering, which read: “Argentina Vintage, Family Photos Miscellaneous, Negatives, Photos Argentina Pre 1961, Photos USA 1961 →, MORE PHOTOS.” The top caption declares: “Every house we ever lived in had a makeshift darkroom.” The bottom caption continues: “Consequently, we were overrun with photos.”⁴⁰⁰ On the next page Quintero Weaver has drawn an array of family photos splayed out on the page. Black and white photos of the family dog, a young boy at the beach, a small girl sitting legs akimbo wearing a flower crown, a bicycle covered in snow, the family crowded around a dining room table. As seen in figure 4.1, Quintero Weaver reminisces: “The camera didn’t miss much.”⁴⁰¹ Lila and her siblings’ childhood was painstakingly catalogued. Each layout sets the foundation of the memoir: a story told through photographs. However, the graphic memoir stands as an intervention in the family’s

³⁹⁷ Harrison, “Photographic Visions,” 116.

³⁹⁸ Costello and Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South*, x.

³⁹⁹ The closet presents a very different significance in *Darkroom* than it does in Cristy C. Road’s *Spit and Passion*.

⁴⁰⁰ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 22.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

personal archive. It inserts images of violence and racism that were left out of the photos in the boxes.

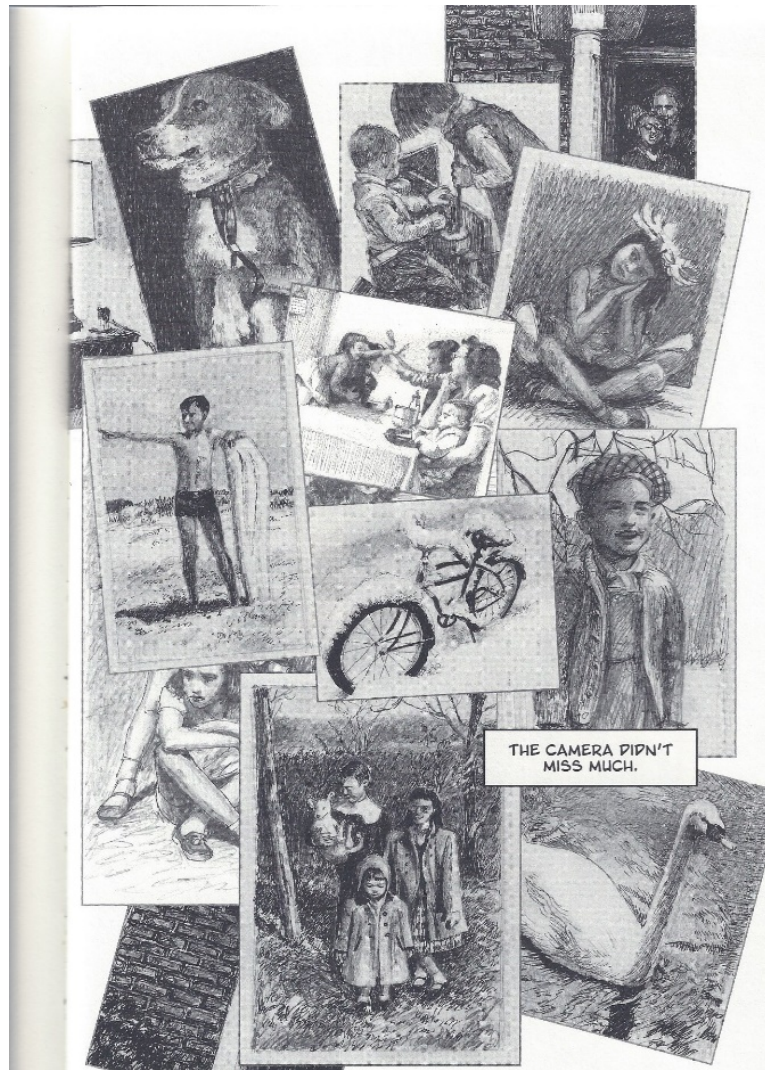


Figure 4.1 Family photo re-created in detail. Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 23.

Darkroom is similar to other graphic memoirs that interlace drawn photographs into their narrative. The most well-known is Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006). Bechdel also recreates family photographs in her panels. And while photographs may seem to be objective records of truth, they are not. *Darkroom*'s chapter title "In The Dark" takes on another meaning than the literal process of developing photographs in a darkroom. It

references Lila and her family's own ignorance of the racial politics in their town. Nowhere seen in the family photographs are the protests happening in Marion. In thinking back on her childhood, Quintero Weaver identifies the gap in her father's photographic history; not every moment was captured. School events and the attack on African American protestors that happened one block from their home, for Quintero Weaver, "exist only in my mind's eye."⁴⁰²

What then happens in drawing and re-drawing photographs to show the process of remembering and re-remembering? The snapshots of an event or object are not the actual event or object, but a representation. As Harrison observes, "narratives of remembering then will involve elements of imaging and picturing or visualizing."⁴⁰³ When a comic artist draws a photograph that signifies an object that represents another object. To demonstrate, Quintero Weaver braids maps throughout her memoir: the block she lived on, the town of Marion, Buenos Aires in Argentina, and North and South America.⁴⁰⁴ In her book *Remembered Rapture*, bell hooks likens the writing of a memoir to that of a drawing a map.⁴⁰⁵ Each physical map represents a migration for Lila: they show the walk she took to school, when she moved to Alabama, her parents' several migrations to and from Argentina. For the author-artist the graphic memoir transforms representations of maps into memories of travel and movement in her life.

I'd like to return back to the full panel page of the photographs splayed out. The arrangement on the page is as if Quintero Weaver has invited the reader to her home, taken

⁴⁰² Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 24-25.

⁴⁰³ Harrison, "Photographic Visions," 120.

⁴⁰⁴ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*.

⁴⁰⁵ bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 67.

out a box of family photos and laid them out on the coffee table. The reader is invited into the private world of the Quinteros—we have the chance to look at small, everyday moments in the family’s life. A photograph symbolically “invites the speaking about the experience of others.”⁴⁰⁶ In drawing the photographs, which are representations of memory, *Darkroom* becomes a narrative of the process of remembering as much as it is a narrative of remembering.

Graphic memoirs show the process of remembering through the construction of panels, images and words. Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is known for its reproduction of photographs via drawing. Ann Cvetkovich, in her essay “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” examines the significance of family photographs in Bechdel’s graphic memoir. Cvetkovich is concerned with Bechdel’s “archival documentation” in the form of her “careful reproduction of a snapshot,” specifically her father’s illicit photo of their babysitter Roy.⁴⁰⁷ A pattern emerges in other graphic memoirs. Cvetkovich points to how Art Spiegelman in *Maus* also “strategically places three archival family photographs” within the narrative.”⁴⁰⁸ I add Quintero Weaver’s use of family photos in her memoir within the pattern Cvetkovich identified in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Spiegelman’s *Maus*. It then becomes clear how these artist-narrators use the reproduction of photographs as a visual tool in their work.

Photographs in graphic memoirs then take on a new meaning. For Cvetkovich, it is how “the disruptive force of photographs owes something to the labor she [Bechdel]

⁴⁰⁶ Harrison, “Photographic Visions,” 118.

⁴⁰⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 1 & 2 (2008): 111-128.

⁴⁰⁸ Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive,” 117.

devotes to reproducing them.”⁴⁰⁹ I reason then, that Quintero Weaver does a similar artistic labor in her own careful reproduction of family photographs in *Darkroom*. There are multiple photographs reproduced, suggesting that the “disruptive force of photographs” is important to the disrupting of dominant historical narratives.⁴¹⁰ We see this in her retelling of the events in Marion that led to death of Jimmy Lee Jackson, which becomes part of the visual history of the civil rights movement in the South.

Vignettes of the Civil Rights Movement

Like *March* (2015) and other graphic novels, *Darkroom* is a vignette of the civil rights movement. It is different than other graphic novels on the subject because it is from the perspective of an Argentinian immigrant—a Latinx “outsider” (outside the United States) perspective of the Jim Crow South. Some other graphic histories include: *March* by Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell; *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1956), written by Alfred Hassler and Benton Resnik and illustrated by Sy Barry; *The Silence of Our Friends* (2012), written by Mark Long and Jim Demonakos and illustrated by Nate Powell; and the French comic—or *bande dessinée*—*Emmett Till: Derniers jours d’une courte vie* (2015) written by Arnaud Floch and illustrated by Christophe Bouchard. Some comics filter the narrative through a partial historical figure, while others tell a broader history.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive,” 117.

Martin Luther King and The Montgomery Story was originally published in 1956 and told the story of the Reverend Dr. King and Rosa Parks' participation in the Montgomery bus boycott. It was distributed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith organization that strives for peace through various non-violent activities.⁴¹¹ The comic "taught young people not just about the event itself but also about nonviolence as a tool for social change."⁴¹² According to Andrew Aydin, John Lewis' staff member in 2008, the congressman told him about the influential comic book that was focused on the Montgomery bus boycott. Aydin asked Lewis why he didn't write a comic about his own contribution to the civil rights movement; that conversation led to the critically acclaimed comic biography series *March*.

The *bande dessinée* *Emmett Till* makes clear that the history of the civil rights struggle is important outside the United States. Floc'h and Bouchard retell the lynching of Emmett Till, who was tortured and murdered by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. While there was a trial, both men were acquitted by an all-white male jury.⁴¹³ The *bande dessinée* was created in partnership with Amnesty International, a non-religious, politically un-affiliated non-profit "campaigning for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all."⁴¹⁴ *Emmett Till* is a vividly-drawn 80-page color comic. Similar to Redfern and Caron's *Who is Ana Mendieta*, Floc'h and Bouchard include a bibliography and historical narrative with photographs that elaborate on

⁴¹¹ Fellowship of Reconciliation USA website, <https://www.forusa.org/>.

⁴¹² Grace Bello, "A Comic Book for Social Justice: John Lewis," *Publishers Weekly*, July 19, 2012. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/58354-a-comic-book-for-social-justice-john-lewis.html>.

⁴¹³ Arnaud Floc'h and Christophe Bouchard, *Emmett Till: Derniers jours d'une courte vie* (Paris: Éditions Sarbacane, 2015).

⁴¹⁴ Amnesty International, "Who We Are," <https://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are/>.

specific key moments in the Emmett Till case.⁴¹⁵ While Quintero Weaver does not include a bibliography in her graphic memoir, she does cite several historical texts she consulted while reconstructing the night of violence in Marion that led to the death of Jackson.⁴¹⁶

Different coalitions that strive for human rights have used comics as a way to educate people of the various struggles for civil and human rights in the United States. Comics then become a cultural record. The publication of both *Montgomery Story* and *Emmett Till* was supported (at least in part) by different human rights organizations. The former was used to educate school children and church-goers about the nonviolent protests,⁴¹⁷ while the latter taught graphic novel readers in France about the lynchings in the U.S. South. Each takes an individual African American's story and places it in the larger cultural context of human rights. The comics function as an educational tool to supplement the history of the civil rights movement more globally.

Darkroom confronts the ambiguous racial space Latinx immigrants often find themselves in during the civil rights movement. Quintero Weaver uses the graphic medium to sort through her childhood amid such a turbulent time. She interrogates not only her own actions and identity, but also, the inconsistencies in how the very material conditions of segregation in the South were often portrayed. Quintero Weaver's use of the drawn photograph expands, as Santos notes, "an expansive civil rights photographic archive by highlighting gaps in the historical record."⁴¹⁸ And as Costello and Whitted observe, "the

⁴¹⁵ Floc'h and Bouchard, *Emmett Till*.

⁴¹⁶ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 252.

⁴¹⁷ PREVIEWSworld, "The Comic That Inspired A Movement: Andrew Aydin On Martin Luther King And The Montgomery Story," Jan. 20, 2014, <https://www.previewsworld.com/Article/144160-THE-COMIC-THAT-INSPIRED-A-MOVEMENT-Andrew-Aydin-on-Martin-Luther-King-and-the-Montgomery-Story>.

⁴¹⁸ Santos, "On Photo-Graphic Narrative," 80.

comics form itself offers enormous potential for revising conventional understandings of the South.”⁴¹⁹ In Quintero Weaver’s graphic memoir, civil rights history is integrated into personal memory through the visual device of photographic composition. The drawn photograph in *Darkroom* highlights parts of Southern history alongside the author-artist’s construction of her own personal history.

Quintero Weaver re-creates a mental map of the town and events. Her father goes out to capture those events with his camera—acting as a silent, but active participant. Creating counternarratives to historical events becomes a political act. Counternarratives challenge official histories, which produce narratives that continue to marginalize communities, like the African American and Latinx groups in the United States. Part of the struggle for equality is the right to tell one’s own story. Quintero Weaver uses the memoir to tell her story and the struggle for voting rights in Marion, Alabama. Quintero Weaver re-interprets the Latin American immigrant narrative by showing cross-racial ties. As readers, we see how those larger events, like voting rights protests, affected everyday lives of Latinx people.

Photography is a valuable documentarian tool for social justice activists. It is part of a process of archiving the present moment for future use, and constructs a historical narrative around said events. The material inertia of the photographic process in *Darkroom* illuminates “the indebtedness of civil rights history to the material forms of documentation such as the photograph.”⁴²⁰ What then, is the role of photography in the civil rights movement? The first Selma March showed the realities of Southern racism; people could no

⁴¹⁹ Costello and Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South*, x.

⁴²⁰ Santos, “On Photo-Graphic Narrative,” 79.

longer ignore it. Similarly, the reader cannot ignore the injustice of the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson that Quintero Weaver covers in the comic.⁴²¹ The two events are connected. As Santos observes, the death of the Marion protestor becomes catalyst for the Selma marches.⁴²² *Darkroom* contributes a counternarrative to the larger history of civil rights growing throughout the U.S. South.

An important aspect of the civil rights movement was voting rights, as well as de-segregation in schools. In 1969, during Lila's start of the eighth grade, Perry County (where she lived) desegregated.⁴²³ Quintero Weaver records her memory of desegregation in two pages where the background is drawn as if the panels were laid out on two pieces of lined paper from a spiral notebook. Like Cristy C. Road's *Spit and Passion*, the illustrated autobiographic form often reproduces the aesthetic of the diary. The hand-drawn visual move gives the narrative, at times, a more personal tone. Several scenes retell her memory of desegregation: the white students at Francis Marion High School now had class with Black students, they had to for the first time use titles of respect when speaking to Black adults (who were now their teachers), and student athletes and cheerleaders played and performed together.⁴²⁴ Costello and Whitted's analyses of comics of the South that particularly deal with emancipation, in this case de-segregation, show how these graphic narratives "upset traditional configurations of heroism through carefully crafted counternarratives."⁴²⁵ Reading

⁴²¹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 173.

⁴²² Santos, "On Photo-Graphic Narrative," 78.

⁴²³ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 112.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 122-113.

⁴²⁵ Costello and Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South*, xiii.

other Southern comics in this way supports my own argument that *Darkroom* is in line with other graphic counter histories of the civil rights movement in the South.

School segregation is a common topic in other graphic memoirs/autobiographies of childhood. Elizabeth Marshall, in her chapter “Activist Schoolgirls,” from her book *Graphic Girlhoods*, is concerned with how three picture books narrate girls’ coming of age stories during times of violence in school.⁴²⁶ Marshall also uses Solórzano and Yosso’s Critical Race methodology of counter-storytelling, seeing how graphic narratives of childhood “warrant close attention for the majoritarian stories and images that they counter as well as the lessons that they convey.”⁴²⁷ Similarly, Quintero Weaver titled her chapter that illustrates the contradiction of racism in school “School Lessons.” Marshall understands how the verbal-visual devices in depictions of education engage with dominant official histories to posit alternative accounts.⁴²⁸

Lila being an Argentinian immigrant occupies a nebulous racial space: on the one hand she is able to attend an all-white school, but on the other, when she doesn’t conform to whiteness her peers are quick to reinforce the racial coalition. For example, Lila defies the “the code” when she exchanges pleasantries with an African American classmate at the pencil sharpener. The panel layout consists of three panels inlaid in the middle of the page, as seen in figure 4.2. There are three panels in between the top and bottom panel, both of which have soft borders that blend into the surrounding page.⁴²⁹ The top panel, on face

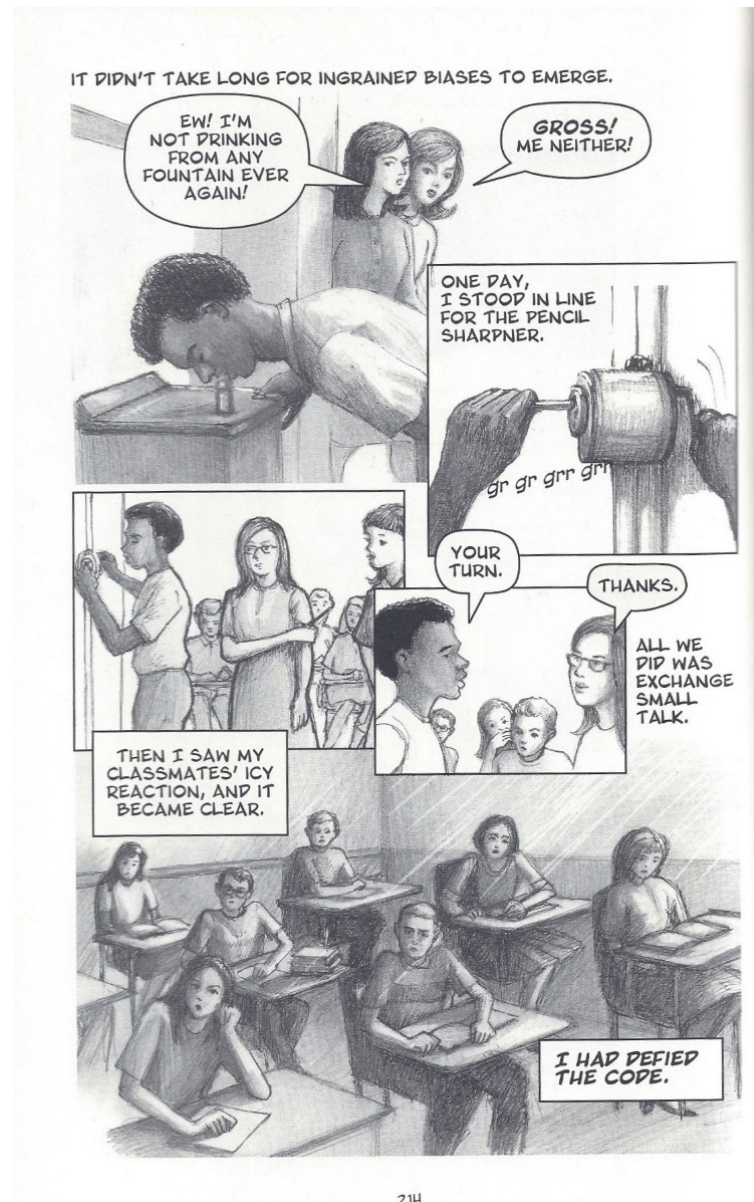
⁴²⁶ Elizabeth Marshall, “Activist Schoolgirls: Documenting Segregation and Residential Schooling in Auto/biographical Picture Books,” in *Graphic Girlhoods: Visualizing Education and Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴²⁷ Marshall, “Activist Schoolgirls,” 79.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 214.

value, is of a student drinking from a water fountain. Yet, it taps into a strong visual signifier of segregation in the United States: “Whites and Colored only water fountains.” As opposed to traditional memoirs that entirely rely on text, Quintero Weaver can tell several overlapping narratives simultaneously. The first is the overarching story of segregation in the south (the visual of the water fountain); second the interpersonal relationships between a Latinx student and an African American student (as seen in the three inlaid panels); and third the combination of the visual representation of segregation and the image of Lila’s racial transgression angering her white peers. Lila is physically standing in between the African American and white students. She is faced with the decision of conforming to white supremacist behavior of segregation or becoming an ally to the desegregation movement. Quintero Weaver as the author-artist draws the ugliness in the graphic memoir, thus taking a stand to create a narrative that shows in full light the vicious response to desegregation in the South.



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Figure 4.2 Despite desegregation being outlawed, it was still part of the social rules in Marion. Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 214.

Memory and History

Many of the struggles for civil rights that the Quintero family witnessed in Marion in the 1960s were never captured on film. Few of those records have survived in the archive.

The author-artist draws her child self in the midst of this change: Lila as a child doesn't yet

comprehend what a candlelight vigil might mean. Graphic memoirs of trauma, like Quintero Weaver's, attempt to make sense of foreign racial politics of the U.S. As Breckenridge and Peterson argue, *Darkroom* "subtly encourages the reader to adopt Lila's readership position, which is one of growing skepticism."⁴³⁰ This skepticism gives the reader a chance to also re-examine those politics in the contemporary sense. Graphic narratives provide ways to plug in the gaps that photography couldn't fill at the time.

While *Darkroom* may present a counternarrative of Latinxs in the Jim Crow South, it nevertheless reproduces many of the same official histories of Argentina. Quintero Weaver offers the same mainstream racial history of Argentina: that there are no Black people in her country. She says so precisely in the graphic narrative: "In Argentina, people of African origin were a rare sight."⁴³¹ The assumption is that there are just not that many Black people in Argentina. This follows the national-myth of racist-exceptionalism. Part of the nation-building project in Argentina and Latin America relied on the racial distinctions that lead to the subjugation of communities of African and Indigenous descent.⁴³² What Quintero Weaver leaves out is the historical context of why she and her family encounter so few Afro-Argentines despite Argentina, like many other South American countries, having participated in the Atlantic slave trade.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Breckenridge and Peterson, "Envisioning Equality," 119.

⁴³¹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 43.

⁴³² Mara Loveman, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2014, 130.

⁴³³ There are numerous books on the subject of slavery in Latin America. See: Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Rolando Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); and Darién J Davis, *Slavery and Beyond: The African impact on Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

While Quintero Weaver does go (somewhat) into the racial history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, this examination is brief and relies on a reductive theory of the Bering Strait that is positioned as fact by white/Western science. Many Indigenous peoples' histories do not accept the Bering Strait theory as factual. However, it continues to be taught and cited as an indisputable fact of the how Indigenous people arrived in the Americas.⁴³⁴ And, yes, *Darkroom* is a memoir and not a history textbook. But my argument that graphic memoirs and comic biographies are capable of engaging in counter history-making in how they portray memory, history, and trauma, means that they too can support official historical narratives. While a majority of the comic features histories that complicate official accounts of Latinxs in the United States, it also unfortunately relies of the belief of absent Afro-descended people in Argentina and the myth of the Bering Strait theory. In doing so, it contributes, inadvertently so, to the continued erasure of Black and Indigenous histories and knowledges.

Darkroom more critically engages official U.S histories, though. Many of the racist events that the Quintero family witnessed in Marion in the 1960s were never captured on film—or little of those records have been preserved. Like Road's *Spit and Passion*, *Darkroom* is a Latina artist coming of age story, one set during desegregation. Quintero Weaver's "personal story as a young Argentine immigrant" navigating new social codes, language and history "slowly dissolves and ultimately disappears into the historical narrative of the civil

⁴³⁴ Judy Iseke-Barnes, "Misrepresentations of Indigenous History and Science: Public Broadcasting, The Internet, and Education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26, no. 2 (2005): 149-165.

rights movement.”⁴³⁵ In capturing those formative experiences, the author-artist also re-creates specific historical movements.

The juxtaposition of family photos, newspapers, and school textbooks in *Darkroom* contest historical moments that are foundational in the modern U.S. nation-building project during the Jim Crow era. I read the narrative of Lila’s identity formation in the Latin American tradition as part of this project. Doris Sommer in *Foundation Fictions* (1999) offers the idea that “the country and the novel practically gave birth to each other,” thus the novel’s function for colonial nations rectifies, or comes to terms with a country’s independence.⁴³⁶ Graphic memoirs that attempt to remember traumatic events—like the history of lynching, voter suppression and denied public space—attempt to resolve a fragmented United States on the cusp of a paradigm shift of desegregated public space and voting rights granted to previously disenfranchised Black Americans. As Elisabeth Refaie writes in her study of autobiographic comics: “Memories of traumatic events have a distinct quality.”⁴³⁷ Quintero Weaver recreates that quality through the comic medium, such as juxtaposition of images, panel design, and photographic metaphors.

An important part of my analysis of the narrative is influenced by panel design, specifically how the panels alter the reading experience.⁴³⁸ Some panels in *Darkroom* take the shape of pages ripped from a textbook, while others look like photographs taped in a scrapbook. The author-artist, like other comic artists, molds panel shapes in a way that not

⁴³⁵ Breckenridge and Peterson, “Envisioning Equality,” 124.

⁴³⁶ Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances Of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

⁴³⁷ Elisabeth Refaie, *Autobiographic Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012) ebook, 99.

⁴³⁸ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 99.

only makes them contained units that convey a single scene, but their shape becomes part of the narrative itself. For example, on the night when the police and white townspeople attacked protestors, it was a regular night for Lila and her family. The page has a traditional rectangular panel on top in the middle that is borderless. It is filled with an image of the family's house during evening time. A speech bubble extends from one of the small windows of the house and spreads over the perimeter of the panel. Quintero Weaver's mother announces dinner, "Lila, set the table please." Below are three panels in the shape of circles, as seen in figure 4.3. A plate of chicken and mashed potatoes is drawn near the left side of the page and is almost the same size as the other circular panels. Then there is a panel of homework (the students have to identify clocks with different times). The second is of Lila and her sister working or playing at the table. The third is a close up of the paper dolls Lila and her siblings like to play with. Near the bottom right of the page is the drawing a toothbrush and toothpaste.⁴³⁹ The page becomes a panel itself.

⁴³⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 149.

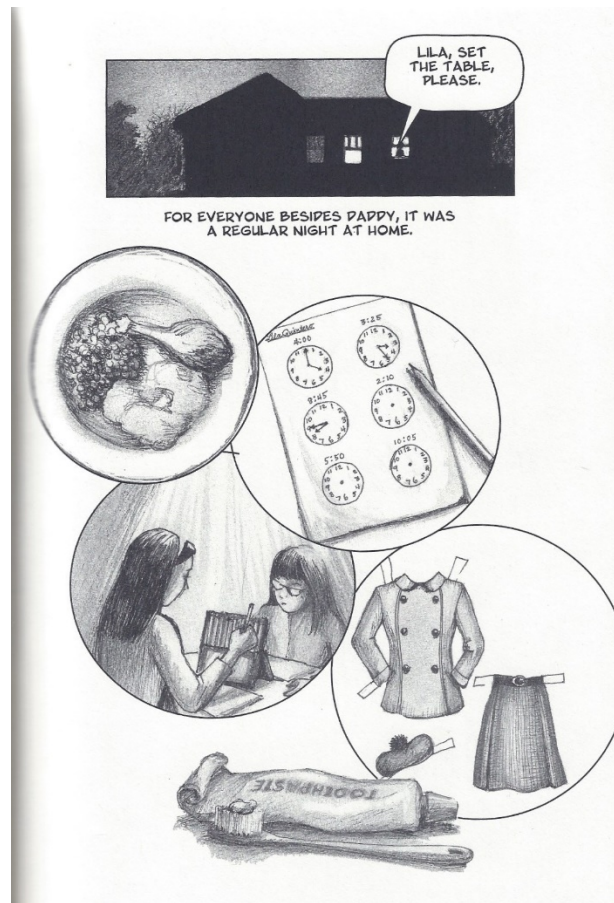


Figure 4.3 Panels and objects mimic each other on the page. Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 149.

By making each of the panels shaped as circles as opposed to rectangles, the reader sees the Quintero's evening through glimpses. The panel shapes are significant. Circles seem peculiar compared to the usual rectangles of the comic form. The plate of food at first glance looks like it could be a panel in and of itself. Upon closer inspection, each is drawn from Lila's perceptive: what she might see when sitting down to the table for dinner. The focalization—a narratological term Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri apply in comics analysis where there is a differentiation between the narration of the story and how the

narrator mentally perceives what is going on, such as in a memory⁴⁴⁰—in this scene switches between Quintero Weaver as the narrator remembering that night and child-Lila experiencing the evening firsthand. The reader is immersed in the mundane nature of an evening spent at home having dinner, doing homework, and brushing one's teeth before bed.

Memories also functions as photographic metaphors in *Darkroom*. The author-artist gives shape to her past in the comic while also showing the reader how she is constructing those memories. Since “the past is more than just memories for the audience,” the comic artist uses the form to explain to the reader how memoires themselves are also constructed alongside the images, texts and panels.⁴⁴¹ In the first chapter Quintero Weaver remembers what it was like to be in the darkroom with her father. Over a two-page spread she has drawn for the reader images of the bottles of chemicals used in developing film, such as fixer and stop bath. She has drawn the different trays that the photographic paper is placed in, and the process of what happens when the final image in revealed. The text captions read:

Most of the darkroom lessons have faded away./But how could I forget the actual moment of revelation?/When the blank sheet of photographic paper.../slipped into the developing bath.../...and within seconds before my eyes the latent image flowered.⁴⁴²

When Quintero Weaver refers to the latent image on the photographic paper she alludes to her own memories. Her memories are the unprocessed photographic paper; it isn't until she recreates them on the comic page and interrogates what happened that the events become

⁴⁴⁰ Silke Horstkotte, and Nancy Pedri, “Focalization in Graphic Narrative,” *Narrative* 19, no. 3 (2011): 336-337.

⁴⁴¹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 104.

⁴⁴² Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 16-17.

visible. In re-remembering, events that were not perceptible at the time become clear, such as the disenfranchised African Americans in Marion. What also becomes clear is how Lila was unaware of the significance of the voting rights marches. But in re-creating her memories, Quintero Weaver is able to address her cognitive disconnect. I reason then, that “the revelation” that Quintero Weaver as the adult-narrator refers to is her racial consciousness at the time, a consciousness that wasn’t fully realized until Quintero Weaver used the medium of comics to remember. The creation of the graphic memoir for the author-artist is like being in the darkroom. Integrating memories, re-creating the story by sharing it, and amending certain parts is much like processing a photograph.

In another panel, the author-artist remembers being at home on the same night as the violent suppression of the February protest in Marion. The reader is presented with contradictory memories. Lila hears her mother telling her father that it might be dangerous. When Lila responds with worry that her father might be in danger, her mom tells her, “Don’t worry. There will be lots of police around to keep people safe.”⁴⁴³ Lila’s mother is oblivious to the police violence happening throughout the country and in her own town. Her mother’s attitude reflects that of many white Americans of the time (and frankly in the present-day). They refused to see the white supremacy of the police department. Many civil rights demonstrations sought to address that kind of ignorance. By showing police beating Black protestors, on the evening news white Americans could no longer hide in their ignorance of the political situation. The memories shared in a graphic memoir change and are changed by the story being told. For El Refaie, storytelling and autobiography are

⁴⁴³ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 148.

interwoven, because “as soon as we begin to describe our memories to ourselves or to others, we turn them into stories.”⁴⁴⁴ For Quintero Weaver, her memories illustrated in the comic tell the story of white ignorance during the civil rights movement.

Part of the storytelling in *Darkroom* is the process of how the child-subject becomes aware of larger social inequalities, or more specifically, how anti-Blackness functions in the stories we tell.⁴⁴⁵ For example, Quintero Weaver reminisces about the school songs she and her classmates would sing. One in particular, “Old Black Joe,” stood out to her. She writes, “‘Old Black Joe’ brought to mind an elderly man that often passed by my house. Dogs from the neighborhood took after him barking, as they did all Black pedestrians.” The accompanying drawing is of Lila sitting on her stoop watching an elderly Black gentleman walk past, slightly hunched while holding on to grocery bags. Two dogs trail him, teeth bared and snarling at him. In the bottom panel, the author-artist has drawn her own dog, Cahci, who she says: “Snarled and bared his teeth along with the rest.” The next caption reads: “How did **he** become racist I wondered?” [author’s emphasis]⁴⁴⁶ Lila at the time sensed that something was off, but did not have the understanding or language to articulate what she was seeing.

Adult Lila takes the observation of her child-self and turns it into an explanation. Simply put, her dog was racist. Child Lila in the memory only sees dogs barking at a man walking by. In drawing and processing that memory, the author-artist points to an often overlooked byproduct of anti-Black racism: dogs will learn their owner’s unconscious racist

⁴⁴⁴ Refaie, *Autobiographic Comics*, 99.

⁴⁴⁵ Other graphic memoirs recently published also involve the depiction of a non-Black child realizing systemic racism: see Hazel Newlevant *No Ivy League* (New York: Lion Forge) 2019.

⁴⁴⁶ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 191.

bias. However, this is also consciously taught behavior. In the United States, dogs were used during slavery to chase and track runaway enslaved people, and during civil rights demonstrations white people commanded dogs to viciously attack Black protestors. Both quantitative studies and personal essays have spoken to this canine behavior. One study concluded that “perceptions of racial bias in pet dogs are more in line with ingroup bias.”⁴⁴⁷ Lila’s experiences are transformed in the darkroom of the author-artist’s memories.

Ethno-Racial Subjectivity in Black and White

I place *Darkroom* within the genre of Latinx Memoir writing that recounts memories of ethno-racial formation and confrontation. From Piri Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and Cherrie Moraga in *Loving During the War Years* (1983), to Raquel Cepeda in *Birds of Paradise* (2013) and Daisy Hernandez in *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* (2014), Latinx memoirs often deal with issues of racialization of Latinx people in the United States. How does Quintero Weaver use the black and white color palette of the graphic memoir to examine the Black/white racial binary in the United States? Antonio Viego in his book *Dead Subjects* uses Lacanian theory to develop language about the Latinx subject.⁴⁴⁸ He problematizes the uses of “wholeness, completeness and transparency” when talking about the ethno-racialized subject.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Carlee Beth Hawkins and Alexia Jo Vandiver, “Human Caregivers Perceive Racial Bias in Their Pet Dogs,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 22, no. 6 (2019): 901–17.

⁴⁴⁸ Antonio Viego, *Dead Subjects: Towards a Politics of Loss In Latino Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴⁹ Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 4.

Does Quintero Weaver reinforce anti-Blackness in asking for the reader to look “beyond the black/white binary” or does she use the graphic form and the metaphor of photography to engage with issues of racialization in productive analytical moves? The author-artist begins the memoir with memories of being in the darkroom with her father when she was a child. “Black and white” from the title takes on the literal meaning of black and white photography. She draws for the reader the multi-step process of producing photos: developing the film, exposing the photo with an enlarger, then processing the paper in different chemicals (developer, stop bath and fixation).⁴⁵⁰ Yet, following that memory is the geo-political context of the town of Marion, Alabama, which she and her family moved to in 1961. A pie chart of the racial demographic of Perry county, where Marion is located, is presented to the reader: 65.8% of the circle is filled in with black representing the African American population and the rest, 34.2%, is filled in with white to signify the white population. A gray circle appears next to the pie chart, and the caption reads: “We introduced a sliver of gray into the demographic pie.”⁴⁵¹

The metaphor of the black and white photograph interrogates the place of the Quintero family as ethno-racial subjects in 1960s Alabama. In her article, “Latinos Beyond the Binary” Linda Martín Alcoff addresses the intricacies of race and ethnicity as both social constructs and material realities in Latinx Studies. Martín Alcoff concludes: “We need expanded categories of identity, as well as expanded notions of racism...to avoid unproductive debates about whether Latinos are an ethnicity or a race.”⁴⁵² Expanding the category of identity to include a racialized Latinx subject as also an “ethno-racial” subject

⁴⁵⁰ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 14-17.

⁴⁵¹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 19.

⁴⁵² Linda Martín Alcoff, “Latinos beyond the Binary,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48 (2009): 126.

offers a means to render the Quinteros' interactions within binary racial politics in the U.S. South during that time. However, they can possibly avoid falling back on the black/white binary without critique of how some Latinx people benefit from whiteness.

Both Martín Alcoff and Viego opt for a term that incorporates the layered processes of racism associated with racialization, while also accounting for the colonial history of ethnicity in the U.S.⁴⁵³ Viego uses the term “ethnic-racialized subject” to argue for the use of a Lacanian theory of language in a psychoanalytical approach to critical ethnic studies. I see much of Latinx literature, particularly memoir, simultaneously engaging with the confusion of race and ethnicity and producing new forms and imaginations of Latinidad. *Darkroom* participates in this process in how it depicts Lila's self-perception of her own racial identity as compared to how she is perceived socially.

The portrayal of Lila's racial anxiety, as seen in the graphic memoir, often lack clear critical language, resulting in the need to “to address both sides of the binary.”⁴⁵⁴ In one example, Lila is confronted with having to “officially identify.” In a page-width panel the author-artist has drawn the school form with Lila's pencil hovering between two boxes: one for “White” and one for “Negro.” A thought bubble enters the panel: “Let's see: I'm certainly not a Negro.” The second one, overlapping with the first: “That only leaves one choice.” The third and final thought bubble, begins to drift outside the borders of the panel: “But I don't really feel white.”⁴⁵⁵ Santos reads this scene as one of many instances of Lila's

⁴⁵³ I want to note that Martín Alcoff and Viego are using their respective terms in slightly different ways, specific to the theoretical goals of their scholarship. While I don't want to collapse the meaning of the terms, my focus is “ethno-racial.”

⁴⁵⁴ Martín Alcoff, “Latinos beyond the Binary,” 113.

⁴⁵⁵ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 86.

racial anxieties throughout *Darkroom*.⁴⁵⁶ However, I want to linger on the former statement that Lila makes. She is certain that she is not “negro.” How is this certainty that one is not Black a symptom of anti-Black sentiments within Latindad? While she doesn’t feel white, she is treated as white, or has enough proximity to whiteness as a Latinx ethno-racial subject. The binary becomes a crutch, allowing phenotypically European Latinxs to ignore their benefits in an anti-Black society.

Ignoring how Latinx people are included in white-only areas of public life and overemphasizing how Latinx people do not fit the binary becomes problematic at best, or enforces anti-Black and anti-Indigenous sentiments at worst. Lila and her family are white and mestizo (or mixed race). In the chapter “Ancestral Lines,” Quintero Weaver draws her father’s official ID that lists his skin color as *trigueño*—translating to wheat color in Spanish.⁴⁵⁷ Argentina, like many other Latin American countries “use[s] rich and varied lexicons to mark even subtle distinctions.”⁴⁵⁸ In the following panel, the author-artist draws a picture of her parents’ wedding cake the caption: “Mamma, officially deemed white, defied social convention by marrying this *trigueño*.”⁴⁵⁹ This small admission is reflective of eugenic ideology in Argentina when it came to “racial mixing.”⁴⁶⁰

For Quintero Weaver, like so many Latinx immigrants, the term ethno-racial might be more useful. While Quintero Weaver and her family aren’t considered quite white, they are not considered Black in 1960s Alabama, an important distinction that creates material

⁴⁵⁶ Santos, *Graphic Memories*.

⁴⁵⁷ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 83.

⁴⁵⁸ Loveman, *National Colors*, xii.

⁴⁵⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 83.

⁴⁶⁰ Loveman, *National Colors*, 130.

conditions of freedom. The author-artist uses the repeated images and motifs, the gutter, and panels to navigate her recollection of her racial formation in her formative years. During desegregation in Marion, the author-artist illustrates for the reader how Lila and her classmates are physically different.⁴⁶¹ Lila herself looks phenotypically white, which privileges her to certain treatment that her African American peers cannot access. In this instance, she is able to attend an all-white school during segregation in the U.S. South.

Mirror images in the graphic memoir denote the physical differences that have been racially codified. In one instance, a scene between Lila and a new classmate, the caption reads: “My regard for the rules was giving way to the current situation, namely, a rapport with my Black classmates.” For example, as seen in figure 4.4, the left panel in the first strip has the half of Lila’s face on the left side as a darker skinned hand reaches to touch her thin, straight hair. A speech bubble extends from the right panel, “Can I feel your hair?” The right panel is a mirror image. On the right side is half of her classmate’s face, with a lighter skinned hand reaching out to touch her curly, afro-textured hair. A second speech bubble, her classmate’s, says: “You can touch mine too.”⁴⁶² The foundation of Quintero Weaver’s solidarity must begin in an acknowledgment of difference. Audre Lorde explains why alliances between white and Black women often fail because “white women have such difficulty reading Black women’s work,” pointing to their “reluctance to see Black women as different” than their self.⁴⁶³ Despite her family’s Latin American immigrant status, they are not treated the same way in Marion as African American members of the town. When Lila

⁴⁶¹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 215.

⁴⁶² Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 215.

⁴⁶³ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 118.

begins to see that difference, she is skeptical of the trappings of “color blind” ideology, which makes recognition of historical marginalization impossible.

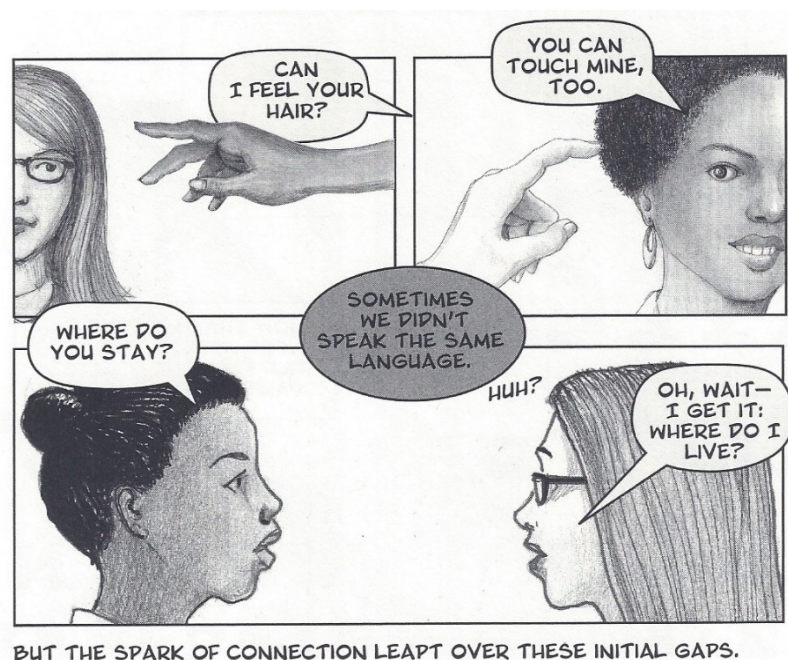


Figure 4.4 The graphic medium is able to visually engage with the codification of race in physical features. Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 215.

Part of documenting adolescence in *Darkroom* has to do with Lila becoming aware of problematic notions she and her community have of Black Americans. In the chapter entitled “School Lessons,” Lila begins going through puberty, her body is changing—more specifically she begins to wear contact lenses. The contacts quite literally open her eyes to the racial politics and racism going on around her. While the contacts did not all of a sudden make it so she can see the abstract concepts of racism, she began to see the concrete effects of racism. She is able to see the difference in phenotypically Black faces. “Now that my eyes were opened, those old facial templates vanished from my head,” the author-artist narrates

over the image of a rudimentary sketch of a proportional face.⁴⁶⁴ The fundamentals of drawing, mentioned earlier in the memoir, only recognized Eurocentric features in the “old facial temples.”

Lila begins to critique those drawings techniques in the narrative, while an adult Lila articulates the veiled racism in those lessons. In a panel with the title caption “The lesson,” the author-artist has drawn two faces, the one on the left is basic, horizontal dotted lines cross the face where hairline, eyes, nose and mouth would usually appear. She writes, “You always begin with an idealized face.” The second face is more detailed, the features are drawn and shaded. the accompanying caption says: “As you progressed, new concepts were introduced.”⁴⁶⁵ The rudimentary drawing has proportions often associated with a phenotypically Eurocentric face (width of the nose and lips are thin, for example). The detailed face takes on the characteristics of a racialized white face, the *idealized* face. The author-artist, through the use of braiding,⁴⁶⁶ repeats the image of the “idealized face” later in the graphic narrative when she remembers getting contacts for the first time. The ideal face after Lila’s revelation, however, is different. The nose is broader, the lips fuller—they no longer conform to Eurocentric ideals of beauty.

Once Lila has broken that racial code by associating with her Black peers, she is forced to decide. Either Lila conforms to whiteness, like so many other ethnic immigrant groups in the United States, or she transgresses the racial code by joining a multi-racial coalition, a decision that many other ethno-racial groups made, like their European

⁴⁶⁴ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 216.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁶⁶ Silke and Pedri, “Focalization in Graphic Narrative.”

immigrant predecessors before them.⁴⁶⁷ I believe those European groups made the wrong choice when enveloping into whiteness for better economic and social opportunity at the expense of Black people. White and mestizo Latinx groups are also making this mistake presently. Santos refers to Lila's "relative proximity to whiteness" in *Darkroom*, taking more of the stance that she occupies a tense position outside of the black/white binary.⁴⁶⁸ Lila and her family act within that binary, sometimes aligning with whiteness (attending a white school) or in her father's job as a missionary, and sometimes they reject whiteness (forming friendships with their African American neighbors).

I want to trouble Lila's racial codification further by arguing that Lila and her siblings' education is indicative of how their family has aligned with whiteness. They are enrolled in all-white schools prior to desegregation in Alabama. For example, Quintero Weaver reminisces about the first time she had a Black classmate. The top panel is a drawing of her classroom with her and her classmates sitting in two rows. Everyone is drawn with light shading, except the newest student. The caption reads, "she looked terrified."⁴⁶⁹ Visually to the reader, Lila blends in with the rest of her white classmates. Phenotypically, the author/artist has drawn herself white. Which means that she, like her father, who was allowed to enter the front entrance of public establishments, and her mother, who was officially designated as white in Argentina, benefit from whiteness.⁴⁷⁰ Many of Quintero Weaver's memories of her early racialization often align far more with the white townspeople of Marion, than with African Americans. Their engagement with the binary is

⁴⁶⁷ See *How The Irish Became White* by Noel Ignatiev (New York: Routledge, 1995) and "How the Italians Became White" by Brent Staples, *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2019.

⁴⁶⁸ Santos, "On Photo-Graphic Narrative," 94-95.

⁴⁶⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 197.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

emblematic of how the unspoken ways that some Latinx groups are able to exist in white spaces. Does *Darkroom* show how they transform those spaces through acts of interracial solidarity?

Testimonio, Act of Witnessing

Testimonio is an act against forgetting. Stories like Quintero Weaver's force us to remember and to also engage with those events differently, whether in the past or our current situation. Counternarratives in graphic memoirs like *Darkroom* offer readers the possibility for new ways of thinking and coalition building. It's impactful when marginalized groups take the time to tell the stories of other communities affected by oppression. Graphic novels and memoirs are inextricably tied to those histories we tell about racial equality. *Darkroom* uses testimonio as a means to tell the story of protests for civil rights that happened in her town.

Resisting oppression works by forming solidarity across multiple marginalized axes of oppression. Particularly, in the case of voting rights, the act of witnessing becomes an integral part of dissent. There is a reason why white mobs in Marion attacked reporters and camera equipment. Subsequently, there was no photographic evidence of the night, which Lila's father tried to capture with his camera.⁴⁷¹ Quintero Weaver, years later, takes up her father's task in telling the events of that night in illustrated testimony. What is valuable about this kind of testimony? Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia Curry Rodríguez, in their essay "*Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources*," offer a historical look at how the testimonial as

⁴⁷¹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 165.

a genre has been used as a tool for liberation.⁴⁷² They argue how the purpose of “*testimonio* is to bring light to a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action.”⁴⁷³ In their personal narratives, graphic artists illuminate the project of the racial and gendered state; through *testimonio* they make a case for active resistance.

Graphic memoirs that depict culturally relevant events, events that may not directly affect the narrator, become significant in how they present cross-racial acts of solidarity. The author-artist made the artistic and literary choice to engage with the history of racism in her hometown of Marion, Alabama. Not all graphic memoirs extend support across different identity groups. One of the most notable graphic memoirs of the last twenty years, Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, does little to engage with the politics of heteronormative marriage or civil rights for queer people. While I am not arguing that every autobiographical comic must, per se, advocate for the entirety of a subjugated group, it is impactful when the author-artist fleshes out the historical context that surrounds their personal narrative. A graphic memoir that only engages with how the narrator was oppressed and makes no attempt to forge intragroup solidarity is not a counternarrative.

The constructive nature of memory and of the form of comic art is able to bear witness to what white supremacist apparatuses work to destroy. As mentioned in the previous section on memory and history, the graphic form addresses issues of remembrance. The lines, positive and negative space, and image/text relationship all show how graphic memoirs rebuild events that have not been recorded by more formal means, such as

⁴⁷² Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (2012): 525-538.

⁴⁷³ Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” 525.

cameras. Santos points to the ways that the family photo album “tacitly acknowledges its own construction” and in doing so can “create an arranged and constructed narrative of personal and political histories.”⁴⁷⁴ Graphic memoirs rely on the “role of memory and reconstructive epistemology” or “testimonial.”⁴⁷⁵ We see anger and rage revealed on the page. Like an enlarger in the darkroom, the author-artist’s illustrations shed light on events that the white media tried to erase. Quintero Weaver’s graphic memoir is a testimony to what happened in Marion, Alabama.⁴⁷⁶ It shows that Latinx people witnessed that violence firsthand and examines how that would later affect them.

Memoir writing has often been a vehicle for marginalized writers to make space for their lived experiences. For hooks, memoir is a chance for “women to tell their personal stories as an act of resistance to break silences.”⁴⁷⁷ Similarly, Blackmer Reyes and Rodríguez argue how “testimonio includes the knowledge that reflection and speaking lead, eventually to liberation.”⁴⁷⁸ Quintero Weaver recounts the night of violence that happened blocks from her family’s home. The caption reads: “My father witnessed the madness.”⁴⁷⁹ Although her father attempted, like other journalists, to photograph the event—no images survived. Yet, *Darkroom* uses firsthand accounts from her father, newspaper reports from the following day, and books written on the subject to piece together the events of that night.

On February 18, 1965, protestors gathered in Marion, Alabama for a peaceful march to the Perry County jail in support of political prisoners arrested while fighting for voting

⁴⁷⁴ Santos, “On Photo-Graphic Narrative,” 82.

⁴⁷⁵ Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” 527.

⁴⁷⁶ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 163.

⁴⁷⁷ hooks, *Remembered Rapture*, 66.

⁴⁷⁸ Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” 527.

⁴⁷⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 182.

rights for Black Americans. The official narrative is that a riot broke out that night.

According to a *New York Times* news article published the day after the protest, the headline of which read “Negroes Beaten in Alabama Riot,” it was reported that “About 50 state troopers fought crowds of screaming Negroes with night sticks in the town square tonight.”⁴⁸⁰ The picture the *New York Times* article paints is of state troopers trying to maintain the peace by fighting back screaming and rioting protestors. This is the usual perspective the white mainstream press has taken: demonizing Black protestors.⁴⁸¹ *Darkroom* offers a different story.

In drawing the faces of protestors Quintero Weaver humanizes the African American residents of Marion. The memoir includes how she witnessed their struggle for voting rights, making them central figures in her story. They exert agency in this narrative, agency that is sorely missing in the publications surrounding the incident in 1965. In a two panel scene, which takes place in the church on the night of the march, the author-artist has drawn the faces of protestors with great detail. The light from the candles they are holding gently illuminates their faces. Each person has distinct features.⁴⁸² No one looks angry and no one is screaming. Quintero Weaver “successfully takes advantage of the graphic medium to denote racial difference and further condemn prejudice.”⁴⁸³ The top panel also appears on the cover of the book, marking it as a clear part of Lila’s coming of age story. The comic is

⁴⁸⁰ John Herbers, “Negroes Beaten in Alabama Riot,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1965.

⁴⁸¹ See any current day mainstream coverage of protests against police brutality in Ferguson, Oakland, New York City. The coverage continues to frame social justice response as aggressive riots.

⁴⁸² Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 157.

⁴⁸³ Breckenridge and Peterson, “Envisioning Equality,” 118.

grounded in the political moment. Although child-Lila is unaware of the situation, as an adult she makes sure to include the African American historical event in her re-telling.

When mainstream historical narratives created by white media (like textbooks or films, for example) leave out Latinx participation in the civil rights movement, they obscure interracial actions. Interracial solidarity takes many different shapes. What does it look like in graphic memoir form? First Quintero Weaver documents in her memoir the callous racism of her teachers. The day after the night of violence, Lila “received little notice” about the event, but she “knew what sort of reaction to expect.” Lila and another white classmates are standing at the water fountain in the background, while in the foreground two white teachers talk about last night’s incident. The blonde teacher says, “That colored boy that got shot threw a bottle at that state trooper, you know.” Her brunette colleague responds, “Hmmp.”⁴⁸⁴ The blonde teacher uses the passive voice when talking about Jackson’s murder, he “got shot.” Who is doing the action? Passive phrasing like this makes it as if a gun miraculously discharged on its own, as opposed to the state trooper shooting an unarmed Black man.⁴⁸⁵ Then in another panel, the author-artist provides a close up on the brunette teacher’s face. Her mouth is small, too small for the rest of the proportions of her face, which makes her face look distorted. As we know, Quintero Weaver is a trained artist and mentions several times in the story that she learned how to draw the proportions of the human face. She intentionally distorts the teacher’s face because the words that come out of her mouth are small, mean and hateful. The teacher says, “In that case, he got exactly what he deserved.”⁴⁸⁶ The teachers’ racism is loud and clear. The author-artist uses the comic

⁴⁸⁴ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 172.

⁴⁸⁵ Passive phrasing like “he was shot” is still used in present day accounts of when police brutalize people.

⁴⁸⁶ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 172.

medium to share what she witnessed that day, a testimonio to the racism that pervades her school.

Another act of solidarity in *Darkroom* is how Quintero Weaver uses her graphic narrative to correct the official record. The narration that followed the scene just mentioned tells the reader how for decades the state trooper claimed self-defense and it wasn't until 2007 that the state trooper was charged with second degree manslaughter. The following page is filled with black. On the top page there is an oval-shaped frame that reveals a clip of a newspaper that reports of Jackson's death.⁴⁸⁷ The author-artist challenges the official account with the inclusion of the newspaper. She narrates above the news clipping: "The Black community seethed with the indignation at the claim of self-defense."⁴⁸⁸ Under the newspaper clip are two images, with borders that make them look like photos. The first is a distant shot of Jackson leading two elderly people to safety the night of the march. The second is an image of Jackson, a portrait drawn in detail. As seen in figure 4.5, a panel with a white border extends from the picture, which reads: "Jimmie Lee Jackson, Dead at 26."⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁷ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 173.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 173.

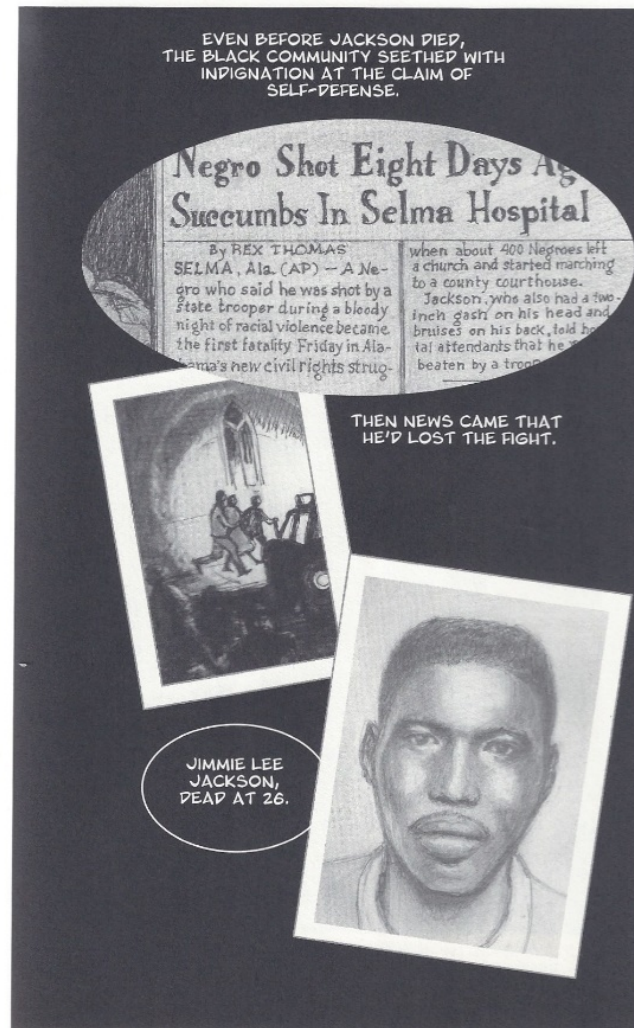


Figure 4.5 The official account of Jackson's death is contested with the portrait of Jackson. Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, 173.

Other scholars who have studied interracial social movements like the Rainbow Coalition in Chicago and the Wixárika (Huichol) indigenous people in Western Mexico look to more direct actions. Their analyses of the meaning of those alliances is helpful to my own study. Antonio López in his article “‘We Know What the Pigs Don’t Like:’ the Formation and Solidarity of the Original Rainbow Coalition” surveys the alliance between the Black

Panthers, the Young Lords and the Young Patriots.⁴⁹⁰ López says of the alliance: it never “dismissed self-determination and the reality of distinct histories of racial domination and racial formation.”⁴⁹¹ Similarly, the article “‘It Is Loved and It Is Defended:’ Critical Solidarity Across Race And Place” by Diana Negrín da Silva, examines the efforts of Wixárika indigenous people against mining projects on their lands; non-indigenous groups join their struggle.⁴⁹² However, Negrín da Silva notes, “the entitlement that many of the non-indigenous allied leaders exerted” through the physical space they took up dismissed the customs of the Wixárika community.⁴⁹³ Each case study shows how interracial solidarity can be both successful and fail in different moments.

For any act of solidarity, let alone a movement, to be successful it needs to recognize difference in the historical marginalization of various groups. It should not take up space that disrespects the home community’s social rules. How does Quintero Weaver acknowledge difference in her graphic memoir? What blocks different groups of women from connecting, according to Lorde, is “the refusal to recognize those differences.”⁴⁹⁴ Lila begins doing that work in childhood. When her school is desegregated and Black students begin attending for the first time, Lila starts to acknowledge the differences between her and her Black classmates. The reader sees Lila navigate the new social dynamic in her school, one where the social codes still remain the same, where white and Black people do not interact unless absolutely necessary despite changes in the law that require such interaction to occur.

⁴⁹⁰ Antonio R. López, “‘We Know What the Pigs Don’t Like:’ the Formation and Solidarity of the Original Rainbow Coalition,” *Journal of African American Studies* 23, no. 4 (2019): 476–518.

⁴⁹¹ López, “Formation and Solidarity of the Original Rainbow Coalition,” 482.

⁴⁹² Diana Negrín da Silva, “‘It Is Loved And It Is Defended:’ Critical Solidarity Across Race and Place,” *Antipode* 50, n0. 4 (2018): 1016-1036.

⁴⁹³ Negrín da Silva, “It Is Loved And It Is Defended,” 1029.

⁴⁹⁴ Lorde, “Redefining Difference,” 115.

Like other graphic memoirs, *Darkroom* simultaneously tells the story of the author-artist from the perspective of their child-self overlaid with their adult perspective. The events of the night of violence are absent from Lila's outlook, albeit for a few hints. In a full-page panel we see a hazy and cold morning where Lila and her brother are walking to school. They walk down the same street where the white mob and state police attacked protestors and journalists the night before. Her brother reaches down to inspect a bit of broken glass—the only physical remnant from the violence that night. The caption reads: “Had we paid attention, we might’ve seen a trace of the previous night’s madness.”⁴⁹⁵ As an adult narrator remembering that day, Quintero Weaver adds new layers, which are represented by the relationship between the art drawn and “present day” words in the caption.⁴⁹⁶ While Lila did not directly witness some moments, in constructing the narrative in *Darkroom*, she is able to witness what her child-self was unable to see.

Conclusion

Enclosed in darkness, the dim crimson from a red light bulb is the only source of light. After shooting a roll of film, you process the negatives in the dark. Then you invert the images once more with an enlarger, and light shines through the film negatives, exposing a page of light-sensitive paper. The sheet, still blank, is then dipped into various chemical solutions that bring the image forth, and to stop the paper from taking in any more light, one last bath in a chemical solution, literally called stopper. It's a solitary process. However, Quintero Weaver's metaphor for the darkroom and the visual device of photo processing

⁴⁹⁵ Quintero Weaver, 171.

⁴⁹⁶ By present day, I mean the time at which Quintero Weaver is writing and drawing the comic.

shows how photography and memory can be used for collective action. As opposed to other graphic memoirs that present a more ahistorical context to their story, Quintero Weaver does not remove her protagonist (in this case her child-self) from the political situation.

The ambiguity and tension of Latinx subjectivity is reflected in both the content of the narrative in *Darkroom*, as well as in the comic form. As the collection of Latinx graphic memoirs grows, *Darkroom* is an important contribution. Quintero Weaver engages the issues of Latinx ethno-racialization in her personal reminiscences, but does so by addressing her and her family's part in the larger racial politics of the Jim Crow South. At the end of his introduction in *Dead Subjects*, Viego warns against previous conceptualizations of the ethno-racial subject. He writes: "The ethnic-racialized subject has been primarily theorized as the perfectly calculated sum of 'the cultural context in which the subject is immersed,'"⁴⁹⁷ not unlike the photograph, which is also thought to be a perfect sum of its components. Quintero Weaver translates her ethno-racial subjectivity in the graphic memoir through the metaphor of the photograph to position the narrative firmly within the historical framework of Marion and the U.S. South.

⁴⁹⁷ Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 28.

CODA

On May 31, 1921 a white mob attacked an affluent African American neighborhood known as “Black Wall Street,” in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Over the course of two days, hundreds of homes and properties were destroyed, 300 Black people were murdered, and tens of thousands made homeless. Despite the incident being one the most vicious racist attacks of the last century, it was a relatively unknown historical event until recently. It was left out of the official history. Then, in October 2019 HBO aired the first episode (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice”)⁴⁹⁸ of their newest limited series *Watchmen*.⁴⁹⁸ The first episode depicted the Tulsa Race Massacre for a mainstream audience. The show was adapted from the Alan Moore comic *Watchmen* (1987-87). The showrunners used the established comic book tropes of the superhero and Moore’s source material to address both contemporary issues of racism and historical events kept obscured from public memory. After that episode aired, people took to the internet to know more about the Tulsa Massacre. A few months after that episode aired, Oklahoma State officials announced that they would include the 1921 Tulsa Massacre in all K-12 curriculum.⁴⁹⁹ Like many other pop culture critics, I speculate that it was that *Watchmen* episode, which brought the historical event into to public conversation, that lead to the amended school curriculum.

The 1921 Tulsa Race massacre, like the murders of Ana Mendieta in Redfern and Caron’s *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* and Jimmie Lee Jackson as depicted in Quintero Weaver’s *Darkroom*, are historical events that are intentionally left out of the official history. Whether

⁴⁹⁸*Watchmen*, “It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice,” *HBO* 1:00:01, October 20, 2019. <https://www.hbo.com/watchmen/season-1/01>.

⁴⁹⁹ Christina Maxouris, “The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Will Soon Be a Part of the Curriculum for Oklahoma Schools,” *CNN.com*, February. 20, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/20/us/oklahoma-schools-1921-race-massacre-trnd/>.

in the form of a superhero adaptation or a graphic counternarrative, comics are able to challenge those accounts that continue to erase parts of the story. While the Latinx comic biographies and graphic memoirs examined in this dissertation may not reach the same amount of people as an HBO show, they still do valuable work. Storytelling has always been an important tool for creating cultural history, both in how we make history and how we create identities about ourselves. When certain graphic narratives take up the task of doing both they become part of narratives' power to challenged dominant histories and challenge the risk of forgetting.

Latinx Comix set out to archive the breadth of Latinx graphic memoirs and comic biographies published in the United States. It also fills a gap in Comics and Latinx Studies scholarship that overwhelmingly focuses on either white graphic memoirs or Latinx autobiographies written in text only format. What happens as a result is that Latinx graphic narratives are less likely to be assigned to college reading lists or purchased by school libraries. Each of these books presents a counter history that would be a valuable pedagogical tool: *Who is Ana Mendieta?* offers a Latinx epistemology to western art history; *Ghetto Brother* presents an alternative history of the Bronx and urban planning; *Spit and Passion* demonstrates that queer Latinx youth were very much part of the Punk music scene; and finally *Darkroom* shows the Latinx presence in graphic narratives of the civil rights movement.

When all four graphic narratives are read together it becomes clear they are a counter history that present varied and complex lives of Latinx communities in the United States. Moving forward I want to expand my study to include Latinx graphic memoirs published online and anthologies that include auto/biographical comics. I see this happening as either

adding new sections to my manuscript or undertaking a sperate study altogether. There is a whole realm of Latinx non-fiction being published online. One example is Kat Fajardo's mini comics *Gringa!* (2015) and *Bandida Series* Vol. 1 (2015) that explore growing up biculturally with Latinx superstitions.⁵⁰⁰ Another example comes from the aftermath Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico, and responds to the failure of the United States government to adequately manage disaster aid. After Maria, two comic anthologies were produced as a response to the disaster. *Puerto Rico Strong* (2018) was a collaboration between artists and writers from the Island and the diaspora to record the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and document oral and folk histories from Puerto Rico.⁵⁰¹ Following suit was *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico* (2018), which situated the catastrophe in the story world of Puerto Rican superhero of La Borinqueña.⁵⁰²

While my project looks at how non-fiction comics portray certain historical moments within the United States, I plan to extend my parameters to look at the transitional production of these books. For example, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* was first published in French by two Montreal-based artists. This is similar to *Ghetto Brother*, where Voloj, who was born in Germany to Colombian parents, decided to create a graphic oral history of Puerto Rican activist Benjamin Melendez. There are various transnational migrations within the narratives. Redfern and Caron show Mendieta's trips to Mexico and Cuba to create her art. In *Ghetto Brother* Voloj and Ahlering trace the migration of crypto-Jews from Spain to the Spanish

⁵⁰⁰ Kat Fajardo, *Gringa!* and *Bandida Series* Vol. 1, katfajardo.com, 2015.

<https://www.katfajardo.com/gringa>, <https://www.katfajardo.com/bandida-series>.

⁵⁰¹ Marco Lopez, Desiree Rodriguez, Hazel Newlevant, Derek Ruiz, and Neil Schwartz, eds, *Puerto Rico Strong* (New York: Lion Forge, 2018).

⁵⁰² Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ed, *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico* (New York: Somos Arte, 2018).

Caribbean and then from Puerto Rico to New York City. Road threads her Cuban-exile heritage throughout her pop-punk memoir of adolescence. And finally, in *Darkroom* Quintero Weaver situates her and her family's numerous migrations between Argentina and the United States amid the changing U.S. South of the 1960s. There are still numerous transnational threads to follow and unwind between and within these counternarratives of Latinx experience. My dissertation opens up the possibility of exploring these threads in the future.

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