The Worlds of the Hernandez Brothers

By Derek Parker Royal

By almost any account, the work of the Hernandez brothers—Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime—stands as one of the most celebrated in contemporary American comics, especially when it comes to alternative or non-mainstream comics. They are constantly referenced as major figures in surveys of post-1980 (or modern age) comics, their work has been widely anthologized, and their long-running series, *Love and Rockets*, is considered by many to be the quintessential indie title. Yet, a survey of the scholarship will find a relative dearth of studies devoted to one or more of the brothers' comics. As the selected bibliography at the end of this special issue of *ImageTexT* clearly demonstrates, few comics scholars have devoted themselves to Jaime's or Gilbert's works, and this is especially the case with their *Love and Rockets* output. Whenever critics choose to write about alternative comics or "literary" graphic novels—this latter assumption, while common, is not only problematic, but quite prejudiced—the topics of their analyses are more often than not works by creators such as Chris Ware, Art Spiegelman, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Joe Sacco. These are all authors who have created singular and clearly identifiable texts that can easily be read outside of the context of their larger oeuvre. If the Hernandez brothers do come up in these discussions, it is usually in passing or by way of quick comparison. Scholars may acknowledge the significance of the brothers' body of work, but for whatever reasons they have more or less steered clear of direct critical engagement.

A large part of the problem may be the kind of comics that the Hernandezes create. Each of the brothers has published self-contained titles that stand outside of a larger serialized universe—e.g., Mario's one-shot *Brain Capers* (1993), Gilbert's miniseries *Grip: The Strange World of Men* (2002), Mario and Gilbert's *Citizen Rex* (2001), or, arguably, Jaime's recent *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls* (2012) —but they are best known for their work on *Love and Rockets*, a complex and highly integrated narrative world, or worlds, that has lasted for over thirty years. This is about the same amount of time, if not more, that it took DC Comics and Marvel to establish their own multifaceted universes. Indeed, a comparison to mainstream superhero comics may help to explain the current state of Hernandez brothers scholarship. One of the barriers to reading superhero titles is that if you are not already familiar with the "Marvel Universe" or the "DC Universe," it will be nearly impossible to grasp fully a story or narrative arc within a particular title. The publication history or backstory related to a DC or Marvel superhero, along with the backstories of the other heroes linked in some way to that subject, is vast and quite intimidating. Where is the narrative point of entry? How much can you truly comprehend by just jumping in, especially without referring to some kind of encyclopedic supplement…which itself could become a time-consuming endeavor? These are probably the same kind of questions confronting potential readers of *Love and Rockets*. When both fans and scholars look at the title's longevity,
especially as given expression through Jaime's Locas stories or Gilbert's Palomar narratives, they may not see individual and graspable texts, but smaller and incomplete pieces of a much larger, even arabesque, tapestry. In the face of such a sprawling and intimidating body of work, how easy is it to devote a single critical essay or part of a class syllabus to a storyline from Love and Rockets, or even one of the many satellite graphic novels that circle the ongoing series? If we admit our uneasiness with "just jumping in," or our uncertainty in grasping the entirety of the brothers' output, then the paucity of scholarship begins to make more sense.[5]

But as vast and as intricate as the Love and Rockets universe can be, it is a narrative space that is accessible and engaging to a variety of readers. The stories that compose the series are ones we can recognize. Unlike many ongoing comics that might freeze a character in an undefined present or use the conventions of specific genres—such as time travel, "super" accidents, or fancifully advanced technology—to nullify temporal progress or retard the aging process, the characters that populate the pages of Love and Rockets grow and develop over time, and the Maggie or the Luba that we know today are vastly different from the figures we previously encountered (or may encounter later in our readings) in the very early comics. They uproot themselves, gain weight, alienate loved ones, take on different occupations, turn gray, and eventually attend more funerals. The decompressed and serialized nature of the series makes it a saga, but one with a feeling of urgency and immediacy, something that we might find in a soap opera or a telenovela.

Yet the latter, often used to describe Gilbert's or Jaime's works, is ultimately an unsatisfying metaphor. Telenovelas have a discernable end point, and besides, such comparisons may overly privilege the ethnic quality of the work. While the Hernandez brothers clearly write from the context of their West Coast Latino backgrounds (although by no means limiting their comics to that perspective), they do so in a way that normalizes those experiences. This has led to what Darieck Scott has called a "dynamic of unsettled or elusive race and ethnicity" (96), the acknowledgement of a difference that could be applicable to characteristics within the dominant culture. Indeed, in interviews the brothers have tried to emphasize the universality of their comics, wanting their work to be anchored to their ethnic background but not fettered to it.[6] In other words, their ethnicity is more of a means through which they tell their tales, not necessarily the focus or the subject matter of their narratives. As a result, the various stories in Love and Rockets are particular while at the same time they transcend their contexts. The Hernandez brothers have shown that one can be ethnic without having to make that the grand sum of one's comics. All in all, the characters created by the Hernandez brothers are familiar to us because they grow and develop as we do and, as their stories evolve, are filled with the same kind of conflicts and contradictions that define their readers. Trying to encapsulate our own lives over time can be near impossible, and this challenge might be akin to grasping the narrative worlds created by the Hernandez brothers. It is not an easy thing to do, but such an attempt seems only natural.

But to begin appreciating the brothers' works, especially for the uninitiated, it may be useful first to understand the publication history of Love and Rockets, map out the storylines of its oft-cited narratives, characterize each brother's style of art, and explore the common themes generated within the texts. When Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez self-published their first issue of Love and Rockets in 1981—and largely at the urging of the eldest, Mario—it did not take long for their work to catch the eye of Fantagraphics publisher, Gary Groth. In 1982, Groth republished the inaugural issue, this time with a color cover (the self-published cover had been in black-and-white), and the first series of Love and Rockets ran for a total of fifty issues, ending in 1996. All issues in the original volume were magazine-sized, and the comics were black-and-white.[7] The art on the color covers alternated between the series' two main contributors, Gilbert and Jaime, with one drawing the front cover and the other the back for one issue, and then with the next issue switching the cover responsibilities. After the end of the first series, the two brothers began working on separate titles—Gilbert wrote New Love (1996-1998), Luba
Luba Comics and Stories (1998-2006); Jaime created Whoa, Nellie! (1996), Penny Century (1997-2000), and the one-shot Hopey and Maggie Color Fun (1997); and all three Hernandez brothers contributed to Measles (1998-2001)—that carried on many of the stories in the original Love and Rockets. However, the sales for these individual series were significantly lower than that of their earlier efforts, and this was probably due to the lack of the overt "Love and Rockets" branding. So in 2001, the three Hernandez brothers began their second series of Love and Rockets, which ran for twenty issues until 2007. Although these issues were smaller than those of the magazine-sized originals, standard U.S. modern size, they nonetheless retained a similar format: color covers alternating between Jaime and Gilbert, and black-and-white contents written and illustrated by all three brothers. (The one exception was issue #20, which included Jaime's "La Maggie La Loca" in color.) After a year's hiatus, the Hernandez brothers returned with a third manifestation of their comic in 2008 and going by the title, Love and Rockets: New Stories. Although still in black-and-white, they changed the publication size once again—and as with the second series, the change was partially due to marketing strategies—this time, publishing the comic as an annual and in a graphic novel format of just over 100 pages.

As an ongoing series with multiple authors, Love and Rockets contains a variety of narrative arcs and many with convoluted plots. The two primary story worlds, however, concern the associations surrounding the "Locas," Maggie Chasacarrillo and Hopey Glass (Jaime's comics), and those of Luba, her extended family and friends, and the fictional Central American town of Palomar (Gilbert's comics). The various storylines are too numerous to detail, but some of the most notable are worth introducing. In "Mechanics," one of Jaime's earliest longer stories, Maggie is a mechanic and is called away with her group of prosolar mechanics (including her love interest, Rand Race) to a South American town so that they can repair a rocket. While there, they, along with the adventurous Penny Century and ex-wrestler Rena Titañon, get caught up in a political revolution. The mechanical work that Maggie performs, and the environments that define Jaime's early stories, have a slightly futuristic or science-fiction feel, yet without diminishing in any way the realism inherent in his narratives. (After the first several Maggie narratives, Jaime abandoned this sci-fi tone, only returning to it occasionally in his Penny Century superhero comics.) In a subsequent story, "La Mujeres Perdidas," Maggie and Rand find themselves in another foreign land doing mechanical repair work, and again, along with Rena, are similarly drawn into third-world rebellion and intrigue. "The Death of Speedy Oritz" is a story of romantic entanglements, focusing primarily on the personal relationships surrounding Maggie. Ray Dominguez likes Maggie, but assumes incorrectly that Speedy is involved with her. After Speedy professes his love for Maggie, which she cannot handle, he apparently commits suicide. "Flies on the Ceiling" is a short but significant story of Isabel "Izzy" Oritz Reubens's nervous breakdown while in Mexico. She becomes involved with a man and his young son, but because she is hounded by her demons—the result of her divorce from her English professor husband, her abortions, and her attempted suicide—she decides to return to Huerta (or Hoppers, as the barrio is called).

Perhaps one of Jaime's most ambitious stories is "Wigwam Bam." This is a complex, sustained narrative that begins when Maggie and Hopey are on the East Coast at a party. Angry for being mocked as a "Mexican" and for Hopey's indifference to this slight, Maggie leaves the party and temporarily runs away from her Hoppers past. The rest of the story focuses on the relationships of Hopey and the Hoppers crowd, over the course of which we see Hopey's deep feelings for Maggie. The latter's absence is the basis for "Chester Square," which takes Maggie through a series of identity-defining trials, including prostitution, that will eventually lead her back to Hopey and her other friends. In a series of stories merely called "Maggie," but collected under the title Ghost of Hoppers, an older Maggie is back on the West Coast, divorced, and managing an apartment complex. Although still in an off-and-on relationship with Hopey—throughout the series, Maggie sustains a partly lesbian relationship with her best friend—she meets the seductive Vivian Solis, and travels with her new friend back to her native barrio, Hoppers. There she undergoes a surreal experience and witnesses the burning of Izzy's house, one of her old haunts. One of Jaime's most recent storylines, "The Love Bunglers," is a moving account
Gilbert's Palomar narratives unfold in a similar epic manner. "Heartbreak Soup" is his first sustained story of Palomar and its citizens, involving Pipo Jimenez's ill-fated relationship with the town's ladies' man, Manuel, and establishing the rivalry between Luba and Chelo that will come to define many of the early stories. In "An American in Palomar," Howard, an American photo-journalist, comes to the small Central American town for his new book. Although many citizens believe that he is there to appreciate them—one of the town's objects of desire, Tonantzín Villaseñor, thinks he is her ticket to Hollywood, and both Chelo and Luba believe that they are serious subjects for his photography—Howard stereotypes the townspeople and exploits them merely to further his own career. "Human Diastrophism" is a long serialized narrative surrounding the arrival of a serial killer in Palomar. As the townspeople and Sheriff Chelo try to solve the mystery, Luba takes up with her former lover, Khams—it's their relationship which will serve as the basis for many of the subsequent stories—and Palomar's young and reclusive artist, Humberto, inadvertently discovers the identity of the murderer.

"Poison River" is perhaps Gilbert's most ambitious narrative arc. It is the long, convoluted backstory of Luba before she arrived in Palomar. Epic in scope and filled with flashbacks, it carries the reader from the early days of Luba's broken family, into her young marriage to her first husband, Pedro, and through the many twists of her husband's criminal connections and her own drug habits. Along the way Luba experiences a miscarriage, escapes from her doomed marriage, reunites with her cousin Ofelia, gives birth to her first daughter, flees military conflicts, and ends up on the outskirts of Palomar. "Love and Rockets X" was serialized around the same time as "Poison River." Much like the latter, "Love and Rockets X" is a highly condensed story with a large cast of characters. Set in Los Angeles, and following the exploits of a garage band named Love and Rockets, the narrative is propelled through a series of conflicts surrounding race, class, sexual orientation, and generational differences. The story's setting sets the stage for "Luba in America" and many of the stories that follow, in that Luba and her family move to California and we as readers become better acquainted with Luba's half-sisters, Fritz and Petra Martinez, and their associates. Much of Gilbert's subsequent narratives, such as those collected in High Soft Lisp (2010) and his original graphic novels—e.g., Chance in Hell (2007), The Troublemakers (2009), and Love from the Shadows (2011)—are based on the life of Fritz, if not directly, then through her work as a B-movie star and often playing salacious roles.

The visual styles of the three Hernandez brothers are strikingly different, one from the other. Mario's is the roughest of the three, more intentionally primitive, although his illustrations are a rarity in Love and Rockets. His illustrative contributions can be found in some of the earliest issues of the comic, such as his "Somewhere in California..." stories, although there are the occasional later works, such as "Life and Rockets" in 1996. (The vast majority of Mario's input comes through the writing, many times working with Gilbert.) Gilbert's art is less "realistic" and more expressive than his brothers' (especially in the case of Jaime), and as a result, his illustrations appear less sophisticated to some fans. (There have been occasional debates within the Love and Rockets reader community as to which brother produces the best work, some arguing that that while Jaime is a better artist, Gilbert is a better writer. However, many of these arguments are largely moot, based more on fan preference than on broad critical appreciation.) Gilbert's work is heavily influenced by the kind of comics he grew up reading, such as Jack Kirby and Charles Schulz. He has also noted the debt his art owes to Robert Crumb—older brother Mario introduced him to underground comix by smuggling a copy of Zap into the house—and this is especially apparent in Gilbert's depictions of sex, often explicit and outrageous. Jaime's illustrations reflect more of a clean-line style. His work has been particularly influenced by Dan DeCarlo—his characters are strikingly reminiscent of DeCarlo's Archie and "good girl" art—but also by Hank Ketcham's Dennis and Schulz's Peanuts. The impact of Kirby and Steve Ditko is also apparent, especially in Jaime's superhero
Both Jaime and Gilbert work in a more traditional style of paneling or page layout, with even and fairly consistent grids in a three-strip structure. Exceptions to this "classic" format can be found in the brothers' more experimental (i.e., non-Palomar and non-Locas) comics, mostly collected in *Amor y Cohetes* (2008). While both Gilbert and Jaime pursue, to varying degrees, a more realistic (and modern) representation in their art, they nonetheless adopt many of the stylistic gestures found in gag and newspaper comic strips. These include a variety of emanata, grawlixes, comical facial features, and exaggerations of physical actions, all of which contribute to an occasional cartoony tone. Such moments punctuate their comics in ways that greatly further their storytelling, revealing not only the brothers' grasp of the comics tradition, but also their mastery over the entire lexicon of cartoon art.

In terms of subject matter, the work of the Hernandez brothers betrays some stylistic difference. Jaime's comics tend to represent more realistic scenarios, whether they are set in the West Coast punk scene of his earlier stories or in the more mundane environs into which his characters have grown as they have entered mid-life. At the same time, there is a fantastic side of Jaime's work that occasionally takes center stage. This can be seen, for example, in his earlier "Mechanics" stories where dinosaurs and rocket ships co-exist in a contemporary reality, and in his more recent comics following the superhero antics of Angel Rivera (a young and athletic friend of Maggie's) and Penny Century. Gilbert's work, on the other hand, can be roughly divided between the more realistic aspects of his storytelling—the Palomar and post-Palomar Luba and Fritz narratives being the best examples of these—and the experimental side. The latter is usually surrealistic and non-representational in form, and often appears in short and non-serialized pieces. Many of Gilbert's contributions to the recent *Love and Rockets: New Stories* series reveal this unconventional and even expressionistic side to his art. However, one of his best-known early works, "BEM," is a long comic that stands as his most fully realized exercise in narrative experimentation. Yet, even Gilbert's more realistic stories contain bits of the fantastic, and many readers have placed his Palomar work within the tradition of South American magical realism. As such, surreal or dreamlike events are seamlessly interwoven into his realistic storylines, to the point that they become naturalized and are unflinchingly accepted as "real" by his characters.

There are a number of defining themes that run throughout the Hernandez brothers' comics. One of the most common found in the *Love and Rockets* series concerns interpersonal relationships, both romantic and sexual. This is true with all of the brothers' works, where love affairs, marriages, sexual couplings, and unrequited loves compose a majority of the storylines. What is more, the sexuality represented in their comics is largely fluid and nonconventional, leaving the reader to question the role of heteronormality in the narrative. Homosexuality (both male and female), bisexual encounters, fetishism, and other forms of paraphilia are represented, along with heterosexuality, in such a way that all become normative within the story worlds of *Love and Rockets*. In a similar manner, gender roles and expectations are given broad treatment. This is especially the case with Jaime's comics and his Maggie and Hopey stories. The youngest Hernandez brother has been widely praised for his depictions of women—both physically and psychologically—that resist the kind of male-fantasy figures so common in comic books (specifically superhero comics). As such, his female characters struggle with body image, openly discuss their physique, and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Maggie is perhaps the best example of Jaime's democratic, and realistic, depiction of women. As a character she has developed over time, both gaining and losing weight throughout the series, and feeling self-conscious about her appearance and how she appears to others.

Gilbert, too, has been praised for his representation of women, especially as powerful individuals controlling their own destinies (e.g., Luba is often shown holding a hammer, a symbol of her self-empowerment). Yet at the same time, he has been accused of fetishizing the female figure, falling prey
to the same kind of extreme fan-boy fantasies found in mainstream comics. Gilbert's work in more overtly erotic or even pornographic comics, such as his series of *Birdland* comics for Fantagraphics's Eros Comix imprint (1990-1994), has certainly not mitigated these charges. However, as over-the-top as his female forms might be, Gilbert has nonetheless made it clear that in his Palomar stories, there is a genetic dimension to this exaggeration, with similar bodies represented in Luba, her mother Maria, her sisters Petra and (especially) Fritz, her daughters Guadalupe and Doralis, and most recently Luba's granddaughter, Killer. (Curiously enough, Gilbert's most recent narratives in *Love and Rockets: New Stories* surround Killer's visit to Palomar—the spitting image of her grandmother, figure and all—and her subsequent inheritance of Luba's hammer.)

Another subject running throughout the various Love and Rockets narratives is the ubiquity of racial and ethnic tensions. Many of the series' characters, some of whom are immigrants, become victims of prejudice and stereotyping, as seen in Gilbert's "An American in Palomar" and Jaime's "Wigwam Bam." And in stories such as "Love and Rockets X," where Los Angeles is the setting, racial conflict becomes the central theme. This is true with many of Jaime's comics as well, which take place in and around the Los Angeles area. Ethnic discord and immigration, in many ways, are linked to another theme found in *Love and Rockets*: conflicts between the individual and the community. Whether it be the 1980s punk rock scene in Jaime's comics—where Maggie and Hopey participate but long to stand out as different—or the more tranquil and isolated Central American milieu of Gilbert's Palomar—with characters such as Heraclio Calderon and Tonantzín resisting rural conformity—the main characters in *Love and Rockets* are all a part of some community (ethnic or otherwise) with which they can identify and against which they struggle.

In many of Gilbert's stories, conflicts often arise between traditional communities and modernity. In narratives such as "Duck Feet" and "Human Diastrophism," the author demonstrates how outside forces can impinge upon, and potentially eradicate, older and more traditional ways of understanding the world. Jaime addresses this issue as well, but usually through expressions of contemporary American fads and popular culture. In fact, music is one element of popular culture that undergirds both brothers' comics. References to rock and popular tunes saturate *Love and Rockets*, providing a kind of soundtrack to the images. Many of Jaime and Gilbert's characters play instruments and are members of bands, and often music is blaring from a radio or being sung by someone. (Indeed, throughout the entire *Love and Rockets* series, both brothers include "footnotes" to the various lyrics emanating from the radio or tuneful characters, placing song titles and musicians at the bottom of the page or just outside of the hyperframe.) It is no wonder that the 1980s rock band, Love and Rockets, took their name from the comic book series. These narrative worlds, with their interlocking themes and spiraling storylines, are in no danger of winding down anytime soon. The brothers continue to put out their annual *Love and Rockets: New Stories*, and four separate titles have been or are being released this year from Gilbert, including *The Children of Palomar*, a collection of the three-issue *New Tales of Old Palomar*, and Maria M: Book One, a B-movie-inspired story of Luba's mother, reminiscent of Gilbert's recent Fritz graphic novels. On top of this, Fantagraphics is marking the thirty-year anniversary of *Love and Rockets* with three retrospectives texts: *The Love and Rockets Companion: 30 Years (and Counting)*, *The Love and Rockets Reader: From Hoppers to Palomar* (both of these works edited or authored by Marc Sobel), and *Love and Rockets: The Covers.*

The essays that make up this special issue of *ImageTexT* bear out the ongoing and multilayered nature of the brothers' work, and they do so from a variety of critical perspectives. Christopher Pizzino's contribution starts things off by looking at some of the comics of Gilbert Hernandez through the lens of trauma theory. He is particularly interested in how these works employ "autoclastic icons," or self-breaking images, to represent the conflicted and tempestuous state of comics production over the last
half century. Next, F. Vance Neill brings a more narratological analysis to Gilbert's comics, reading the creator as a rhetor, or storytelling rhetorician, employing his arguments via implied authorship and the visual rhetoric found in the text-image relationship. A very different approach is taken by Jennifer Glaser, who looks at the entirety of the Palomar stories as a unique transnational marker of multiracial space. By contrast, Jesse Molesworth focuses specifically on one Palomar narrative arc, "Human Diastrophism," and reads it as an allegory on the intrusion of new media (including comics) on traditional societies. In his contribution, Frederick Luis Aldama confronts head on what many readers may find the most disturbing side of his art: its sexual and violent explicitness. He argues that Gilbert's more recent stand-alone graphic novels—*Chance in Hell*, *Speak of the Devil* (2008), and *The Troublemakers*—revisit, and revitalize, the tradition of pulp storytelling while speaking on the consequences of capitalism. The youngest Hernandez brother's work is the subject of the final essay in the collection. Christopher González reads "Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz" within the context of visual topography—as he describes it, matters of configuration, localization, and spatialization—and claims that Jaime's use of gangland violence speaks to the way that space functions in his storyworld. These essays are followed by a series of book reviews of the brothers' output over the past year, as well as the only critical work that has so far been published on any of the Hernandez brothers.

We hope that the studies presented here provide new ways of reading the Hernandez brothers and that together they will serve as a springboard to further interrogations of their works. And although we are cognizant of the fact that, with the publication of this special issue of *ImageTexT*, the field of scholarship surrounding the Hernandez brothers has now almost doubled, we look forward to a time when the comics of Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime receive the kind of sustained and wide-ranging attention that they so richly deserve.
Throughout this introduction I specifically refer to Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime as "the Hernandez brothers," not the name by which they are more popularly known, "Los Bros Hernandez." The latter privileges their Latino roots in a way the brothers find uncomfortable. In a recorded conversation I had with Jaime in 2009, he specifically pointed out that "Los Bros Hernandez" was a form of branding thrust upon them by their publisher, Fantagraphics, in the early 1980s. He emphasized that it "was a title given to us that we never liked. Fantagraphics gave it to us, and we kind of said, 'We wish you wouldn't do it like that.' And they just didn't listen. And that became our name without our say so. … [W]hen they came up with Los Brothers Hernandez, we found that kind of on the racist side…like 'here are these Mexican guys.' I mean, I'm sure that wasn't their intention, but that's just kind of how we took it."

The word "alternative" is thorny when applied to almost any manifestation of popular culture, and the medium of comics is no exception. Its use implies the question, "An alternative to what?" In terms of comics, the answer is usually "the mainstream," but even here the parameters are fuzzy. "Mainstream" may refer to corporate hegemony, in which case the points of comparison would be the big two publishers, Marvel and DC Comics. Yet both companies house, or have housed in the past, imprints whose titles are largely creator owned and that cater to more niche or "non-mainstream" audiences, such as Vertigo and Icon. At the same time, many smaller, but economically successful, publishers have routinely put out comic books whose generic content is almost indistinguishable from the main output of the big two (e.g., superhero comics) and targeted to a similar audience. If we take genre as a touchstone for understanding "alternative"—that is, anything that is not superhero comics—then the demarcations become even more troublesome. What of other genres that are popular, or were highly popular in the past? And what of independent creators who work within the conventions of superhero narrative, yet use it to interrogate that genre or to instil it with iconography from decidedly non-superhero sources? Alternative comics have commonly been seen as the post-1980s inheritors of the underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s, yet even if we accept this understanding, we would have to admit that many kinds of comics, even those produced in the mainstream, were directly influenced by that underground. An argument could be made that ownership is a determining factor of what is and is not "alternative." Does a creator, or a creative team, solely own the property they work with? Answers in the affirmative have usually been interpreted as "alternative," but even here one could find exceptions. What of licensed properties, or even creator-owned comics that have a wildly popular following, such as many newspaper strips? The point here is not to exact a definition of "alternative comics," but to problematize the term, become aware of its limitations as a narrative signifier, and acknowledge that its casual employment can result in unnecessarily discriminatory—as well as uninformed and even lazy—critical practices.

It is quite telling that of the various special issues of scholarly journals specifically devoted to comics—Modern Fiction Studies (2007), MELUS (2007), English Language Notes (2008), Shofar (2011), and College Literature (2011)—none include an essay focusing exclusively on one or more of the Hernandez brothers. The one possible exception to this would be Charles Hatfield's contribution to English Language Notes, but even here he uses the works of Jaime and Gilbert as a means to demonstrating the larger system of comics, how to read and how to teach them, instead of an endpoint of analysis. It is also worth noting that of all the edited collections devoted to comics studies, and there have been many since 2000, only Paul Williams and James Lyons's The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts (2010) includes a contribution that discusses the Hernandez brothers in any substantive way, and even then that essay is a broader survey of Latina figures in comics.

For a useful discussion of this phenomenon, and how mainstream comics readers may differ from those drawn to independent or alternative titles, see Douglas Wolk, especially his chapter "Superheroes and Superreaders." His coinage and description of the "superreader" is particularly insightful and helps
to explain certain divisions between these two comics audiences.

[5] While the evidence is purely anecdotal, it is worth pointing out the challenges I have faced in the classroom when trying to teach one of the *Love and Rockets* stories, such as "Human Diastrophism" or "Wigwam Bam." At least as much time (if not more) is spent in class explaining the backstory of various characters and their relationships with others as is devoted to discussing the actual assigned text. This is not a phenomenon I have experienced when teaching Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), Mark Kelesnikov's *Mail Order Bride* (2003), Jessica Abel's *La Perdida* (2006), Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings* (2007), or even Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1987). As much as I find it useful to use one of the Hernandez brothers' books in the classroom, it requires more attention and can become more burdensome than the use of other texts. Also, a friend and colleague on *The Comics Alternative* podcast, Andrew Kunka, has shared with me his own experiences related to this matter. Whenever he asks scholars what comics they feel that they need to read, but have not yet taken the time to do so, the answer is often *Love and Rockets*. This is largely due to the intimidation factor and the time and energy that such a reading project would require.

[6] For example, see my interview with Gilbert and his thoughts on how "the more ethnic a piece is … the more universal it is" (229). For an additional view on the brothers' ethnic import, see the aforementioned 2009 conversation with Jaime.

[7] See Darieck Scott for the significance of the comic's black-and-white content, especially as it relates to ethnoracial issues.


[9] Other important storylines from Gilbert include "Act of Contrition," "Ecce Homo," "Duck Feet," "Farewell, My Palomar…," "Luba Conquers the World," and "Chelo's Burden." Gilbert's non-Palomar, and more experimental, comics have also significantly marked his oeuvre, including his groundbreaking "BEM," which includes Luba's first appearance; his treatment of Frida Kahlo, "Frida"; a sendup/mashup of his and Jaime's comics, "Hernandez Satyricon"; and the offbeat series of stories featuring the character Errata Stigmata.

[10] One can even place Gilbert's Errata Stigmata comics into this "experimental" category. Errata is one of Gilbert's few notable characters outside of his Palomar narratives. Her adventures are often surreal, offbeat, and narratively disruptive. She gets her name from stigmata that are a result of childhood emotional trauma.

[11] Although overemphasizing this Marquezian quality, as apt as it may be at times, runs the risk of ethnically limiting Gilbert's works. Similar to the aforementioned comparisons to telenovelas—and also in light of Jaime's previously cited suspicions over "Los Bros Hernandez"—any deterministic linkage between the Hernandez brothers' comics and Latino culture may result in a constrained reading of their texts.

[12] All three of these books were originally going to be released in 2012, the year of *Love and Rockets* thirtieth anniversary at Fantagraphics, but for undisclosed reasons the publication date of those works have been pushed back to the last part of 2013 or the first quarter of 2014. We had originally planned on including reviews of these books as part of this special issue of *ImageTexT*, but review copies were still not available as of the completion of this collection.
Works Cited


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