

# introduction

LOS BROS HERNANDEZ are a collective of sibling Latino comic book artists (Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime) who have been very influential in the American comic book industry. Born to a humble Mexican-American family in Oxnard, California, the brothers have taken an interesting career path to develop into the artists they are today. Their seminal experimental anthology *Love and Rockets* is their most important achievement, as it is one of the longest-running titles that has survived on the ever-changing comic book market, and is the text that fully demonstrates their artistic maturity. With this work, they have been able to experiment with comic book narrative techniques, which has earned them a loyal fan base and the respect of their peers in the industry as well as that of mainstream critics.

Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, the main subjects of this book, are arguably two of the most influential U.S. Latino comic book artists of all time. They self-identify specifically as Latino artists (of Mexican American descent), and their collective work includes masterpieces such as Gilbert's *Palomar* and Jaime's *Locas* sagas. Their epic stories contain Latino characters and content that often serve to define their texts as ethnic contributions to the American comic book industry, which has been known for having a problematic history

in providing venues for diversity. However, not all of their comics feature Latino signifiers, and, as Los Bros are very comfortable with mainstream American comic book genres, they are able to dabble in narratives that in the past were not commonly associated with traditional Latino literature, such as superheroes, horror, and science fiction.

Both brothers have been able to create successful stories enjoyed by all types of audiences, yet have still firmly established their identity as alternative Latino creators. Their works have been critically acclaimed by scholars who regularly write essays about their work, while their sales figures have kept them in print over several decades, and they have become two of the more recognizable names of the prominent independent comic book company Fantagraphics Books. They have also published additional material in mainstream publishing giants such as DC Comics, the *New York Times*, and the *New Yorker*. The controversial nature of their comic book content, specifically in terms of sex and violence, does not always allow them to profit from the teen market that tends to dominate the American comic book industry, but it certainly has made them iconic in alternative and intellectual circles.

As a fan of comic books and graphic novels, and as a Puerto Rican/Hispanic/Latino reader, I've had a difficult time narrowing down the traits that define a great Latino artist. The American comic book industry has had important contributions from a number of Latino comic book writers/artists, such as George Pérez (Puerto Rican heritage) and Joe Quesada (Cuban heritage), who have helped to develop the visual aesthetics and storytelling of mainstream superhero narratives (for example, in their work on the Avengers/New Teen Titans and the Batman/Daredevil series, respectively). Their comics tend to be family friendly and directed to a mainstream audience, and, even though the creators are of Hispanic descent, their work does not provide too many Latino signifiers that might confuse its target mainstream audience.<sup>1</sup> There are dozens of creators of Latino/Hispanic descent working in the American comic book industry, and many have created important pieces that are aesthetically impressive. However, the vast majority of their work is limited to the genres and topics promoted by the mainstream American comic book publishing corporations. This is why the influence of Latino/Hispanic artists in the comics published in the United States tends to be very underrated.

In his book *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, scholar Frederick Aldama provides a comprehensive coverage of the history of Latino comics (with Latino subjects) that includes a wide variety of works, such as the controversially “ethnic” funny strips by Gus Arriola in the 1950s, hipster narratives such as Gil Morales’s *Dupie*, mainstream and independent Latino superheroes such

as *Diablo* and *El gato negro*, and the works of alternative creators such as Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (emphasized throughout most of the book).<sup>2</sup> Besides the artists of Mexican American origin, Aldama also includes artists from all Latino denominations, such as Puerto Rican (David Álvarez) and Cuban (Frank Espinosa).<sup>3</sup> In Aldama's view, the different types of Latino representation in the American comic book industry are important in different ways because creators of Latino comics have different goals, and while some may want to convey political messages or narratives close to the ethnic experience of the community, others may just want to entertain or portray some aspects of American life in general. Latino artists are thus a broad and varied group, whose work cannot be homogenized into a specific type of storytelling or artistic expression. Aldama explains: "When studying Latino comics, we must keep centrally in mind the dimension of the author and the reader. Not by looking to biographies or interviews for those nuggets that point to a one-to-one correspondence between fiction and biographical fact, but by noting how certain visual and verbal techniques move authors (as readers) cognitively and emotionally."<sup>4</sup>

I personally believe that Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez are two of the greatest Latino creators in the U.S. because, as ethnic auteurs, they have been able to create narratives that subvert hegemony without falling into the didactic tendencies of many writers. More importantly, they have been able to avoid the "ghettofication" of their subjects and to create a complex intertextuality that could only be completely understood by a reader who can decode both Latino references and the visual narratives of the Anglophone American industry. The Latino/Hispanic reader may not understand everything in their narratives if he/she does not know enough about the American comic book industry to truly grasp their subversion of genres. On the other hand, there are many details that traditional comic readers may miss if they are not familiar with the influences of the Latino heritage and the entire spectrum of the American comic book industry in their work.

When I was researching material for this book, I noticed that Los Bros Hernandez have a solid presence in the American media, despite their comics almost never making the top 100 comic list in sales. They are a hit with alternative venues such as comic book and indie record stores, but are also featured in mainstream venues such as *Time*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times*, where they have given interviews and published new material. Both brothers have inspired praise by contemporary prominent writers such as Junot Díaz, Alan Moore, and Neil Gaiman, who are among the most recognized authors in the literary Anglophone world. Pulitzer Prize winner Junot

Diaz, while discussing Jaime Hernandez's illustrations of his work, recognized Los Bros' comics as an inspiration for his own pursuit of a writing career and for books such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.<sup>5</sup> In another interview conducted by Michael Silverblatt in the radio show *Bookworm*, he also stated that American writers in Hollywood and mainstream literature are barely catching up to *Love and Rockets* and its representation of new gender values.

Alan Moore, writer of comic masterpieces such as *Watchmen* and *Prometheus*, whom I would call the Shakespeare of English-language comics, has also written to praise Jaime's work.<sup>6</sup> Neil Gaiman, winner of the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards, conducted an interview with the brothers in the *Comic Journal* (reprinted in the *Love and Rockets Companion*), and chose material from Mario and Gilbert's *Citizen Rex* to be included in his collection *The Best American Comics 2010*. This is high praise indeed, and it is not limited to writers and comic book artists. Jaime and Gilbert's work has been the focus of a number of academic studies, inspiring more scholarly criticism than most other artists in the American comic industry. Many academics (such as Frederick Aldama, Charles Hatfield, and Derek Parker Royal) are interested in Los Bros' work because of their redefinition of the comic book language and their innovative approach to Latino identity and gender values, themes that are very important and debated in American academia. Gilbert and Jaime's work remains of critical interest, as the serial nature of their output keeps them continuously innovative, unlike the work of other artists whose narratives often become outdated with the passage of time.

There is ample scholarly research on the Hernandez brothers, and it is important to review it here and outline some of the general analytical trends developed in the academic criticism of their work. One of the most relevant critical studies is Frederick Aldama's book *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez*, which provides a compelling account of the work of a number of Latino comic artists in the United States and explains how their visual depiction of American Latinos' realities has evolved through the years. Aldama discusses the work of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez in the context of the history of Latino narratives. Another important work is scholar Charles Hatfield's book *Alternative Comics*, which places the brothers' work in the context of the American alternative industry and explains how *Poison River* defies the conventions of the hegemonic comic book genres, while providing an in-depth analysis of its complex narrative structure.

In addition to these important manuscripts, a number of article-length

scholarly publications have appeared in academic journals. Approaches and texts discussed vary widely, and the articles address topics as diverse as race representation, sexuality, spatiality, remediation, and others (such as Christopher González's and Daerick Scott's articles). An important contribution to note is the recent (summer 2013) special issue of *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comic Studies* journal titled "The Worlds of the Hernandez Brothers," edited by Derek Parker Royal and Christopher González. The articles it contains, including the excellent introduction, provide a good sample of the types of scholarly criticism available. In addition, this special issue includes a bibliography of both primary and secondary sources that would be a good reference source for those who wish to undertake further studies on Los Bros.

At this point, most of the books written about Los Bros Hernandez are published by Fantagraphics Books, the company that also publishes most of the comics included in the *Love and Rockets* series. In 2013, Fantagraphics published additional books commemorating the anniversary of *Love and Rockets*, which include *Love and Rockets: The Covers* (a collection of Los Bros covers), and *Love and Rockets Companion: 30 Years (and Counting)*, a collection of some of their more detailed interviews. One important book about Los Bros not published by Fantagraphics is *The Art of Jaime Hernandez*. It focuses on Jaime in its meticulous presentation of the creator's life and work, but also contains a lot of details on Gilbert. This particular book is very engaging because writer Todd Hignite had access to the family and was able to provide a detailed account of the brothers' childhood, comic influences, and development as artists. Because of the existence of this excellent book, I will not focus on the biographical aspects of the brothers' lives, but will refer to some of these aspects whenever relevant to the themes I am exploring.

The analysis I offer in my book aims to examine the role of Los Bros in the comic book industry, the academic canon, and the Latino arts in the United States, while covering some theoretical subjects that will appeal to an academic audience, for example, aesthetic and cultural intertextuality, developments in the perception of depictions of race and ethnicity, and more abstract ideas about the role of sex in the challenging of authority and hegemony. The themes presented in this book's chapters overlap, thus the chapters work in clusters more so than as distinct units. Each chapter is followed by a "Spotlight" section, which offers a brief discussion of an important comic not mentioned earlier but touching on themes relevant to the preceding chapter. After this introduction, the first chapter, titled "Subverting the Intertextual Comic Book Corporate Structure," follows the theoretical framework developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and later Linda Hutcheon to argue that the parodies pre-

sented in *Love and Rockets* follow the legacy of Harvey Kurtzman and Robert Crumb. Further, in the first chapter I explore the evolution of Los Bros' narrative technique and how it changed from the work of fan-artists mimicking ironically the superheroes and science fiction they read as kids to the output of alternative creators whose parodic narratives redefined American comics aesthetics by making us rethink the visual language of comic books that had been stunted in the United States by the Comics Code Authority and the marketplace.

My main goal in the first chapter is to show that, as creators, the Hernandez brothers manipulate many of the genres prevalent in American popular culture, so in order to understand their work, the reader also has to understand the intricacies of the American comic book genres the artists are redefining through their parodies. In addition to studying the intertextual elements present in the *Love and Rockets* anthology, and particularly in Los Bros' first stories "Mechan-x" and "BEM," I specifically study the parody of superhero conventions in Jaime's *Locas* saga as embodied in the character of Penny Century.

The second chapter, "The Revision of Latino Experience through Comic Book Genres and Soap Opera Devices in Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar* and Jaime Hernandez's *Locas* Sagas," explores Los Bros' position in the Latino/Chicano canon. Prominent U.S. Latino authors have worked hard to establish the presence of Americans of Hispanic heritage in mainstream U.S. literature. Some of these authors recreate the experience of the hardships that immigrant workers endure in the United States (for example, Tomás Rivera, . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra*); others explore the complexities of their bilingual heritage (for example, Sandra Cisneros, *House on Mango Street*); still others express ambivalence toward the cultural markers that define them as Latinos (for example, Richard Rodriguez). Grounding my argument in Latino scholarship, I specifically track how empowering and problematic the commodification of Latino identity has been, a controversy that affects how we perceive Gilbert and Jaime, due to ethnic and geographical differences that can affect the national and transnational experience of the Latino individual.

The Hernandez brothers occupy a unique position among Latino writers, not only because they work in a visual medium, but also because of the way they write their characters and storylines. Their stories and featured characters are published in serial format over several decades and evolve as perceptions of Latino identity change, which helps them to remain up to date with current representational models. For the most part, their comics have overcome the nostalgia for the creation of identity that was so important in the

1960s, and their Latino characters are not necessarily always virtuous but are often prejudiced toward other ethnic or social groups. They feel comfortable with their Hispanic heritage and function well within the cultural markers of both Latin America and the United States. Bilingualism is not an issue for them. Neither is citizenship or national belonging.

In this second chapter, I focus on Gilbert's *Palomar* saga, a text particularly important for being set in both an ambiguous Latin America and the United States. As first-generation immigrants, the *Palomar* characters experience different lifestyles and attitudes, but their stories do not involve the long-distance nationalism that often permeates this type of narrative. More importantly, their progeny, second- and third-generation immigrants, who know nothing about their parents' and grandparents' past or their experiences prior to their arrival in the United States, cannot understand them or their actions. Thus, a gap opens between first-generation and second- and third-generation immigrants due to inadequate communication and the absence of shared experiences. An example of this is the *Poison River* storyline that discloses the violent origin of the character of Luba in Latin America and juxtaposes it to the extravagant lifestyle of her offspring in the United States.

I further argue that the politics of Gilbert do not always fit Latin American dialectics, as his social conflicts lack the historical references that define nationalist narratives. His criticism is mostly about the Palomar citizens that serve as a metaphor for the ostracized Latino/Chicano communities of his youth, and about how they handle the neurotic elements of sexuality. The saga also presents their journey from isolation to an age where they are finally able to represent themselves to the global world as conveyed by Fritz's movies. This idea glorifies the role of Latino/Chicano comics in opening the narrative of mass culture in order to finally communicate a specific Latino/Hispanic experience in the United States.

In the second chapter, I also cover certain aspects of Jaime Hernandez's *Locas* saga that are relevant to this discussion. I argue that Jaime's narrative was always more accessible to Anglophone audiences because it dabbles in more mainstream genres such as science fiction, punk narratives, urban melodrama, and others. Still, I focus in particular on Maggie's relationship with Rena Titañón, who represents the political side of Latino culture that is sometimes baffling to Maggie, a Latina who is not connected to a specific Latin American nation-state. The evolution of their relationship and the parallels with Penny Century's superhero obsessions that I discuss in the first chapter provide a dialogical clash of voices related to Latino identity that makes the characters feel more rounded. Rena and Penny are two models (resistance and

assimilation) that Maggie respects and avoids while following her dreams of finding true happiness.

The final chapter consists of an interview I conducted with Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez when they were honored at Ohio State University as guest speakers for the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum's Grand Opening Festival of Cartoon Art in November 2013. This interview was important for the manuscript because I was able to ask them about several topics I discuss in the book and see how they responded to some of the controversial aspects related to representations of sexual relations and ethnicity that have been addressed in previous academic scholarship. This was one of the most important moments in my career, as I was able to interact with artists I truly respect, and it is a suitable conclusion for the book.

My main goal in writing this book is to provide an introductory text that allows students at the university level to understand the basic cultural elements (industry, cultural connections, ethnic and gender issues) that are truly important for the full appreciation of Los Bros Hernandez's comic books and graphic novels. Within the limits of this manuscript, I may not be able to cover every single aspect of Los Bros' prolific work or redeem the more controversial aspects of their storytelling, yet I hope my readers will be able to understand why Gilbert and Jaime are so important for Latino arts, the American comic book industry, and for American culture in general.

## **The American Comic Book Industry, the Comics Code, and the Control and Manipulation of Distribution Spaces**

As an introduction to neophyte comic readers who have not read very many comics since they were children, I will now attempt to place Los Bros Hernandez's work within the history of the American comic book industry. Further, I will explain how certain historical events led to economic censorship related to constrictions on the physical space of distribution in the United States, which in turn led to the dominance of the superhero genre that set the industry back in terms of artistic freedom and content. I will also trace Los Bros Hernandez's work back to its origins within an alternative movement that had roots in the 1960s underground comix collective whose artists tried to reinvent the corporate language of comics and create more radical and adult projects. I will further explain how *Love and Rockets* took advantage of the new direct-market distribution system set in place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and how its brand has evolved under the publisher Fantagraphics Books, from an outsider comic anthology marketed to more alternative readers and stores to a commercially viable product that will take advantage

of the current digital distribution that may change the ways in which comics are distributed.

The availability and features of a physical retail space for the distribution of comics have been important in the history of the American comic book industry because physical space was the key to establishing economic censorship during the mid-twentieth century in a country that by law embraces a broad definition of freedom of speech. American comic book scholars (for example, Bradford Wright in *Comic Book Nation*, Bart Beaty in *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, and Amy Kiste Nyberg in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*) have highlighted two particular historical events that helped to create the retail limitations that forever marked comic book culture in the United States: the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* by psychiatrist Frederick Wertham in 1954, and the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, a self-censorship group created by comic book publishers (and not the American government). Wertham's book and the Comics Code are much maligned in American comic book culture today because they are blamed for the events that led to the infantilization and conservative nature of the medium on the American market. However, these were very complex historical events, where opposition to comic books came both from intellectuals and educators who needed to defend canonical literature from the waning interests of children and from religious groups who had issues about the morality of many of the exploitative comics that were printed at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Wertham's book helped to create a lot of debate in post-World War II United States about the role of mass culture in the upbringing of the American youth.<sup>8</sup> The author specifically targeted comics because he saw them in his studies as one of the main causes of illiteracy in children that could in turn lead them to a life in crime and, therefore, to poverty.<sup>9</sup> Scholar Bart Beaty states that the importance of Wertham's book is that "if it consolidated the anti-comic book sentiment in professional journals where it had been previously mixed, it also solidified opposition in religious magazines that had always been skeptical."<sup>10</sup>

Many individuals opposed Wertham's research, yet many others were inspired to galvanize a movement against the comic book industry and to pressure American senators to provide legislation that could regulate the controversial content that was published in comics at the time. Scholar Amy Kiste Nyberg writes that, as a response to public pressure, some comic book companies hastily created the Comics Code Authority, whose seal-of-approval stamp would guarantee the stores that the comics they sold had wholesome



Luba's reaction to Frida Kahlo's art. Gilbert Hernandez, *Beyond Palomar*, 37. © Gilbert Hernandez.

content.<sup>11</sup> The companies would therefore avoid further inquiries from the United States Senate. However, establishing the Code became a type of censorship in itself, when most newsstands stopped carrying the comics that were not officially approved by the Comics Code's office. For example, Nyberg writes that some wholesalers returned entire boxes of comics unopened because they were not carrying the Code's seal of approval.<sup>12</sup> This in turn led to the financial death of many companies such as EC Comics, whose comics contained more disturbing material and whose stories did not fit the Code's parameters.<sup>13</sup>

The Code's rules permitted depictions only of a utopian version of life. Among the most important facets of culture that were covered were regulations about the depiction of crime, specifically targeting positive portrayals of criminals and criticisms of law enforcement.<sup>14</sup> In addition, many bans were put in place against horror subject matter<sup>15</sup> (possibly targeting EC Comics and its horror line), as well as against nudity, sex, illicit marriages, divorces, and any type of behavior that defied national morality. According to Nyberg, the biggest impact the Code had on American comics was that it maintained the dominance of the superhero genre in the following years.<sup>16</sup> However, she finds more damaging the fact that criticism against the establishment was prohibited and therefore "without the freedom to challenge the status quo, comic book content remained for the most part quite innocuous."<sup>17</sup>

To contextualize what happened in the American industry in the 1950s, I wanted to compare it with similar events that happened in Mexico. Scholar

Anne Rubinstein explains how in postrevolutionary Mexican society, comic books were similarly criticized both by educators for not being sufficiently literary and for being a threat to the postrevolutionary education of the masses, and by religious groups for providing controversial narratives. Mexico established a censor board during the 1940s, but the board's criticisms and fines were habitually ignored by the government. Comic books did not lose their space on the newsstand because the printers that published and distributed the comics were owned by politically influential newspapers with powerful political allies that allowed them to ignore the prescribed draconian punishments.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the laws were established to inflict penalties after distribution, not to regulate content during the creative process.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, the censorship board had less power to limit the content of comic books because it could not control the space of distribution like the Code could in the United States. Nevertheless, most Mexican comics were not necessarily transgressive (with the exception of Rius's *Los supermachos* and Gabriel Vargas's *La familia Burrón* within certain specific subjects). This example is not to idealize the Mexican comic book industry, which certainly has its problems and different issues with censorship. My purpose is to compare the two types of censorship in order to demonstrate why retail space was so important in the case of the American industry. Having the Code's seal of approval would grant the comic book companies access to the American distribution system and therefore provide a more effective manner of censorship.

One interesting example provided by Rubinstein about the American conceptualization of comics as a negative influence on the working class was the work of American sociologist Oscar Lewis, who (similarly to Wertham) blamed comic book reading, alongside radio and TV, for the apathy and poverty of a second-generation-immigrant Mexican family. The family that had moved from the Mexican countryside to the capital was the focus of his study *Los hijos de Sánchez* (1961), in which Lewis also attributed one of the family's daughter's promiscuous behavior to her fascination with *Tarzan* comics in her early tomboy childhood.<sup>20</sup> In his *Poison River* storyline, Gilbert Hernandez addressed and parodied such intellectuals' hatred for comics in Latin American culture. In that storyline, a young Luba was constantly harassed by Ofelia and other Marxist Hispanic intellectuals who wanted her to stop reading *Pedro Pacotilla* comics (a parody of the Mexican comic *Memín Pinguín*) and to look more at Frida Kahlo paintings instead. Only her working-class father defended Luba from Ofelia's harassment, especially when Kahlo's art would make his daughter cry.<sup>21</sup>

Rubenstein's statement about Lewis's perception of the decay of Mexican

working-class children through their consumption of mass culture is very relevant to my study of *Los Bros Hernandez*. In *The Art of Jaime Hernandez*, Todd Hignite explains how Los Bros' parents were workers (their father, Santos, from Mexico, and their mother, Aurora, from El Paso, Texas) who met while working in the fields and packing houses.<sup>22</sup> Santos died when the three brothers were still very young, which means they were mostly raised by their mother in Oxnard, California.<sup>23</sup> Aurora loved reading comic books, which in Mexican/Mexican American culture were also consumed by working-class adults, and she encouraged this passion in her kids.<sup>24</sup> The maternal support for their comic book passions allowed Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime to experience reading all types of entertainment and genres, from superheroes to jungle adventures, to funny strips and parodies. They also consumed other types of mass culture such as films and television shows which, instead of making them unfocused as Wertham or Lewis would imply, made their art visually compelling and intertextual.

### **Alternative Space and the Rise of *Love and Rockets***

Los Bros' parodies of the average intellectual's snobbish attitudes toward comics does not mean they support the comic book industry's hegemonic narratives. Rather, they believe in the medium and were part of the alternative movement that tried to innovate an industry stunted by the Comics Code. This would not have been possible without the underground comix movement from the 1960s and '70s that sought to break all comic taboos, or without the rise of the direct market that loosened the hold of the Comics Code.

During most of the 1960s, the Code and the limited newsstand distribution space it controlled remained mostly unchallenged. However, this began to change with the emergence of the underground scene and the hippie subculture. In the late '60s, some artists such as Robert Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, and others tried to defy the corporate and hegemonic language of the industry with their "comix" narratives that parodied or deconstructed mainstream narratives by infusing comic book art with everything that institutions like the Comics Code would not approve, such as sex, violence, and criticism of authority figures and the establishment.<sup>25</sup> Their use of intertextual comic images to break all taboos is very important for any discussion of Los Bros' work and will be explored in more detail in the next chapter of this book. Artistic and economic independence was the main motto of comix artists, and it allowed them to make exciting narratives without being exploited by corporations, yet it also carried some negative consequences, for example, erratic scheduling and poor profit models.

Comic book art historian Roger Sabin explains several important aspects of this underground comic book movement. First, its epicenter was in San Francisco, unlike the mainstream comic book industry's hegemony, which was based in New York City.<sup>26</sup> This is important to point out, especially since Los Bros are part of the California comic scene and not part of the New York publishing industry, where corporate giants like Marvel and DC Comics are located. Second, it was a movement that lasted from 1968 to 1975 and comprised mostly of self-published work, with which the Hernandez brothers were familiar.<sup>27</sup> Third, the artists in the movement did not have access to the newsstands because of the highly violent, erotic, and disturbing content of their works but found other ways to distribute their material, including selling their comics on the streets or in metropolitan stores that catered to customers from the alternative scene.<sup>28</sup>

In his book *Alternative Comics*, scholar Charles Hatfield devotes a section to the comix underground movement's influence on contemporary alternative comic artists such as Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez.<sup>29</sup> Among the most important contributions, Hatfield lists the fact that "comix did pave the way for a radical reassessment of the relationships among publishers, creators, and intellectual properties, a reassessment that was to affect even mainstream comics in later years. Comix were the first movement of what came to be known among fans as 'creator-owned' comic books—and creator ownership was prerequisite to the rise of alternative comics."<sup>30</sup> Hatfield adds that "comix introduced an 'alternative' ethos that valued the productions of the lone cartoonist over collaborative or assembly-line work. In essence, comix made comic books safe for auteur theory: they established a poetic ethos of individual expression."<sup>31</sup>

In the 1970s, the U.S. comic book industry began to change with the emerging direct market involving specialized comic book stores, which allowed emerging alternative comics to achieve something that the underground comix could not: national distribution. In the traditional newsstand model, distribution companies usually sent their comics to the stores, and then after a certain period, the retailers would rip off the covers of the unsold copies and send them back to the publisher. This system was not ideal because comic book companies could lose some money with the unsold copies, whereas there was no risk involved for the vendor. With the new comic book stores, owners could not return the comics they ordered, but the comic book companies would give them a larger profit margin. Even though superheroes would still be the main genre available on their stands, these owners did not use the Comics Code as a way of filtering what was supposed to be "correct"

entertainment. Instead, because they needed a steady influx of customers, they attempted to comply with their buyers' interests, which, depending on the geographical location of the store or the interests of the owner, meant more available distribution space for comic book creators with alternative goals outside of the main publishing industry.<sup>32</sup>

To make this clearer, I will explain the pros and cons of the process of buying comics at a direct market comic book store. First, in traditional newsstands, the customer could only choose from what the retailer had exhibited. Customers did not have any power over the material being made available to them. In contrast, the new direct market established in the late 1970s allowed readers to start subscriptions through which they would individually (pre-) order material in which they were interested and would pick up on a weekly basis. Comic book stores have a large catalog where one can read the descriptions of all the material to be published in two months' time. If the reader has not missed the deadline, he/she can order whatever he/she wants from the catalog, be it *Batman* comics, Japanese manga, or other types of narratives. This system was beneficial to large and small publishers alike, as they would have a better idea of the number of titles they had to print for an established readership. In addition, they could tap into developing trends in readership, which allowed companies to experiment a little more with material that did not fit the Comics Code.

Despite these advantages to readers and publishers, the direct market can also be conservative in its own manner, as many comic book stores carry predominantly superhero and fantasy comics because they do not want to risk losing money. As Charles Hatfield explains, "This situation, only belatedly recognized as a major disadvantage, tends to discourage risk-taking by retailers, even as the economic advantages for publishers encourage the production of a surfeit of new product. The result is an excess of comic books each month, shrilly marketed, of which most retailers can order only a small sample."<sup>33</sup>

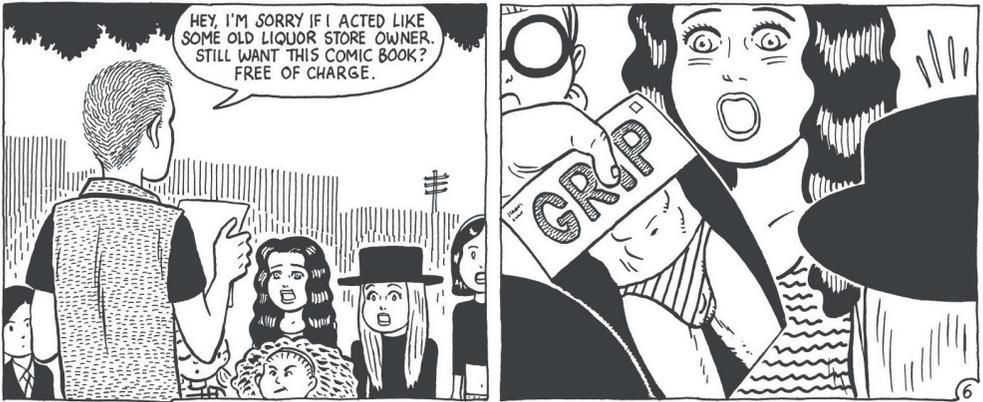
Before the existence of the Internet, when I was living in Puerto Rico, most of the comic stores I frequented sold almost exclusively mainstream superhero comics, which is why I did not know about Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's work when I was growing up. I could have ordered a copy of their work if I knew about them or had browsed some of their comics in the store, but without sampling an issue of *Love and Rockets*, it would be difficult for a reader to commit to their work. This absence of information or availability of comics for instant purchase is part of a vicious circle of supply and demand disconnect, for, if there was no market for a different type of comic

in my small-town store, the store owner was not going to risk losing money and order copies just so that customers can glance at the art. Thus in order for Los Bros' work to flourish in the direct market in the 1980s, there had to be alternative clients that consumed their type of storytelling that would guarantee the owner that they would come back and financially support the subscription by buying the comics they ordered.

Professor Matthew Pustz explains in his book *Comic Book Culture* that most alternative comics sell a lot less than mainstream comics.<sup>34</sup> He writes that most comics readers are adolescent men, while the alternative crowd tends to be composed of college students and has a larger share of female readers (about 40 percent). Pustz describes alternative readers in the following manner:

Many readers of alternative comics come to them from alternative culture: these people listen to alternative music (a category as diverse as alternative comics), have non-conformist ideas regarding lifestyle, clothing, and personal appearance, and practice more liberal politics than most Americans. Most important though, is that most alternative-comics readers set themselves up in opposition to traditional mainstream American culture and to mainstream comic books. Aside of picking up a comic of *X-Men* for a few laughs, or buying an old issue of DC's *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* for its nostalgic value, most alternative-comic fans would not be caught dead reading mainstream comics.<sup>35</sup>

As an alternative creator who was impacted by the setup of the comic book distribution system, Gilbert Hernandez mocked the comic book retail system and how comics are disseminated. In the segment "Letters from Venus," Venus (a precocious and highly intelligent girl) goes to Shredder Records, an alternative record store, with her Japanese American schoolmate/friend Yoshio. In this type of punk/grunge retailer, all the alternative and antiestablishment comic books are featured on the stands as opposed to the superhero comics that tend to dominate the conventional stores. In the art of the page, one can distinguish eccentric titles on the stands of Shredder Records, such as Jaime Hernandez's *Penny Century* and *Whoa, Nelly!*, Peter Bagge's *Hate*, and Daniel Clowes's *Eightball*, which were some of the most trendy comics at the time in the American industry.<sup>36</sup> Yoshio laughs when, in a self-reflexive meta-narrative, he grabs a copy of Gilbert Hernandez's own *Grip*, which Venus dismisses as boring porn. The hipster employee at the store does not allow the two youngsters to continue perusing the comic because they are under age, but on the next page he catches them in the street and gives Venus a free copy



Venus receives a free copy of Gilbert Hernandez's *Grip*. Gilbert Hernandez, *Luba and Her Family*, 24. © Gilbert Hernandez.

of *Grip* because, as he admits, he acted as “some old liquor store owner.”<sup>37</sup> This scene is important for my discussion in this chapter of the book, as it illustrates Gilbert Hernandez’s awareness of the fact that his comics at the time were part of an alternative scene that tried to bypass the market and economic limitations imposed on erotic and transgressive material.

In a later segment, “Letters from Venus: Life on Mars,” Venus again encounters the employee from the store at a costume-themed carnival, and he asks her why she hasn’t visited his store again. Venus replies that she and her mom Petra now go to the Winkydinky comic book store because it is closer to her house.<sup>38</sup> Venus explains that her mother Petra does not want her to visit the alternative store because it is “stinky punk” and sells the comics Venus likes but cannot read due to her young age, while Winkydinky sells the superhero comics her mother enjoys.<sup>39</sup> All of these events become further infused with irony when in the segment “Letters from Venus: Who Cares About Love,” it is revealed that Petra is having an extramarital affair with the Shredder Records employee in the backroom of the store.<sup>40</sup> This could be interpreted as a jab at the hypocrisy of the system in which Venus is being pushed to move from the “alternative space” to shop at the “wholesome and kid-friendly” comic book store. This spatial displacement means that children and teenagers are forced to consume infantile narratives and to veer away from the sexuality and erotic appeal of the content sold in Shredder Records. Meanwhile, Venus’s mother as an adult is allowed to indulge and explore sexuality and extramarital affairs in the same space that is denied to Venus.

Los Bros Hernandez belonged to the late 1970s/early '80s California punk scene, which also made them part of the alternative music crowd at the time. They no longer participate in this punk scene, but following this type of lifestyle at the beginning of their careers certainly made them more rebellious than the typical comic book artists. As Charles Hatfield writes, "Specifically, Jaime and Gilbert evoked Southern California's punk rock scene, capturing its rough-and-tumble nature while applying its DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic to their own work."<sup>41</sup> Therefore their interests in this music's worldview led them to be self-sufficient and create material that evolved from the underground comix from the 1960s and mid-1970s rather than traditional adventures that would be published at Marvel or DC. Like Pustz's description of the alternative comics reader that I previously quoted, Los Bros tried to stay away from traditional storytelling, while sometimes intertextually indulging in the language and visual narratives of mainstream comics to parody them ironically in funny ways that are attractive to alternative readers. Charles Hatfield describes their work outside of the mainstream and comix frame:

In addition, Los Bros defied the longstanding masculine bias of comic books by focusing on distinctive and complex female characters. These characters, as they matured, mixed caricature, low-key realism, and a refreshingly inclusive sense of beauty. As such, they broke with the fetishism of both mainstream adventure comics, with their feverish celebration of the disciplined, superheroic body, and most underground comix, with their scabrous, at times misogynistic sexual satire. The brothers' thematic innovations—the punk milieu, their eagerness to explore their Latino roots, and their regard for women—inspired fierce loyalty among their readers.<sup>42</sup>

Los Bros, under the leadership of older brother Mario, published the first issue of the anthology *Love and Rockets* with a low print run of 800 numbers.<sup>43</sup> Gilbert sent the issue to *The Comics Journal* for review, hoping to get some publicity even if the editors hated it.<sup>44</sup> The move paid off when publisher Gary Groth saw the potential in their anthology and decided to distribute their comic through his company Fantagraphics Books, which at the time also distributed *The Comics Journal*.<sup>45</sup> The brothers made an agreement with Fantagraphics, which allowed them to keep the publication rights of their works and to avoid editorial interference, as they would still be involved in every facet of their art (pencils, inks, and lettering). However, the company would help to promote them and would deal with the publishing minutiae, including matters of advertising, licensing, and distribution, which can be very distracting and time consuming for creators.

Under the Fantagraphics label, Los Bros Hernandez maintained a stable run for the first *Love and Rockets* series. They published 50 issues from 1981 to 1996, which were not best-sellers like the traditional superhero comics but which gained solid alternative-reader customer support and wide acclaim from reviewers and scholars. One aspect of their work that is important to acknowledge is that, by working outside of the mainstream publishing industry, they have been able to survive economically, as their lower print numbers remain profitable due to the fact that their financial gain is not designed to support megacorporations such as Marvel and DC Comics. In the bigger companies, comics selling lower than the top 100 are always in danger of being canceled because they are not seen as contributing to corporate profitability. Los Bros Hernandez's comics never crack the top 100, but they are never in danger of being canceled because their fan base is stable, never interested in gimmicks, and would even contribute to Los Bros' cause by buying multiple editions of the same storyline.

### Complying with the Industry's Business Model

Even though Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez are independent/alternative creators, they still follow certain patterns of the comic book industry. For example, while many new readers only read their work in graphic novel collections that can be found in comic stores or national bookstores such as Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble, most of their material first appears in the thirty-two-page comic book format. Most of the industry's comic book companies follow this serial narrative model because by publishing in segments, they can profit faster from any series, and they assume that after they reprint the storyline in book format, fans will buy the material again because they will not want to bother reading from their comic collection. This means that a *Love and Rockets* fan would buy the comics because they cannot wait several years to see what happens next with their favorite Los Bros' characters, but then they would also buy the collection because it is easier to reread a book than to go through the individual issues again.

Many of these idiosyncrasies of the industry have certainly affected the publication of the Hernandez brothers' work. In an interview, Gilbert and Jaime mentioned that the reason they changed the original *Love and Rockets* magazine format to one similar to most traditional comics while launching the second volume was that retailers told them customers were complaining they could not fit *Love and Rockets* issues into their comic book boxes.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the brothers had stopped publishing the first anthology to create a series of spin-offs, such as Gilbert Hernandez's *Luba* (1998–2004) and *Luba's*

*Comics and Stories* (2000–2006), and Jaime’s *Penny Century* (1997–2000). Many fans did not know these comics existed because the mainstream companies inundate the market and it becomes very difficult to know everything that can be ordered. It was easier for the Hernandez brothers to just publish everything under a second volume of *Love and Rockets* (2001–2007) and simply tell the customer to order the new issues of one single comic in the store.<sup>47</sup>

A third change in format occurred when Los Bros relaunched a third volume of the series (from 2008). Gilbert and Jaime realized that many of their readers were buying the majority of their books from online retailers and bookstores. Therefore, instead of publishing single issues of the series (mostly sold in comic and alternative record stores) to be later collected and sold in bookstores, they decided to turn *Love and Rockets* into a graphic novel series that comes out once a year but that features a larger page count and launches on the direct market and at book retailers at the same time. The series now also premieres each issue on tablet/smartphone applications at the time of its publication in hard copy, thus making it available in the entire country simultaneously.

Today, the distribution of comics has changed in such a manner that now Los Bros’ books can be purchased in both mainstream and alternative bookstores. In addition, as of 2013, Fantagraphics has opened a new digital venue for them through the comiXology application. Now all the Hernandez’s work can be bought at any time and any place with an Internet connection, and their art can be better appreciated on devices such as the iPad. On these new electronic devices, the reader can zoom into each individual comic panel in order to appreciate better the intricacies of the creators’ pencils and inks. Now the reader can have direct access to Los Bros’ work and does not need a mediator with a physical space, as it used to be in the past with the newsstands, comic book stores, and alternative “hipster-distribution system.” I think this is the time for their work to be disseminated on a mainstream level and to truly enter other spheres of influence.

Since Los Bros Hernandez are one of the main research subjects in my academic career, I have read almost every single thing they have published and that is available. I have bought back issues on eBay, hardcover collections, smaller-format reprintings, iPad digital copies on comiXology, and old *Love and Rockets* merchandise. I have become as obsessed with their work as I am with my *Batman* collection, which is odd, considering one is not supposed to associate their work with crass consumption. To become a fan of Los Bros’ works can be a daunting task because it involves reading thousands of comic

book pages and remembering a complex continuity that can be as rough as knowing all the tidbits about Marvel Comics' *X-Men*. Scholar Derek Parker Royal comments on this complex collecting and reading phenomenon when he adds that it is likely one of the obstacles to integrating Gilbert and Jaime's comics in the classroom:

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.<sup>48</sup>

The two main massive storylines that are part of the *Love and Rockets* anthology are Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar* and Jaime Hernandez's *Locas*. Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar* saga originally took place in a small and geographically undisclosed town in Central America. The story did not have a main protagonist, focusing instead on the residents of the town. Among the most interesting stories in this saga are "Heartbreak Soup," which introduced the town of Palomar, and the critically acclaimed "Human Diastrophism," which deals with art, politics, and a serial killer on the loose in the town. However, readers have to understand that to really appreciate the nuances of a particular segment of the story, they have to have read the entire *Palomar* saga. What could help the reader acquire the necessary background is the fact that Fantagraphics has made the whole series available in two cheaper volumes called *Heartbreak Soup* and *Human Diastrophism*. Collectors can

also buy the whole narrative in one hardcover volume titled *Palomar: The Heartbreak Stories*.

During the *Palomar* storyline in the first run of *Love and Rockets*, the highly sexualized character of Luba began to gain more prominence and popularity. Gilbert revealed her origin in the critically acclaimed *Poison River* storyline, which was confusing to readers while it was being serialized but has now been better appreciated once it was collected as a graphic novel, currently included in the Fantagraphics collection *Beyond Palomar*.<sup>49</sup> Toward the end of the first volume of *Love and Rockets*, Luba's family and some of their neighbors move to the United States, where they become financially successful.

After the cancelation of the first *Love and Rockets* anthology, Gilbert continued Luba's storyline in three series: first in *Luba and Luba's Comics and Stories*, and then in the second volume of *Love and Rockets*. These stories were collected in three *Luba* volumes (*Luba in America*, *Ofelia's Book*, and *Three Daughters*) and in one hardcover (*Luba*). While this storyline is not part of the *Palomar* saga, due to the self-referential nature of the work, it makes more sense if the reader has read all the previous material too. One could say that besides the great character development, one of Gilbert's most interesting choices with his saga is how he shifted the story from representing a Latino idyllic vision of small towns in Latin America (*Palomar*) to a funny parody of decadent Latino bourgeoisie and unbridled sexuality (*Luba*). I will still refer to Luba's stories in America as part of the *Palomar* saga in the same way that most *Star Trek* fans would call *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise* part of the *Star Trek* universe and canon.



Luba. Gilbert Hernandez, *Beyond Palomar*, 179. © Gilbert Hernandez.

One of the most important characters developed by Gilbert Hernandez in his *Luba* saga is Fritz, Luba's half sister and homage to Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat*. She is another highly sexualized and controversial character, who begins her career as a therapist but then becomes a B-movie and low-budget genre-actress superstar. Fritz is a very prominent character in the *Luba* saga, but her stories are mostly collected in the volume *High Soft Lisp*. Currently, Gilbert is working predominantly on writing "graphic novels" out of Fritz's B movies, which include *Chance in Hell*, *The Troublemakers*, *Love and Shadows*. He also began to publish in 2013 another graphic novel showing Fritz's cinematic adaptation of the *Poison River* storyline (*María M*).

Most of Gilbert's work has been distributed by Fantagraphics, but his prestige has allowed him to occasionally work with mainstream publishers. He published a small *Iron Man* story in the miniseries *Marvel Tales*, a monthly comic for DC that was canceled (*Yeah!*), a miniseries (*Grip*) and a graphic novel (*Sloth*) for Vertigo (a DC Comics mature imprint), as well as a few miniseries for Dark Horse (*Speak of the Devil*, *Citizen Rex*, and *Fatima: The Blood Spinners*). In various online interviews, Gilbert has revealed that he likes to publish occasionally in the bigger companies because they offer higher remuneration rates.<sup>50</sup> However, he is not completely happy with the experience due to the pressures of a fast publishing schedule that he cannot control. One of the examples quoted by Gilbert Hernandez is how he could not finish the graphic novel *Sloth* because the Vertigo offices would not wait for him anymore and the editor wanted a clearer narrative.<sup>51</sup> He says that while many readers thought he had achieved something profound because of the obscure resolution of the book, it really was not his intention to provide a vague ending; rather, he was pressed for time and couldn't finish the storyline.<sup>52</sup>

Jaime has had a similar yet different career path from Gilbert. His *Locas* saga follows the lives of Maggie and Hopey, two young Latinas who were part of the 1980s punk movement in the United States. Unlike Gilbert's *Palomar* universe, where many of the main characters have recently immigrated into the United States, Jaime's Latinos are not first-generation immigrants, and the plots follow their lives, adventures, and misadventures in love while they grow up and mature. One of the better descriptions comparing the two brothers' aesthetics was provided by Derek Parker Royal:

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 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 comics.<sup>53</sup>

I would say the main difference between Gilbert's and Jaime's work is that Jaime has integrated more American comic book genres into the fabric of his *Locas* narrative. Maggie and Hopey's stories have presented science fiction, superheroes, wrestling, political adventures that somehow fit into the continuity established by Jaime and cannot be dismissed as dream sequences or other typical plot devices. Gilbert's narrative abounds in intertextual devices (for example, Fritz's movie adaptations of material previously published by Gilbert) and surrealist techniques, but Jaime's interconnects better with the American comic book industry and its comic readers. The beginning of the *Locas* saga has a science fiction bend, and the character of Penny Century is used to deconstruct the superhero narratives that have dominated the American industry. This intertextual playfulness allows the creator to develop in more detail some of the most critically acclaimed comic characters of all time.

Jaime's *Locas* saga has been published in the three volumes of *Love and Rockets* and a few miniseries such as *Penny Century* and *Whoa Nelly!* and the strip published by the *New York Times*. The *Locas* saga has been collected in two hardcovers, *Locas* and *Locas II*, and in five paperbacks, *Maggie the Mechanic*, *The Girl from H.O.P.P.E.R.S.*, *Perla La Loca*, *Esperanza*, and *Penny Century*. The saga resumed in the third volume of *Love and Rockets*, where it continues to this day and with no ending in sight. Just recently, Jaime's superhero adventure featuring Maggie and Penny Century has been collected in the volume *God and Science: The Return of the Ti-Girls*, adding another volume to the *Locas* saga. Jaime's freelance work has reached some mainstream success. He has not been interested in doing too much work out-

side *Love and Rockets* and Fantagraphics, but he has done illustrations for the *New Yorker* and the prestigious home video company Criterion.

As of 2014, Gilbert and Jaime have maintained a high profile with their recent work. The more prolific Gilbert just released (in 2013) two hardcover collections of material he had previously published in *Love and Rockets* (*Julio's Day* and *Marble Season*), to a media blitz of rave reviews. The artist granted interviews to several national venues such as NPR and the *Chicago Tribune*, as his *Marble Season* received wide acclaim in the industry and reached the No. 2 position on *The New York Times* best-seller list. *Julio's Day* has recently become one of the best-reviewed graphic novels, an important feat considering the controversial gender and queer issues within an ethnic context that it openly addresses. Another original graphic novel, *Maria M* (2013), has also caught critics' and audiences' attention with its complex reinterpretation of earlier *Palomar* stories. Jaime provided the illustrations for Junot Díaz's short story collection *This Is How You Lose Her* and, in 2014, published *The Love Bunglers*, a collection of his new groundbreaking Maggie stories that appeared recently in *Love and Rockets*. One could argue that at this point, the brothers' work has reached a peak in sales, popularity, and outstanding critical reception.