

12/19/17

ENGL 7800

The Postcolonial Roots of Trauma in Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar*

It's a longstanding rumor that Jack Kirby once told a young James Romberger that "comics will break your heart". Kirby created and worked on a variety of famous superheroes at both Marvel and DC from the 1940s to the 70s and created the genre of romance comics before suffering from the lack of creator rights in the comics industry. His artwork was confiscated and a good deal of his work was uncredited. Kirby, more than anyone else, understood the many ways in which the comics industry and medium can be unjust. I think about this quote often, and the first time I felt as if I came across a work that stood in defiance to the corporate-owned, white male-dominated world of comics was when I read Gilbert Hernandez's *Heartbreak Soup*. Here was a Mexican-American cartoonist telling the stories of Latinx characters — a good deal of whom are queer — in a creator-owned series that has been running for over thirty years. Hernandez's work in *Love & Rockets*, the series he created along with his brothers Jaime and Mario, expanded my idea of what comics can be through its scope, the people it depicted and the familiar traumas explored.

Gilbert Hernandez used to be held up as an example of ambitious "literary" comics, further marring his brother, Jaime's, early work as juvenile and of little artistic merit. These roles have reversed in recent years as Gilbert has abandoned the acclaimed Palomar stories in *Love & Rockets* in favor of indulging in B-movie tropes, humorously excessive violence, body horror, and sex. While Gilbert's early Palomar stories that begin with *Heartbreak Soup*, are commonly said to contain a simplicity and earnestness in the folk tale manner they are told in, the tone was

tempered with the consistent presence of intense physical trauma suffered by the majority of the characters. The shift in the portrayal of trauma that is deeply ingrained in the history of each character and Palomar itself is initiated in *Poison River*, Gilbert's first full-length comic. *Poison River* deviates from the traditional structure and setting of the earlier *Heartbreak Soup* stories.

I plan on arguing that the various characters in Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar* suffer from both individual and collective traumas that are rooted in postcolonialism, Western intervention in Latin America and more specifically, the Cold War. I intend to examine how Hernandez accomplishes this through visual elements and a manipulation of the comics medium. While Hernandez's depiction of trauma in the stories *Human Diastrophism* and *Poison River* are frequently viewed as his most political work, the methods used to argue that Hernandez grounds trauma in Latin American history often ignore the visual components of his work. By focusing on the visual and arguing that it is inextricable from Hernandez's exploration of trauma — even oftentimes relied on to signify the gravity of the trauma — I hope to call for a reading of Hernandez's work that examines his manipulation of the elements inherent to the comics medium that wordlessly communicates the suffering of a town.

Comics criticism is a relatively small field that is largely preoccupied with the legitimacy of the medium. Perhaps due to this concern, a good deal of criticism focuses on the same few works—Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Joe Sacco's journalistic comics—all of which are nonfiction. I've been interested in why the works that are written about the most within comics are largely nonfictional accounts of tragedy and trauma. It comes across as leaning on the testimonials of others to communicate the seriousness the medium is able to encompass as well as the seriousness it should be viewed with.

The prioritization of the text over the visuals furthers the idea that critiquing comics and engaging with them like any other work of literature will somehow legitimize them by ignoring the aspect of the medium considered most juvenile, the artwork.

The text that I plan to lean on the most in my argument is *How to Read Nancy* by Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden. Karasik and Newgarden detail 42 distinct elements of comics and by examining how they are at play in a single *Nancy* comic strip; they emphasize how these elements can be manipulated by a cartoonist to great effect. Some elements that I plan to use in my argument are second-panel transitions, panel size and background. Hernandez utilizes second panel transitions to quickly shift perspective and broaden the scope of *Palomar*, the backgrounds of which he keeps notably sparse, especially in comparison to his depictions of America. Hernandez typically adheres to a fixed grid, but occasional breaks with it and drastically alters the panel size to quickly shift perspective or pace. These elements are all integral to Hernandez's depictions of trauma, altering the way certain scenes are read or witnessed and using dramatic perspective shifts to create a jarring effect and emphasize the way Latinx individuals are rarely centered even in their own suffering.

Critics who have prominently written about Hernandez's work in *Love & Rockets* have neglected the visual and oftentimes attempted to use his depictions of trauma to make a larger statement about the medium. In *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez*, Aldama focuses on the history of Latino comics and devotes attention to several titles, including *Love & Rockets*. Aldama briefly touches on the various ways comics are typically analyzed and read, whether that be through a prioritization of the visual over the text or vice versa, and more rarely, an equal consideration of both. For the latter technique, Aldama praises Charles Hatfield, although in his own analyses of comics, he focuses on the narrative. I

plan to use Aldama's work to illustrate the dominant mode of reading comics, which is to prioritize the text.

For his part, Hatfield dedicates a chapter of his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* to Hernandez's *Palomar* stories. He primarily focuses on Hernandez's visual and stylistic techniques, mainly his treatment of space and time, as well as what he describes as a tendency to employ "a sliding scale of realism, drawing some characters (for example, children) broadly and wildly, but others (for example, prominent adult characters) in a more restrained, naturalistic way." (72). This variation in realism is prominent in *Human Diastrophism* and *Poison River*, the two longest stories I am focusing on, both of which mark a shift to the more realistic, leaving behind the more caricaturized expressions and mannerisms in the earlier and more folkloric *Palomar* stories. These two stories, as Hatfield admits, are largely about the political landscape in postcolonial Latin America across decades, necessitating the shift toward realism to better depict the trauma inflicted on various characters. Of *Poison River*, Hatfield writes that it "is shockingly different from the matriarchal retreat of Palomar, for *Poison River* surveys the political landscape of postcolonial Latin America in general, offering a dauntingly complex critique of the intersections between crime, political counterinsurgency, sex and sexism." (89)

In "Autoclastic Icons: Bloodletting and Burning in Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar*" by Christopher Pizzino and "Picturing the Transnational in *Palomar*: Gilbert Hernandez and the Comics of the Borderlands" by Jennifer Glaser, both critics reach outside of the work to ground Hernandez's depictions of trauma in the medium, positioning it as a commentary on comics as a whole, shifting the focus away from the region and characters. Pizzino argues that Hernandez's work depicts trauma heavily linked to burning and physical violence, which he equates to the

violence done to the comics medium after the obscenity trials of the 1950s. Meanwhile, Glaser argues that Hernandez's work is largely concerned with the transnational, a concept the comics medium is especially suited to depict, and claims that Hernandez links it to the format of comics itself. While both Glaser and Pizzino prioritize the alleged trauma of the medium over the trauma of the individual characters, both provide readings that are useful to my project. Glaser focuses on indigenous identity in *Palomar* and how characters of Indian background will revert to the traditions of that identity as the effects of the Cold War on Latin America intensify. This allows indigenous identity to be a way to differentiate oneself from American foreign policy and the way it and outsiders begin to encroach on the town of Palomar, effectively fashioning this identity into a form of resistance.

Pizzino, in his analysis of *An American in Palomar*, links the character of Miller to Hernandez, referring to him as the "creator-surrogate" (4). This connection aligns with my exploration of the ways Hernandez implicates the reader and himself as voyeuristic through his depictions of the traumas of others. Additionally, it leads into a discussion on the ability of art to effect social change, which I discuss in the context of *Poison River*. Gilbert very finely walks the line between making his characters more than sympathetic but subject to pity due to the unfair amount of trauma they suffer from. Pizzino's idea of the "creator-surrogate" has led me to question several aspects of *Palomar*. Is it fair to say that by depicting the suffering and trauma of Latinx characters in a fictionalized, but distinctly poor town, Hernandez subjects his characters to the same fetishistic gaze as characters like Miller? Is the reader implicated in this voyeuristic consumption of racialized trauma? Does Hernandez's drawing style, rendering a good deal of his female characters with outrageously large breasts, fetishize the very characters who are subject to these traumas?

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag examines the ways photography depicts trauma, specifically war, and how these depictions shape the effect these images have on people. She argues that after the Vietnam War was televised, images and footage of the violence of war have become a “ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen entertainment” (20). Additionally, the profusion of these images has affected the way people who have not personally experienced war understand it, giving these images a greater power in culture. This can be seen in *Human Diastrophism* when the photojournalist Howard Miller is shown in his home, where his girlfriend, Cathy, witnesses Tonantzin’s self-immolation on television without being aware of who she is. Cathy is visibly disturbed by witnessing this, but Miller does not even look at the television; instead, he casually categorizes this death he unknowingly had a hand in as commonplace, betraying how he has become inured to such descriptions. This argument can be extended to the reading of *Love & Rockets* itself. If consuming a stream of images, which comics essentially are, can desensitize us to the violence it depicts, does Hernandez’s goal in humanizing Latinx people in *Love & Rockets* ultimately result in him just making these images commonplace?

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman asks “is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? (2). After teaching a class where she has her students watch testimonials by Holocaust survivors, and noting the students’ difficulty in articulating its effect, Felman asserts that the burden of those who bear witness to trauma is a “radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden.” (3). If reading testimonies of trauma forces the reader to bear witness to this trauma, then the ways Hernandez relays his stories, through an anonymous but involved narrator, wordless depictions of violent trauma and the occasional shift in narrator creates a variety of

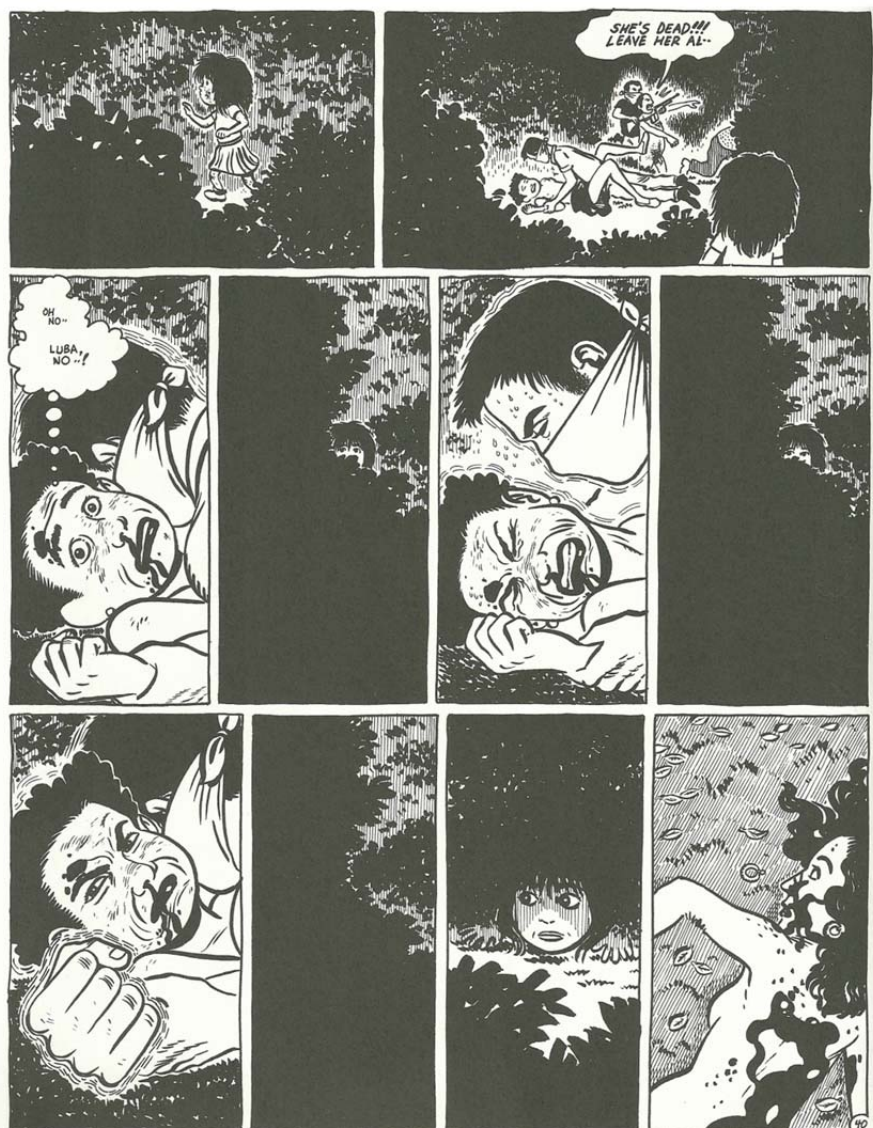
testimonials. These testimonials, whether conveyed wordlessly or through text are designed to provide the reader, or witness, with a variety of perspectives despite these testimonials all being the product of one man.

Finally, Ruth Ley's *Trauma: A Genealogy* presents the two major differences in critical approaches to trauma theory, the mimetic and anti-mimetic models, and explores them through an emphasis on the agency given, or deprived, by each model. Ley's notes the persistence of trauma and states that "the experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present (2). Not only is trauma portrayed as repetitive and persistent for the victim in *Palomar*, but the trauma a character experienced in the past oftentimes resurfaces in other residents of Palomar and lives on in them, forming a collective trauma.

The manner in which characters become the vehicles for other character's personal trauma is further shown, and with the largest impact, in the relationship between Ofelia and Luba. The familial relationship they have is predicated on their existence as distant cousins, but this is deepened by Ofelia's resentment and annoyance with Luba because she has to care for this young child while she believes she can be doing more productive things in her young revolutionary meetings. However, their relationship becomes the product of unspoken agreements and understandings, most notably the shaky fist that Ofelia holds up to Luba to communicate that she is to stay still and away from her, as shown in the following panel:



Luba's wide eyes and the lines drawn around her that mimic how shaken she is at the sight of this fist that has become an omen that she fears and understands becomes a crucial part of both her life and Ofelia's, most notably after Ofelia's rape and abuse at the hands of anti-revolutionary forces, as shown in the following panel:



It is the silent weight that Ofelia's shaken fist holds that saves Luba's life, as the sight of it prevented Luba from intervening on Ofelia's rape, causing her to watch it from the bushes. It is at this precise moment that the fist no longer simply signifies an expectation and a fear of what will come if Luba fails to meet this expectation, but it is now the physical embodiment of the moment that Luba recalled and relived at various moments of her life; it becomes the symbol of a trauma that is unknowingly shared between the two. Since *Poison River* served as a prelude to the events of the earlier *Heartbreak Soup* stories, this one scene provides the reasoning for many unexplained character traits. Ofelia's constant complaints about her back that she claims was

injured when a church fell on her, is actually the cause of this brutal rape, beating, and having to claw her way out of her own grave after she was buried and believed dead by her attackers.

Additionally, Luba's propensity to carry a hammer around is shown to have originated when she first becomes a banadora, and the reader sees her first use it to beat a man that tried to sexually assault her, the memory of Ofelia's attack undoubtedly being the cause for this safety measure. Hernandez's ability to take moments and character aspects that were previously disregarded as unnecessary quirks and give them a traumatic foundation that has reverberated through the history of these characters lives, as well as Palomar itself, lends the work added depth and illustrates how previous stories were both a product of stagnation and one moment in a cycle that began years before.

Luba's marriage, involvement in mob rule and drug abuse are laden with moments and instances that callback to Ofelia's attack. Ofelia's belief that Luba does not remember that night creates a barrier that does not allow either woman to move past it. Their previous ability to garner an understanding of one another without verbalizing it no longer exists upon Luba's return to her family home. In its place is a frantic desire to mask the lasting effect that night had on each woman, both aided and comprised by the resigned and oddly stoic look they maintain. This refusal to acknowledge the events of that night, let alone speak of it, reaches its climax when after Luba begins scolding Ofelia for losing the majority of their savings, Ofelia leaves the car and shakes her fist at her, as shown in the following page:



Here, every part of Ofelia is shaking with anger, and her fury is matched by her desperation and belief that her fist still holds the weight it once did. Ofelia's refusal to consider that Luba remembers her attack does not prepare her for Luba's response. The fist loses its power as a threat in that panel through its specific callback to Ofelia's rape. Although Ofelia has denied that Luba remembers her rape, the next panel expresses the realization that they both shared this

repressed trauma unknowingly for years. The dead-eyed look Luba gives Ofelia as she grabs her wrist highlights her refusal to let the many fears that were born that night continue to traverse themselves throughout her life and personal relationships, and the immediate transition to Luba's business in a new town on her eventual route to Palomar signifies that this shared trauma has been robbed of its destructive ability.

I plan on approaching my thesis by first contextualizing the critical conversation in comics, establishing the dominant mode of engaging with comics and the theorists who have put forth these modes. From there, I will make my argument about Hernandez's work and briefly touch on prominent criticisms of his work and their focus before highlighting the way my approach differs through a focus on the visual. Throughout my argument, I plan to use historical texts, namely Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, to contextualize the political climate in Latin America at the time Hernandez's stories are set in. By doing so, I hope to draw parallels between the economic exploitation of the region, the rise of political insurgents in the 1970s, and the historical treatment of Indigenous people in Latin America and the way Hernandez uses this history as an unspoken backdrop, allowing these factors to affect the lives of his characters in various ways. Finally, I will ground the connection between the traumas depicted and the visual elements through an examination of the way Hernandez uses character design, placement, backgrounds and even page and panel structure to communicate these traumas and not just echo the text.

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