

RICARDO QUINTANA-VALLEJO, GROWING UP IN THE GUTTER:  
DIASPORA AND COMICS

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*Growing Up in the Gutter. Diaspora and Comics* certainly represents a groundbreaking volume as nowadays still exists a gap between the production of graphic narratives and their academic consideration as artistic objects capable of addressing complex political questions. Quintana-Vallejo's monograph contributes to the filling of this gap by presenting a remarkable analysis of coming-of-age graphic narratives written by and for diasporic people, whose aim is to pave the way for a questioning and rethinking of the foundations and the boundaries of the well-established literary genre of the European *Bildungsroman*, and to do so by exploring the many expressive possibilities of the hybrid medium of comics.

The author centers his research on XXI century graphic fictional and nonfictional narratives of first- and second-generation migrants in America, who undertake paths of personal development within a socio-cultural context inevitably marked by the complex interaction between the culture of origin and that of the host country. The volume opens with a thorough introduction where two key concepts that appear in the title are discussed, namely growing up as a process of identity development that « can happen at different stages of life » (13) and the notion of diaspora as a «communal, forcible or nonvolitional displacement – often a last recourse when a community's alternative is homelessness, famine [...] and even genocide or death » (18).

To talk about the texts analyzed in the volume within the interpretative frame of coming-of-age (graphic) narratives allows the author to set aside the overly reductive definition of the *Bildungsroman*. It is since Karl Morgenstern's formulation in reference to Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795), that the term has come to indicate a narrative genre centered on the personal development of a white,

European, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied male hero who ends up conforming to the conservative values of a bourgeois sociocultural context that is also unrepresentative from a geographical point of view. On the contrary, the stories analyzed in the present volume revolve around a polymorphic notion of development, acknowledging that adulthood and maturity are porous rather than monolithic concepts, and they require the characters' individuality and personal desires to be negotiated against societal expectations. As Quintana-Vallejo argues, this is particularly true in diasporic contexts, which imply the existence of a group striving to retain and reproduce home culture in an alien and often hostile environment.

While the author had already engaged with coming-of-age plain-text novels in *Children of Globalization. Diasporic Coming-of-Age Novels in Germany, England, and the United States* (2020), here he chooses to stress out the potentiality of the visual language of comics (here, the word refers to self-contained rather than serial narratives) when it comes to represent the widest possible grammar of development of the characters engaging with the double trauma of growing and forging or accepting their real self in a context of displacement and discrimination. The volume is divided into four parts, each one exploring how the construction of identity of diasporic people intersects, respectively, with issues such as gender-based violence (chapter one), systemic racism and state violence (chapter two), queerness (chapter three) and, finally, the intergenerational burden of diaspora (chapter four). The chapters are named after significant binomials, which constitute the underlying themes on which the author builds his analysis (ghosts – color ; police brutality – black and white ; Queer/LGBTQ+ coming-of-age – the fantastic ; visual and textual – hybrid childhood). Indeed, as we navigate the book, the close reading of the graphic narratives goes far beyond thematic reading and encapsulates a medium-conscious analysis which accounts, among other rhetorical devices, for page composition, layouts, lines, bleeds, gutters, light and shadow, color palettes, showing how the interaction of this rich visual vocabulary works synergically with the verbal text to produce meaning and represent diasporic, coming-of-age narratives.

Chapter one focuses on Vera Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost* (2011), Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), and Gabby Rivera and Celia Moscote's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2020), three graphic novels that address the many, haunting faces of gender-based violence in diasporic contexts. Quintana-Vallejo borrows José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification (1999) to describe how the protagonists of these comics negotiate their own adulthood «against the expectations of both their ancestral community and their host society» (29), ending up with a rejection of the normative markers of maturity.

Chapter two examines the subgenre of testimonios through two black and white graphic narratives, namely *I am Alfonso Jones* (2017), by Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson and John Jennings, and *Manuelito* (2019), by Elisa Amado and Abraham Urias. Both iconotexts similarly rely on a documentary urgency to show how the coming-of-age process can be shattered by state-enforced violence that befalls individuals who are at once invisible and dangerous for the establishment.

In chapter three, the author effectively argues how queerness and magic overlap in their characteristics of excess, transgression and peripherality to the established order. The graphic novels analyzed here – *You Brought Me the Ocean* (2020) by Alex Sanchez and Julie Maroh; *The Magic Fish* (2020) by Trung Le Nguyen and *The Low, Low Woods* (2020) by Carmen Maria Machado and DaNi – display protagonists who «use magic and fantasy as sites for experimentation with queer desire and identity [...] and to figure out how their own eccentric personalities, desires and dreams fit into their processes of development» (100). The notion of disidentification as a fundamental strategy along the coming-of-age pathway of queer, diasporic people of color, returns here employed against normative heterosexuality and traditional gender roles.

Finally, chapter four moves onto graphic narratives which feature accounts of diasporic childhoods and which are designed for readers under the age of eight: *Where Are You From?*, (2019) by Yamile Saied Méndez and Jaime Kim; *Eyes That Kiss in The Corners* (2021), by Joanna Ho and Dung Ho; *Areli Is a Dreamer* (2021), by Areli

Morales and Luisa Uribe; and *My Two Border Towns* (2021), by David Bowles and Erika Meza.

The author stresses the didactic possibilities of coming-of-age graphic narratives, emphasizing the indissolubility of the text-image system to produce meaning in comics; specifically, these texts remind younger audiences that developmental processes do not need to conform to a standardized idea of maturity and, instead, the pathway to a healthy adulthood is marked by tolerance, self-acceptance and cultural hybridity.

The remarks presented in the final chapter pave the way for the conclusions of the volume, which stress once again the necessity to rethink the Eurocentric *Bildungsroman* by employing instead the more porous and inclusive framework of coming-of-age narratives. The monograph critically analyzes a genre and a medium still on the fringes of the hegemonic culture (respectively, minor literatures and comics), convincingly demonstrating that their encounter produces a much-needed militant literature, which is valuable in redefining what it really means to create one's own adulthood in a context of diaspora and injustice.

*Nota biografica*

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