

SHARED COORDINATES: WRITING *HERSTORY* IN IBERO AMERICAN COMICS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the emergence of a transnational sisterhood under three projects originating from the cooperation between groups of female comic book writers in Spain and Latin America. After the 2016 exhibition “Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy” and the publication of its catalogue by Autoras de Cómic, there was a shared need to claim back the role of female or non-male authorship, and its involvement in comic book production and business. The Argentinian group Feminismo Gráfico tapped into such endeavors, and in 2019 produced “Nosotras Contamos”, a travelling exhibition and a catalogue, with a thematic and a diachronic approach. When COVID-19 broke out, Spanish and Argentinian cooperation and development institutions (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo and Centro Cultural España Córdoba) engaged in a discussion on the previous experiences. The project resulted in a publication and an online exhibition *Coordenadas Gráficas* (Graphic Coordinates), highlighting the work of non-male authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica. The transnational perspective of this last project extends beyond the previous national experiences and includes a meaningful selection of comic stories that, regardless of the nationality of the author, can be defined as feminist. Sexism, gender discrimination, gender violence, and sexual and reproductive rights are the shared coordinates discussed by this long list of authors, who question gender normativity from its very composition. By introducing the associative experiences that gave life to the projects and analyzing them in the international context, the study will focus on the appropriate practice of sharing knowledge to pursue a similar recognition. Moreover, based on the words of the curators and the creators, the study ultimately seeks to shed light on the production and circulation of works of collective interest, meant to recover the role of women in the history of comics.

KEYWORDS

feminist collective, exhibition, *herstory*, genealogy, history of comics

COORDENADAS PARTILHADAS: A ESCRITA DA *HERSTORY* NA BANDA DESENHADA IBERO-AMERICANA

RESUMO

Este estudo centra-se no surgimento de uma sororidade transnacional através de três projetos que resultam da cooperação entre grupos de autoras de banda desenhada em Espanha e na América Latina. Após a exposição “Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy”, em 2016, e a publicação do seu catálogo pelo coletivo Autoras de Cómic, surgiu uma necessidade comum de reivindicar o papel da autoria feminina, ou não masculina, e o seu envolvimento na produção e no negócio da banda desenhada. Este esforço foi rapidamente assumido pelo grupo argentino Feminismo Gráfico que, em 2019, produziu “Nosotras Contamos”, uma exposição itinerante e um catálogo, com uma abordagem temática e diacrónica. Aquando da pandemia de COVID-19, as instituições de cooperação e desenvolvimento espanholas e argentinas (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo e Centro Cultural España Córdoba)

iniciaram um diálogo sobre as experiências anteriores. O projeto deu origem a uma publicação e a uma exposição *online* intitulada *Coordenadas Gráficas*, que destaca o trabalho de autores não masculinos de Espanha, da Argentina, do Chile e da Costa Rica. A perspetiva transnacional deste último projeto ultrapassa as experiências nacionais anteriores e, mais importante, inclui uma seleção de histórias de banda desenhada que, independentemente da nacionalidade da autora, podem ser definidas como feministas. Sexismo, discriminação de género, violência de género e direitos sexuais e reprodutivos são as coordenadas comuns discutidas por este grupo alargado de autoras, que questionam a normatividade de género desde a sua própria composição. Ao apresentar as experiências associativas que deram vida aos projetos e ao analisá-las num contexto internacional, o estudo centrar-se-á na prática adequada de partilha de conhecimentos para obter um reconhecimento semelhante. Além disso, através das palavras das curadoras e das criadoras, o estudo pretende, em última análise, lançar luz sobre a produção e a circulação de obras de interesse coletivo, destinadas a recuperar o papel das mulheres na história da banda desenhada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

coletivo feminista, exposição, *herstory*, genealogia, história da banda desenhada

1. INTRODUCTION

In Spanish, *presentes* is the plural form of “present”, a multi-faceted word that conveys — as does its literal English translation— both the concepts of something existing at the time it is considered and something which is in view or under consideration. It is also a noun, meaning gift. With all its relevant differences in meaning, *Presentes* is the title chosen by the Colectivos de Autoras de Cómic for their first important project¹. In November 2016, the homonymous exhibition opened at the Real Academia de España in Rome; since then it has been on exhibition in dozens of towns, both in Europe and Latin America. The exhibition “Presentes. Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy” was originally organized and promoted by the above-mentioned group with the support of the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo (AECID), and then developed into a catalogue (Berrocal et al., 2016). *Presentes* is, above all, the first of three similar projects we will focus on in this review: *Nosotras Contamos* (2019) by Feminismo Gráfico, an Argentinian feminist author collective, and *Coordenadas Gráficas* (2020), which unites European and Latin American experiences.

2. THE GENEALOGICAL APPROACH

The three different experiences have many features in common: the projects were developed by women curators or women collectives. Secondly, they explore both exhibition and publishing activities and, finally, they are openly intertwined. Considering the importance of the historical element as “a kind of historical accident, a product of a

¹ On the web page of Academia Real in Rome the joke goes further with the exhibition claim and plays with the words: “female comics authors are presents. Female comics authors are *the* present”. Echoes of the same pun are to be found in Marina Abramovich’s famous extended performance “The Artist Is Present”.

specific historical situation” (White, 1978, p. 29), the projects move indeed from the acknowledgment that the history of comic books in Spain and Latin American countries has been told and made exclusively by male authors and readers. The first aim of the project was “highlighting the role of Spanish female comics artists in the comics industry” (Berrocal & McCausland, 2017, p. 135) and that would be achieved through a gender-oriented point of view combined with a genealogical approach. The latter has been defined as the “retrieval exercise of the sociohistorical memory as an investigative method” (Restrepo, 2016, p. 23).

The genealogical approach comes into play in the production of the exhibitions and catalogues and, in the case of *Presentes*, it is clearly stated in the time indication, *de ayer y de hoy* (yesterday and today). As Alejandra Meriles (2019) explains:

starting from the recovery of individual history, the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic succeeded in showing the genealogy between the women comic artists who worked and the ones now working in the comic industry. Intergenerational links are exposed as a net made up of 52 works, structured by style or topic, similar or opposed pairs. (...) The works are exposed neither in chronological nor in a lineal way (...). Although the panels drawn or scripted by women were exposed together with informative texts, the relation among style, line, or topic which united every female author did not follow any chronology. It was the frequency and the line of questioning, how stories and narrative plots were graphically treated and resolved which united women comic artists belonging to different moments of the Spanish comic industry, now delocalized and present worldwide. (p. 135)

This same genealogical perspective can be of course labeled as *feminist*, not only because of the emancipating virtues of the act of searching, selecting and compiling (McCausland, 2016), but mainly because it is applied to the deconstruction of a male-centered and male-told history of comics, where women are ostensibly absent (Acevedo, 2020). In this respect, the female authors who appear in the exhibition and catalogue of *Presentes* provided great contributions in the past, but were forgotten by history. They are now retrieved by a new feminist perspective and have finally been given the opportunity to intertwine artistic relations, as this is a “sisterhood time, a present mediated by feminist winds, a promise for a fairer, more horizontal and participated future” (McCausland, 2016, p. 39). The collectives responsible for the three experiments considered — Colectivo Autoras de Cómic, founded in Spain in 2013, Feminismo Gráfico, based in Argentina, and last but not least, the spontaneous, informal, and transoceanic join-venture formed by the curators Elisa McCausland and Mariela Acevedo — share the aim to reclaim space and make their work visible by retrieving the female author presence in the past, “upon our her-ancestors’ shoulders” (Miralles, 2014, p. 6).

3. PRESENTES

According to the curators Elisa McCausland and Carla Berrocal, the structure of both the exhibition and the catalogue pushes the genealogic proposal one step forward if compared to a few exhibitions organized before by Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic², highlighting the similarities between the works of female authors in content and form. By using different symbols and colors, the curators establish connections between the authors presented, whose relationships are based on five main thematic axes, as described in the introduction of the catalogue by McCausland, that can be translated as “what a body can do”; “playing, growing up, dreaming”; “there are other worlds and they all are inside this world”; “from the kiosk to the bookshop”; “from the bookshop to the net”. The catalogue includes two essays. The first one is by Antoni Guiral³, who signs a brief history of female presence in 20th century history of comics, starting from the middle 1930s and the Civil War, up to the so-called *magazine boom*. Guiral tries to answer the self-directed question about the reason why there have been so few female authors in the history of Spanish comics and begins admitting that “the latter is a male industry, edited by men, produced by men, and directed to male readers”. The other essay is signed by the Spanish female critic Ana Merino⁴, who points out the important role of female underground comic authors in setting new trends in feminist introspection in the United States, highlighting the difference between that movement and the recent Latin American one. Women artists seem to have been absent in a male-dominated world for a long while; feminist genealogy applied to the history of comics helps the activists involved write and draw up a completely new *herstory*. As McCausland (personal communication, 2023) points out:

what is important about feminist genealogy is the process that is itself inclusive. As stated by Patricia Mayayo in *Genealogía Feminista del Arte Español* [Mayayo, 2013], inspired by Teresa Alario and Ana de Miguel, recognizing genealogy, entering it, means challenging one of the basic cultural codes: the patriarchal tendency to conceive every work, every woman’s claim as if it came from the void, absolutely extraordinary. A far more appealing concept.

4. WRITING HERSTORY

We consider incomplete any history based on unperishable traces. (Lonzi, 1970, p. 16)

² The travelling exposition “Ellas Toman los Lapices, el Espacio y la Palabra” (Sevilla, Valencia, and Barcelona, 2016) and “Mujeres de Tinta” (Madrid, Expocomic 2014).

³ Antoni Guiral is a writer of comics and expert based in Barcelona.

⁴ Ana Merino is the director of the Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts at Iowa University; she is a poet, a novelist, a critic and a curator. Her production also includes important essays about Spanish comics such as *El Cómic Hispano* (The Hispanic Comic; Catedra, 2003) and a monography about American cartoonist Chris Ware (Sinsentido, 2015).

This sentence is included in *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* (Women's Revolt Manifesto): in this pamphlet, Italian feminist author Carla Lonzi (1970) refers to the absence of women in the productive system and in the process of creating tangible wealth, to show that traditionally feminine tasks like cleaning the house, raising kids, and general caretaking are “moves made of air”, perishable actions that cannot be considered as a *real* product, despite being at the same time essential for production to be created and become a reality. Shifting to the history of a specific art production, the experiences here analyzed stem from a similar situation. According to Antoni Guiral, as gender equality was not promoted by politics until the years of transition (from Franco's death to the late 1980s), the presence of women in the labor market, and consequently in the comic industry, was weak. Official comics industry historiography in Spanish-speaking countries included very few women. Moreover, as highlighted by several authors (Autoras de Cómic, 2017), by not mentioning feminine roles, credits have been wrongly awarded indirectly to the male artists whose presence has always been documented. Nevertheless, recent studies — such as the one conducted by Arantza Argudo Martínez (2020) — have focused on the presence of women artists in Spanish comics production and tried to “fill the void and silence perpetuated by the bibliography of art and comic studies in relation to the work of female authors in this field” (p. 10). It is nearly impossible to think of any form of cultural expression that can develop autonomously from a political setting; this statement is even more meaningful in Iberian and Latin American contexts, which witnessed harsh repressions during the time of dictatorships. While North American and French feminists began gathering around the self-produced comics experiences of the 1970s⁵, Spanish women artists still lived under Francoism. It was in recent years, under the fourth wave feminism outburst, that the French Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée contre le Sexisme (<https://bdegalite.org/>) was founded to keep the fight against sexism and gender inequality alive in the 21st century; this French collective inspired Spanish female authors to found the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic. As it is well stated in the French manifesto, feminism is “the fight for gender equality; an antisexist posture that we want to replicate in our environment, because we want comics to be a more equalitarian space” (“Sobre el Colectivo Autoras de Cómic”, n.d.). The genealogical approach of the works analyzed thus sheds light on an incomplete history of comics, one without or with very few female authors. In order to rewrite not just a *story-telling* but a *story-questioning*, the collective chose to retrieve the names that have been cancelled or made invisible (Acevedo, 2020). *Herstory* of Argentinian comics proposed by the collective Feminismo Gráfico is both ethical and aesthetic and it comes into existence through their exhibition and catalogue *Nosotras Contamos*, which follows the same diachronic and thematic criteria laid down before by the Spanish experience *Presentes*. Once again the collective resorts to a smart and allusive title, stretching the potential of language as the verb *contar* means in Spanish both *to tell* and *to count*. As Acevedo (personal communication, March, 9th, 2023) explains:

⁵ A group of female authors gathered around the experience of *Wimmen's Comix*, an underground comics anthology published from 1972 to 1992, coordinated by Trina Robbins. Something similar happened in France with *Ah! Nana*, founded in 1976 by the female authors involved in producing underground magazine *Metal Hurlant*.

Presentes was such an inspiring work. (...) It was the model we followed: we wanted to create a dialogue between authors belonging to different generations, recording contents, moods, and nuances of every time considered, bearing in mind that this should always be an open system, ready to be reformulated and to be connected to other forms. This present burst of female authors is in debt with colleagues from different eras, including those who still aren't in the catalogue, because they were obscured by the shadow of fathers, brothers, and husbands, who went into history. (...) Many women were colorists or scriptwriters and they were cut out from history. Our genealogies want to make these absences visible, although we are well aware that they will never be exhaustive lists.

In a geographic context where “graphic narratives have become an important artistic space of feminist resistance” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 166), the catalogue of *Feminismo Grafico* inherits the Spanish experience. The catalogue insists on the *herstoric* perspective with a general timeline opening the book and a clear temporal organization of the forgotten production of female comics, divided into four chapters which introduce the protagonists of comic *herstory* as “las pioneras” (the pioneers), “las okupas” (the squatters), “las fanzineras” (the zinesters). It is impossible to ignore how this experience contributed to the construction of a “*feminine territoriality* as coined by the Spanish comic scholar Ana Merino (...) which helped to promote an awareness of the field’s genealogy, historicity, and interconnectivity” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 169). The catalogue provides a sort of *legenda* made of symbols to which the curator refers to as “thematic spots” (Acevedo et al., 2019, p. 9). These become fundamental to connect the work of the aforementioned artists and to create a conceptual net and a virtual dialogue, enhancing the meaning of their unrecognized presence in male-gazed history of comics. Promoting the construction of an antisexist environment leads to the creation of a space where non-stereotyped gender identities are included. Argentinian authors belonging to the collective *Feminismo Gráfico*, who promoted *Nosotras Contamos* (again as a travelling exhibition and a catalogue), state :

woman as a category was too tight to include mates who don’t identify just as women, but lesbian, non-binaries, or dissident. We use *female authors* not to define a closed space where to catalogue the works of our colleagues, but as a fragile border that we have been drawing together. (Acevedo et al., 2019, p. 6)

5. JOINING FORCES

The following step was obvious: the Centro Cultural España-Córdoba⁶ fostered dialogue between Spanish and Argentinian experiences dedicated to the construction of female comic authors’ genealogies. Elisa McCausland and Mariela Acevedo, who had

⁶A mixed institution formed by the Agencia Española para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo and the Municipalidad de Córdoba.

been among the curators of the former experiences, joined forces and together with Paloma Domínguez Jería and Isabel Molina from Chile and Iris Lam from Costa Rica, created a “transnational *herstoric* initiative” (McCausland et al., 2020). *Coordenadas Gráficas. Cuarenta Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica* (Graphic Coordinates. Forty Comic Strips by Authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica) is the experiment in which the sisterhood among women and LGBT representative comic authors becomes transnationally real, as well as “the first broader investigation of female comic production in Latin American from a transnational perspective” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 169). The book is a sign of the untold, yet unfolding *herstory* and, more importantly, it represents a space where women comic artists can meet and talk to each other, defining themselves as a large community, a net that is expanding beyond gender and geographic borders, an ongoing genealogic construction. The hybrid character of the single comic author’s groups — institutional, academic, activist — is not a limit but a booster in the development of this third catalogue. Unlike the previous experiences, among the pages of *Coordenadas Gráficas* longer *historietas* (comic strips) are included and shown in the virtual exhibition; in fact, along with the author’s profile, one or two brief comic stories are presented. The catalogue is divided into four parts corresponding to the different countries, opening with a focus on Argentinian national comics history. The approach is now openly feminist, as the curators have declared and considered in their previous works how male presence in the comics industry determined women’s absence; in their introductions to the recompilations, words such as “underestimation”, “omission”, “legitimization”, “revelation”, “patriarchy”, “misogyny”, “resistance”, “plurality”, and “self-recognition” reveal a new shared awareness (McCausland et al., 2020).

6. COMMUNITY AS A BODY LEARNING TO FIGHT

When I started to promote the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic, I had no clue, I didn’t consider myself a feminist. For me, it was just a way to answer the omission we suffered as women comic artists. Then I started becoming aware as a lesbian and a feminist. (Berrocal, personal communication, February 21, 2023)

An important contribution regarding the relationship between the narrative in comics and feminism comes from Hilary Chute’s (2015) works. Interested in demonstrating “how texts in comics model a feminist methodology in their form” (p. 200), Chute is interested in the representation of the body; in graphic narratives, the proliferation of bodies and in general the process of embodiment of different selves in the space of a single page and sometimes overlapping in time, marks a feminist narrative practice. As she writes, “the form of comics powerfully addresses itself to the linkages between life-writing and feminist theory” (Chute, 2015, p. 200). If we shift from the space of the page of an autobiographic comic to the space of an exhibition — whether real or virtual — that presents the existence and the work of women comic artists who have been retrieved

from the official historiography of the medium, it may be easier to understand how these genealogic reconstructions of different and intertwined *herstories* go beyond the simple didactic purpose to eventually generate self-knowledge and collective awareness. We share Sánchez's (2023) definition of "comics as models of the Latin American territory (...) a reading that conceives memory as a display, (...) a representation of facts, bodies, and truths, corporal stability of the witness and the characters of the comics" (p. 150). According to this interpretation, the exhibitions and the catalogues — as well as comics — can be seen and read as the sparks of a new sisterhood, a *corpus*, to which the readers or the visitors can award the same power as the single comic reading experience can have on an individual level in the creation of feminist self-narrative. Studying the show *Presentes* as a "virtuoso montage example", Alejandra Meriles (2019b) comments:

the pedagogic effect of this (exposition) design is double. Not only they are writing the story of a community which, until now, could not recognize itself, but they are showing how the historical account written on the wall of a museum today, was yet there yesterday, in the pages of comics. (p. 1)

The initial genealogical approach has now acquired a solid, worldwide geographic dimension. The shared coordinates are both temporal and spatial and the projects themselves convey a significant double nature, which reminds us of the cross-discursiveness of the language itself of comics, a medium in which we are asked to look at pictures and read words, and vice versa. As the curators of *Coordenadas Gráficas* remark, "as genealogical instruments, the projects emphasize the relevance of women in comic history, but more importantly, promote the expansion of the medium and allow its protagonist to recognize as a sisterhood, without borders" (McCausland et al., 2020).

Presentes, *Nosotras Contamos*, and *Coordenadas Gráficas* are the main parts of a constantly evolving body, learning to understand itself as a shared "under construction territory (...) promoting visibility from collectiveness, counting on its tendency to create community" (McCausland et al., 2020, p. 10).

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