

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: WONDER COMICS. REDRAWING GENDER IN IBERO-AMERICAN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA: BD MARAVILHA. REDEFININDO O GÉNERO NAS NARRATIVAS GRÁFICAS IBERO-AMERICANAS

Nicoletta Mandolini

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Cristina Álvares

Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho, Escola de Letras,
Artes e Ciências Humanas, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

María Márquez López

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain

Comics and graphic novels — or graphic narratives, as some prefer to call them (Chute & DeKoven, 2006) — are a growingly successful medium worldwide, both in popularity and critical recognition. In recent years, the emergence and spreading of the graphic novel, a format that is generally associated with “longer-length and adult-themed comics” (Baetens & Frey, 2015, p. 1) and with distribution channels (namely, bookshops) previously precluded the medium, allowed graphic narratives to enjoy a new renaissance in many areas of the globe. It also worked as a *laissez-passer* for comics to be recognised in areas of scholarly research that have traditionally proved reluctant towards the ninth art, such as that of literary studies. Moreover, the advent of what Manuel Castells (2004) has labelled “network society” to identify the constantly expanding influence that information technology and communication have in our daily lives has significantly widened graphic narratives’ spectrum of reception, and it continues to play a pivotal role in re-shaping comics’ affordances. Digital, internet and social media comics are, nowadays, a reality whose complex dynamics have been studied within a flourishing sub-field of research (Busi-Rizzi, 2023; Busi-Rizzi et al., 2023; Wilde, 2015) that is rapidly overcoming its disciplinary boundaries by gradually finding space and appreciation in other, broader, areas, such as those of cultural studies and communication sciences.

Both the graphic novel format and the digital comics phenomenon have significantly impacted the visibility assigned to gender non-hegemonic authors and the representation of gender-related issues. The graphic novel is a format that, as scholars have pointed out (Baetens & Frey 2015, pp. 10–13), provides a privileged platform for non-fictional narratives and, among these, for life stories such as graphic memoirs, graphic biographies and graphic diaries/journals. Being life narratives such as autobiographies and biographies a creative practice that women writers and other marginalised subjectivities have historically re-worked and re-appropriated (Kadar, 1992, p. 5; Henke, 1998; Cooke, 2020, pp. 7–8), it is not surprising that many outstanding authors experimenting with the graphic novel are women and queer artists. In this sense, it is enough to think of

prominent and already canonised names such as Julie Doucet, Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, Liv Strömquist and Jul' Maroh. Digital comics, on the other hand, have contributed to the democratisation of publishing processes by allowing categories of comics creators who have been historically excluded from the industry to experiment with platforms (like crowdfunding websites, membership platforms or social media) that break the hierarchical model cultivated by the traditional publishing sector, thus proposing more horizontal and accessible dynamics for comics' production, distribution and consumption. This "reduces the risk of exclusion for authors and promotes the inclusion of consumers by facilitating the creation of communities able to aggregate non-hegemonic social groups and give them a voice" (Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023, p. 110). Women and trans-creators are among the identity categories that, despite continuing to be discriminated against and harassed even in the digital space, most have taken advantage of and benefitted from the technological shift (Gandolfo & Turnes, 2020; Chakraborty, 2022; Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023).

As a result of these changes, the old reputation of comics as a medium where sexism is widespread, gendered discrimination is normalised, and disruptions to this sexist pattern can be found only in the niche field of the underground (Aldama, 2021, p. 1), is slowly abandoning the ninth art, and even comics mainstream giants are making an evident effort towards gender equality, often coupling this with a corresponding attempt to promote other types of inclusivity aimed at avoiding racial, classist and ableist representations. Studies on this matter have shown how women and gender non-conforming characters, while still underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed, are progressively gaining more relevance in publications distributed by major comics publishers like Marvel or DC (Billard & MacAuley, 2017, p. 233).

Even scholarly discussions have clearly reflected this positive trend by assigning more space to analysing comics-based cultural products authored by women and gender non-conforming creators or focusing on gender-related topics. Scholarly volumes have been dedicated to a diversified range of issues pertaining to the gender spectrum. The first mention is to Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010), a pillar in the study of women graphic novelists and an unavoidable reference for scholars interested in comics and gender in the Northern American context and beyond. Equally crucial is the work by the feminist comics historian and author Trina Robbins, whose *Pretty in Ink* (2013) retraces the history of women cartoonists in the United States from the XIX century to the present. Sara Zanatta, Smanta Zanghini and Eleonora Guzzetta's *Le Donne del Fumetto* (Women in Comics; 2009), Jennifer H. Prough's *Straight From the Heart: Gender, Intimacy, and Cultural Production of Shōjo Manga* (2010), Toku Masami's *International Perspectives on Shōjo and Shōjo Manga: The Influence of Girl Culture* (2015), Mel Gibson's *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood* (2015), Michelle Ann Abate's *Funny Girls. Guffaws, Guts, and Gender in Classic American Comics* (2018), *The Inking Woman. 250 Years of Women Cartoon and Comic Artists in Britain* (2018), edited by Nicola Streeten and Cath Tate, Julia Round's *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019), Nicola Streeten's *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics* (2020), *Comic Art and Feminism in the*

Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives (2021), edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten et al., and *Sugar, Spice, and the Not So Nice: Comics Picturing Girlhood* (2023), edited by Eva Van de Wiele and Dona Pursall are other additions to the set of scholarly books on girls, women and feminism in the comics world. Gender, comics and the superhero genre are other popular intersections of inquiry for contemporary scholars, as demonstrated by the recent publication of volumes such as *Elisa McCausland's Wonder Woman. El feminismo Como Superpoder* (Wonder Woman. Feminism As Superpower; 2017), *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (2018), edited by Michael Goodrum, Tara Prescott and Philip Smith, Carolyn Cocca's *Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film* (2020) and Esther De Dauw's *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (2021). More general book-length publications on the matter include the *Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comics Books Studies* (2021), edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, Sandra Cox's *Intersectional Feminist Readings of Comics: Interpreting Gender in Graphic Narratives* (2021), and *À Coups de Cases et de Bulles: Les Violences Faites aux Femmes Dans la Bande Dessinée* (Panel and Bubble Blows: Violence Against Women in Comic Strips; 2023), edited by Frédéric Chauvaud, Lydie Bodiou, Jean-Philippe Martin, Héloïse Morel. Special issues of internationally recognised academic journals have also addressed the topic. These include "Superheroes and Gender", edited by Peter Coogan, Mel Gibson, David Huxley, Joan Ormrod and Derek Royal for *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2011); "Wonder Woman Symposium Issue", edited by Vera J. Camden and Valentino L. Zullo for *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2018); "Feminist Comics in an International Frame", edited by Sally Munt and Rose Richards for *Feminist Encounters* (2020); "Feminist Discourse in Comics & Graphic Novels", edited by Houman Sadri and Anna Misiak for *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* (2023).

The clear Anglo-centered focus of most publications mentioned so far is not a coincidence. On the contrary, it mirrors the hegemonic role that Anglo-American culture had and continues to have in the production of scholarly research and criticism on gender-related issues and graphic narratives. As a consequence, much is left out in terms of comics productions arising from other cultural contexts and written in languages other than English. While it is true that feminist and queer comics authors exist in many geo-cultural contexts, a bigger and more consistent effort needs to be made so their work is not invisibilised or marginalised as a result of the strong heteropatriarchal imprinting of the societies where they belong and as an outcome of the shortcomings of the anglo-dominated international scholarly sector.

This thematic issue is titled *Wonder Comics. Redrawing Gender in Ibero-American Graphic Narratives*. It aims precisely at this exercise of critical redirection by investigating the role of gender in the production, consumption and circulation of graphic narratives created in the Ibero-American context, a vast and heterogeneous container of cultural spaces linked by common historical, linguistic and political traits. In Ibero-American countries (Spain, Portugal and the vast array of countries of Latin America), comics (otherwise called *cómic*, *historietas*, *historias em quadrinhos* or *banda desenhada*) have traditionally represented a significant share of the cultural productions and communication

modes. In recent years, graphic narratives' popularity has reached new heights in these countries, most of the times capitalising on an already existing propensity to treat comics as a crucial medium in the context of national cultural production (let us think, for example, at the historical importance of the Argentinian *historieta*, but also at the political relevance that *HQs* — *histórias em quadrinhos* — have had throughout the years of the dictatorship and post-dictatorship in Brazil). This is coupled with the emergence of advanced and, in some cases, globally successful feminist movements and theories on the issue of gender discrimination and violence, which have often found in the comics medium a friendly ally that has facilitated the dissemination of feminist and queer political messages. Examples here include the Argentinian movements for the legalisation of abortion and against femicide (*Ni Una Menos*): both were sustained by feminist graphic narratives that helped spreading the political messages on social and traditional media (Gandolfo & Turnes, 2020, p. 3; Alarcon & Rosa, 2016, pp. 73–79); similarly, in Brazil, comics and graphic novels have been recently used by a plethora of emerging transfeminist authors to denounce the violence of heteropatriarchal culture (Crescêncio, 2021; Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023; Lelis & Lima, 2023); in Spain, comics artists and cartoonists are among those who reacted to the minister Alberto Ruiz Gallardón's menace of limiting reproductive rights in 2014 by organising an online campaign called *Wombastic* (Márquez López, 2018; Bettaglio, 2023); in Chile a social mobilisation happened at the end of 2019 for which a graphic call was hosted by the Plataforma de Investigación, Discusión y Toma de Posición Colectiva Desde América Latina (RedCSur) with hashtags such as #No+ denouncing the sexual violence exercised against women protesters by the carabinieri; in Bolivia, also in 2019, RedCSur replicated the call with #Whipalazo organised among other groups by the publication *Matria* to denounce sexual violence against *cholas* in social mobilisations. Despite the abundance of interconnections between gender politics and the creation of comics in the Ibero-American context, only scattered articles or book chapters have been published on the subject. No systematic analysis, monograph or special collections have been dedicated to the topic. This special issue aims to provide a first contribution that will, we hope, stimulate research and methodical reflections on the matter.

The decision to explore gender issues in comics production and consumption concerning a wide conceptual container such as Ibero-American culture is not a neutral choice. It is, on the contrary, a decision that brings with it potential ethical and methodological problems, given the clear (and sometimes wide) differences that characterise both the societal approach towards gender in the countries that belong to the Ibero-American world and the relationship that the same countries entertain with the comics medium. The first substantial problem that needs to be mentioned is the inclusion, within the Ibero-American container, of countries belonging to antithetical geo-political paradigms, namely to the global north (Spain and Portugal) and to the global south (Brazil and the *América hispanohablante*). This divide, which is deeply connected to the colonial legacy that continues to create links and hierarchies between European and Southern or Central American countries, has shaped the theoretical efforts and the political practices

of feminist thinkers and movements. In this sense, Latin American feminists have demonstrated a propensity towards intersectional thinking aimed at analysing gendered discriminations in connection with the racial and classist inequalities that women and gender non-conforming subjects often experience in the global south. These reflections have been introduced in Spain and Portugal only through a derivative exercise that is still struggling to contaminate the mostly white and middle-class European feminist tradition. This is not surprising if, with Raka Shome (2016), we acknowledge “the importance of recognising how unequal global relations (of culture and economy) continually articulate the politics of gender in any local context, and how local relations are always at work in macro global processes” (p. 255). Another worth mentioning divide is the relevance of graphic narratives within the *milieu* of national cultural productions. In some countries, like Spain, Argentina and Brazil, mentioned above, comics have traditionally played a central role, as demonstrated by the fact that their distribution and consumption shaped the education of generations of readers (an example would be the historical *TBO* in Spain, where the impact of the national Catholic ideology of the Franco dictatorship on publications for girls with powerful indoctrinating messages about sexism and motherhood should not be ignored) and reached dimensions that went way beyond national borders (let us think about the transnational iconographic relevance of characters like Quino’s Mafalda or Mauricio de Sousa’s Mônica). In other countries, such as Portugal, graphic narratives have always struggled to reach popular and critical recognition, which relegated the ninth art to marginality or, in lucky cases, to the underground niche. Notwithstanding these dissimilarities, we believe that the concept of Ibero-America proves able to provide a functional critical category where the dialogue arising from historical and political connections can be taken into account, together with the set of transnational links that old and recent migration flows guarantee. Not to mention the common virtual sphere in which language-based networks overcome national borders and transatlantic distances. Comics and gender-related practices that demonstrate the strength of these links abound. To mention just a few, the transnational ethos that characterises feminist politics and movements since the 1990s (Baksh & Harcourt, 2015, p. 4) reverberated in the world of Lusophone graphic narratives in recent years in the editorial work such as that carried out Sapata Press, a transfeminist publisher of comics zines based in Lisbon but managed by the Brazilian comics artist Ciço Silveira and aimed at establishing a bridge between Brazilian and Portuguese comics productions by women and gender non-conforming authors (López Casado, 2021). In Spain, it is worth highlighting the work of the publication *Femiñetas*, promoted by Flor Coll, with a transnational, feminist and queer aim, and that of the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic that promoted, together with two Basque NGOs, the digital comic *Viñetas de Tortas y Bollos. Cómic Lesbicas Desde dos Orillas* (Panels of Cakes and Buns. Lesbians Comics From Two Margins; 2019), and also *Coordenadas Gráficas: 40 Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica*, a work reviewed in this volume by Moriano.

In light of this background, this thematic issue is a space to assign visibility and critical legitimisation to Ibero-American feminist and queer comics and graphic novels.

It is also a place to discuss in detail the strengths and limitations that characterise them, both in terms of adherence to the complexity of gender-related theorisations and their access to local and transnational dissemination. Not by coincidence, this is the very objective of the working group Autoras, Investigadoras y Editoras de Cómic that two of the editors of this special issue, María Márquez López and Nicoletta Mandolini, convene in the context of the Cost Action project *iCon-MICs*. The work undertaken for this publication is, in light of this, one of the outputs of the *iCon-MICs* project. Moreover, the inclusion of this special issue in the editorial work undertaken by *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* gave us the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the most neglected graphic narrative productions among Ibero-American criticisms: those arising from the Lusophone cultural space. The selection of articles and reviews that this thematic issue proposes reflect these choices.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS THEMATIC ISSUE

The first articles in the thematic issue explore genealogy as a starting point for re-appropriating gender comics in 20th-century print culture, particularly the pioneering Brazilian authors. They analyse the works of women and queer artists in 20th-century comics. Here, the umbilical link between comics and print culture is highlighted, given that the two articles that follow offer a detailed reflection on the contributions of women and members of the LGBTQ+ to two of the major fields within the illustrated print market: humour and erotica.

In “Patrícia Galvão: The First Brazilian Female Cartoonist”, Stella Avelino analyses two of the author’s works, the album *Pagu – Birth, Life, Passion and Death* and the eight strips published in the newspaper *O Homem do Povo*, entitled “Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda”. Galvão (São Paulo, 1910 — Santos, 1962) published her first work of an autobiographical nature at the age of 19, thus becoming the first comic book author in her country. Despite the feminist contribution of her works to the subsequent legacy of women authors, Avelino recovers her important figure, unfairly remembered only for her status as a modernist muse and for belonging to an intellectual and sentimental circle of men.

In “Women, Politics and Graphic Humor in the Press of the Early Twentieth Century: A Brief Look at the Brazilian Case”, Thaís B. R. Moreira studies the graphic humour produced by women in the Brazilian press in the early decades of the 20th century. Adopting a historical and comparative approach underpinned by the gender category, the author analyses Rian’s caricatures of women, the illustrations featured in the Feminism section of the newspaper *O Paiz* and the comic strips by Pagu (Patrícia Galvão). Moreira describes these creations as deconstructions of the prevalent misogynistic and sexist patterns in contemporary graphic humour, which reinterpreted visual culture challenging male and patriarchal authority.

The ensuing four articles focus on graphic novels and other comic book productions, which fall under narratives of the self and the body, recently produced by women

and trans- people in Brazil, Portugal and Spain. This set of articles includes analyses of comics typologies ranging from activist comics to graphic novels and anthologies that were distributed through different channels (both digital and non-digital) despite being clearly devoted to a common reflection on body politics and autobiographical stances.

Marina Bettaglio analyses the use of the uterus as a visual resource in activism in “A Womb with a (Political) View: Reclaiming Reproductive Rights in Spanish Graphic Narratives”. The author focuses on the Wombastic initiative, a Tumblr project organised by the Spanish collective Asociación Autoras de Cómic in response to the restrictive abortion bill that the Spanish Popular Party approved in December 2013. The bill was ultimately not implemented, thanks to protests like the one organised around Wombastic. Bettaglio’s analysis focuses on the claim of the female body represented through comics and illustration as a space of resistance to thwart neoconservative propaganda.

Silvia Valencich Frota and Marta Soares delve into a topic which appears to be deeply linked to bodily representation and self-expression. In their analysis of the Portuguese publication *Nódoa Negra* (2018), a volume organised by Dileydi Florez that collects graphic narratives authored by women, Frota and Soares address the portrayal of female pain. This theme functions as a *trait d’union* for the entire anthology of short graphic stories. Drawing on theories previously introduced by Marianne Hirsch to study graphic representations of trauma, the authors conclude that by saying what cannot be shown, showing what cannot be said, and promoting the creation of meaning in the interstices between text and image, graphic novels provide a more refined and expressive representation of pain in its abstraction and materialisation, between the utterable and the ineffable.

In “Webs of Self, Webs of Meaning. Three Female Fragmentary Portraits in Post-Digital Print Comics”, Pedro Moura delves into the graphic novels by three contemporary Portuguese authors: Hetamoé (2012-2020), Joana Mosi (2021-2023) and Ana Margarida Matos (2019-2023). Employing Peter Wollen’s counter-cinema strategies and Sianne Ngai’s concepts of cuteness and animatedness, the author analyses each work’s resistance strategies against the doxa or stylistic and narrative norm of comics. This analysis explores how these strategies challenge the conventional notions of identity and contribute to feminist interpretations of the self, exploring the multiple ways in which the self is formed and deformed within these narratives.

Camila Luiza Lelis and Marcus António Assis Lima, in their article “There Is a Monster in My Mirror. An Analysis of the Fraphic Novel *Monstrans: Experimenting with Horrormones*”, dig into the autobiographical effort undertaken by the Brazilian comic artist Lino Arruda, who draws on his own experience of FtoM (Female to Male) gender transition to build a disturbing autobiographical narrative where the paradigm of monstrosity is constantly evoked. Lelis and Lima contextualise Arruda’s work and recognise it as part of a plethora of queer autobiographical narratives, many of which have taken the form of the graphic memoir. Here, the author argues, a series of topoi (that of the mirror and the theme of monstrosity mentioned earlier) and practices (a vivid self-representation of physical characteristics) are systematically re-worked in order to assign symbolic space to dissident bodies.

In “Multiplicities, Narratives of Life and Collective Memory of Teaching in the Comic *Fessora!*”, Samanta Coan and Nara B. Lage analyse Alice Lemos’ graphic novel, published in 2021, which recounts the author’s experience as a history teacher in a Brazilian public school. Drawing inspiration from Argentinian theorist Leonor Arfuch’s concept of biographical space, the authors adopt this notion to explore how self-representation and the testimonial form shape the narrative of experiences that portray the school as an institution ill-equipped to embrace diverse gender and ethnocultural identities prevalent in Brazil.

Beatriz Moriano and Neus Lagunas are the authors of one of the two reviews of this themed issue whose focus is on comics, gender and transatlantic connections. The authors focus on analysing the Ibero-American anthology *Coordenadas Gráficas: 40 Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile, y Costa Rica*, published online in 2020. The project emerged from two exhibition initiatives curated by the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic (Spain) and by the Argentinian researcher Mariela Acevedo. The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation sponsored the anthology. According to Moriano and Lagunas, the work’s value lies in its transnational, intergenerational, inclusive and historical character of the contributions of participating women authors from the countries mentioned in the title of the publication.

The second review is Virginia Tonfoni’s contribution titled “Shared Coordinates: Writing Your Story in Ibero-American Comics”. Tonfoni talks about a “transnational sisterhood” based on exhibition and editorial projects that have occurred in recent years through the associative and research impulse. Specifically, it analyses the impact of the Spanish exhibition *Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy* (2016), the Argentinian exhibition *Nosotras Contamos* (2019) and the publication *Coordenadas Gráficas, 40 Historietas de Autoras de Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica* (2020), highlighting the common denominators and interests in this production and circulation of works of collective interest, aiming to recover the role of women in the history of comics.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Nicoletta Mandolini is a FCT researcher at Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade at Universidade do Minho (Portugal), where she is working on the project

Sketch Her Story and Make It Popular. Using Graphic Narratives in Italian and Lusophone Feminist Activism Against Gender Violence (<https://www.sketchthatstory.com/>). She worked as FWO Postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven (Belgium) and she holds a PhD from University College Cork (Ireland). Funded by the Irish Research Council, her doctorate project resulted in the monograph *Representations of Lethal Gender-Based Violence in Italy Between Journalism and Literature: Femminicidio Narratives* (Routledge, 2021). Among other articles on sexist abuse in contemporary literature and media, she co-edited the volume *Representing Gender-Based Violence. Global Perspectives* (Palgrave, 2023). She is an active member of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures research cluster on Violence, Conflict and Gender, that she co-convened from 2016 until 2019. She is founding member of SnIF (Studying'n'Investigating Fumetti) and she is co-leader of the Working Group on Autoras, Investigadoras y Editoras de Cómic of the COST Action project *iCon-MICs*.

Email: nicoletta.mandolini@ics.uminho.pt

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9137-9380>

Address: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, 4710-057 Gualtar, Braga, Portugal

Cristina Álvares holds a PhD in medieval narrative literature (the gaze in the courtly roman, 1180–1250), and is associate professor of French literature at the University of Minho. Her research has been developed at Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho since 1986. She has authored two books and a large number of papers on medieval and contemporary French/Francophone literature. She is a co-editor of the series *Literature, Cinema, Comics* published in the Hespérides collection (Húmus), and has published articles on Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* in *Cincinnati Romance Review*, *Revue Romane*, *Synergies Espagne*, *Neuroptica*, *European Comic Art* and *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*. She is national delegate of the COST Action management committee *iCon-MICS* (Investigation on Comics and Graphic Novels in the Iberian Cultural Area).

Email: calvares@elach.uminho.pt

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5968-4724>.

Address: Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho, Escola de Letras, Artes e Ciências Humanas, Universidade do Minho, 4710-057 Gualtar, Braga, Portugal

María Márquez López is a journalist specialized in the audiovisual field (master in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary, UAB; and master in Film Screenplay, UIMP). She is a doctor *cum laude* with an international mention in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos), she has published her research on comics by women authors in indexed journals and has participated in national and international conferences related to this topic. Her areas of interest are comics, gender studies, film studies and cultural studies. She is an associate professor of the degree in

Communication Sciences at the Rey Juan Carlos University. She is currently co-leader of the Working Group on Autoras, Investigadoras y Editoras de Cómic of the COST Action project *iCON-MICs*.

Email: maria.marquez.lopez@urjc.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9375-3083>

Address: Ciencias de la Comunicación de la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Campus de Fuenlabrada, Camino del Molino, 5, 28942 Fuenlabrada, Madrid.



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