

Sketching the U.S.-Mexico border. Five approaches through graphic narrative and comics

Delinear la frontera México-Estados Unidos. Cinco propuestas desde la narrativa gráfica y el cómic

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Abstract

In the current context of deep polarisation and politicisation over migration issues, we propose to analyse five comics and graphic narratives that contribute to make visible the forgotten voices and spaces regarding Latin American migration to the United States. Emphasis is placed on the role of generic hybridity in granting and reinforcing the legitimacy of the telling of personal and collective stories through the insertion of autobiography, testimony, documentary, western or science fiction, among others. Corpus chosen: *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* (Mateo & Martínez, [2011] 2014), *Rendez-Vous in Phoenix* (Sandoval, 2016), *The Scar. Graphic Reportage from the US-Mexico Border* (Ferraris & Chiocca, 2019), *Barrier* (Vaughan et al., 2018) and *Ana* (Arriaga & Ramos, 2021), shows the multiple possibilities offered by these graphic narratives, which are no longer created purely for entertainment, but to contribute significantly to the configuration of a socially committed discourse.

Keywords: Comic; United States of America; borders; immigrants; Mexico; graphic narrative.

Resumen

En un contexto actual de creciente polarización y politización en torno a las cuestiones migratorias, se analizan cinco propuestas de cómics y narrativas gráficas que contribuyen a visibilizar voces y espacios olvidados de la migración latinoamericana hacia Estados Unidos. Se hace hincapié en el rol de la hibridez genérica al otorgar y reforzar la legitimidad del relato de historias personales y colectivas mediante la inserción de la autobiografía, el testimonio, el reportaje, el western o la ciencia ficción, entre otros. El corpus elegido: *Migrar* (Mateo y Martínez, 2011), *Cita en Phoenix* (Sandoval, 2016), *La cicatriz. En la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos* (Ferraris y Chiocca, 2019), *Barrera* (Vaughan et al., [2018] 2019) y *Ana* (Arriaga y Ramos, 2021), da cuenta de las múltiples posibilidades que ofrecen estas narrativas gráficas que dejan de ser divertimento para participar activamente en la configuración de un discurso socialmente comprometido.

Palabras clave: Cómic; Estados Unidos; frontera; inmigrantes; México; narrativa gráfica.



INTRODUCTION

Although the rigorous migration policies implemented by the United States of America date back to the last third of the 20th century, it was not until recent decades that the denunciation of violence, injustice and human rights violations reached an unprecedented echo. The mediatisation of the anti-immigrant rhetoric exacerbated during the Trump Administration (2017-2021) was countered by the unofficial rhetoric of the networks and new technologies that contributed to counteracting the hegemonic discourse, while providing other perspectives on the policies of persecution of migrants, mainly Hispanics, resulting in international commotion, particularly with the image of children held in cages and separated from their parents. The great impact of these and other restrictive measures in the northern border area of Mexico makes this border a synecdoche of the migration problem. Therefore, by focusing attention thereon, other previous borders that migrants must cross as Mexico is an obligatory transit country on their way to the United States are forgotten.

In the current context of growing polarisation and politicisation around migration issues, comics contribute to making forgotten voices and spaces visible by crossing geographical, linguistic and generic borders in which graphic narrative mixes with autobiographical accounts, testimony, reportage, westerns and science fiction, among others.

From the very first theoretical texts on comics, the idea of reducing them to mere amusement is rejected and it is stressed that their reading involves both aesthetic perception and intellectual search (Eisner, 1985), since, in addition to transmitting information, they seek to obtain an aesthetic response from the reader (McCloud, 1994). Moreover, as a permanently evolving genre, defining the comic is part of a process whose answer is not necessarily definitive (McCloud, 1994) and depends on various factors such as the passage of time, readership, reception.... The comics presented here are an example of this evolutionary process, as they go beyond aesthetic, communicative and intellectual enjoyment and add moral, human and ethical dimensions which, although not exclusive to this sequential art, are not alien to it as art.

GENRE'S HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is inherent to comics as a medium where image and text are combined. This genre has successfully integrated and adapted different languages (visual, auditory, cinematographic...), thus generating another language of its own, which is why we can affirm that the comic is one of the most flexible genres in the integration of other genres that contribute to enriching it. As sequential art (Eisner, 1985), comics are articulated based on a series of juxtaposed images (McCloud, 1994). Paradoxically, the structuring element will be the fragmentation of images (vignette-frames) whose interrelation contributes to the rhythm, tone and atmosphere of the narrative (Eisner, 1985). Its hybrid nature favours the insertion of traditional and contemporary genres, an example of the latter being the new technologies and digital platforms that have given a new twist to the edition, distribution and reception of comics.

Although the examples discussed below share a common theme of telling personal and collective stories about the migration experiences to the United States, each of them differs from the others by proposing a discursive diversity. And we stress straight away that

the insertion of hybrid discourses confers legitimacy and strengthens the veracity of the migratory experience, thus proposing another side of the story that is usually lost in silence and oblivion. It is interesting to analyse to what extent, and how, generic hybridisations contribute to the comic providing an alternative to challenge hegemonic discourses by making visible what tries to be ignored, erased.

In order to highlight the diversity comics are enriched which when linked to other genres, the corpus is chronologically introduced based on binomials that highlight the predominance of the genre with which they are combined: comic-codex, comic-autobiographical, comic-reportage, comic-western, comic-science fiction and comic-social engagement.

THE COMIC CODEX

Codices are supports that contained the pictographic writings of pre-Hispanic cultures¹. The paper used to make them was handmade and came from tanned animal hides or vegetable fibres. They could be under the form of a continuous strip, be rolled or accordion folded. In Mexico, the Mixtec and Mexica used “amate paper” (from Nahuatl “amatl” = paper, papyrus), derived from the inner bark of white and red jonote trees (Pardo-Rodríguez et al., 2002). The task of writing of codices was reserved for the “tlacuilos”, painter-scribes whose training in the “calmecac” lasted several years. This task consisted of recording and representing different types of religious, economic, cartographic, ethnographic, etc. codices. Examples of the latter are the codices in which the origin of a civilisation or the specific customs of a community were narrated. In the 20th century, the craft tradition of painting *amate* paper flourished again in states such as Guerrero, Oaxaca, Jalisco and Puebla. In terms of content, these handicrafts also record everyday traditions and customs; in terms of technique, the constant use of a profusion of colours and the overloading of elements stand out. However, despite this last aspect, it is possible to identify scenes grouped in strata or levels that either refer to specific moments and contexts or guide the movement in these graphic narratives.

In 2011 *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* was published, a book-object whose physical presentation corresponds to that of an accordion-folded *amate* paper codex. In the left-hand margin is the text by José Manuel Mateo and the illustrations are by Javier Martínez Pedro, who has taken up the tradition of paintings on *amate* paper from Xalitla, in the state of Guerrero (Mexico), where he is from. *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* is the story of a boy who, together with his mother and sister, sets out on a journey from Mexico to the United States in search of his father... and a better life. Unlike the usually colourful *amate* paper paintings, *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* uses only black and white, the stark contrast of which reinforces the drama of the narrative. On the front cover, three large horizontal bands can be distinguished: in the upper and lower scenes there are several peasants, some of whom are carrying a satchel that may be used to gather the harvest or to store their few belongings. The centre of the cover is interrupted by a locomotive that crosses the image from side to side “cutting” it in two, it is “La bestia” [The Beast] or “El tren de la muerte” [The death train], that is, the Mexican goods train that hundreds of thousands of migrants board every year while the wagons are in motion and whose journey brings them closer to the more than 2,500 km that separate them from the US border. On the right-hand side of the cover, in the upper band next to the

train tracks, are the three characters in the story: the boy, wearing a baseball cap, accompanied by his mother and sister.

The 10 pages that make up the book unfold - literally and figuratively - the different stages of the journey that will be narrated from the child's voice. *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* has both the format of the accordion codices and the aesthetics of the *amate* paintings with scenes that, although variegated, allow the different stages of the narrative to be identified. A frame encircles the entire painting and its flourishes also resemble those of pre-Hispanic codices. The upper part of the painting opens with the sky leading to a panorama typical of the orography of southern Mexico, with villages surrounded by mountains and sierras. The first human element that appears in the illustration is the boy (recognisable by his cap), in an everyday scene in which he is shown feeding the animals. On the next page, the boy shares that one of his favourite games is hiding behind palm trees, even though he is always spotted by his dog. It is up to the reader to delve into the drawing to situate this *costumbrista* scene, which until now had been narrated using the imperfect. The change in the situation is drastically interrupted and this is also reflected in the use of the past simple imperfect tense. The reader then learns it is no longer possible for them to continue farming and, lacking resources and income, it is necessary to look for other options. The first to leave the village is Don Augusto, who returns the following year to take his sons with him. Although he does not say so explicitly, the journey he undertakes is to the United States in search of work. Little by little the exodus of the men begins, including the boy's father, until only the women and a few children are left in the village. In the absence of income, his mother will try to earn a living in different ways, and the image will show her repeatedly performing different tasks, thus reinforcing what is described in the child's story. Until the moment comes when she has no choice but to take her children and go in search of the father who has not sent them any money for some time. We can follow the journey that mother and children undertake to reach their father throughout the unfolding image. After risking their lives in "La bestia" comes the hiding from the immigration agents, the illegal crossing of the U.S. border, the dogs that chase the migrants... until they manage to reach Los Angeles. Images here fill in the empty spaces in the story - remember that the narration is from a child's point of view - so that the absence of detail in the narrative is compensated for by the profusion of scenes that drastically contrast life in the countryside with life in American cities. The "memory of the migrant" (Trigo, 2003) is thus embodied, in which time merges: the past (linked to the homeland), the present (life in transit) and the future (the search for the American dream). Although the ending is open-ended, the last page underlines the duty of memory and hope sought in *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker*, in an attempt to tell another story, that of those who do arrive, symbolically recovering the voices of those who disappeared, especially those of the children who travel alone and who either die or cannot attest to their identity and thus become practically non-existent.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMIC

In comparison with his other darker works, populated by "gothic reveries", Tony Sandoval's *The Scar: Graphic Reportage from the US-Mexico Border* (2016) is an autobiographical comic in which he recounts his own experiences of illegally entering the United States. Its intimate tone is reinforced by the use of warm colours (ochre, yellow and brown) together with washed-out tones (grey, green) that do not impose but create an

atmosphere charged with unease and melancholy. The first-person narrative functions as confidentiality and confession (but without religious charge), lends credibility and even generates compassion and empathy towards the character. Closeness with the reader is also favoured by the hand lettering of the comic, which strengthens the sensation of reading, seeing and hearing Sandoval. The story is set in 1998, in Ciudad Obregón, Mexico; Sandoval's visa has just been refused due to his poor economic solvency and this takes him further and further away from his American dream which includes meeting his girlfriend Suzanne in Portland, drawing comics for the big American publishers, attending comic conventions and meeting his "heroes", Jeff Smith and Mike Mignola. Desperation - present at several points in the story - will lead Sandoval to make a dangerous decision: to cross the border clandestinely. In a remarkable balance, Sandoval manages to combine two atmospheres in which the character's nonchalance opposes the intensity of the situation impregnated with stress and fear. Similarly, the subtle stroke of the marker (Rotring 0.3) contrasts with the violence and abuse of the *coyotes* or *polleros* (human traffickers). Without falling into a dramatic tone, it unfolds the avalanche of feelings, sensations and extreme experiences faced by those who wish to cross the border without legal documents. Two failed attempts and their respective deportations are not enough to stop Sandoval, who, while waiting for his next opportunity, wanders around Nogales (Sonora, Mexico), which has practically become a city populated by migrants. There he will hear the tragic stories of those from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador "and much further" (Sandoval, 2016, p. 31) who, despite having crossed other borders, will agree that the one in southern Mexico is one of the most difficult. In addition to the danger involved in riding "La bestia" and trying not to fall off the roof, there is the violence of the criminal gangs who rape and rob travellers, demanding money in exchange for not throwing them onto the train tracks. Two pages of three strips each are enough to concentrate the harsh reality of the southern border, which for many is still unknown, to include it is already a way of not denying it.

The comic montage alternates sheets of 2 to 6 strips with some (few) full sheets, the use of the latter being reserved for key moments such as the moment when Sandoval shares his *naïve* plan to cross the border through Nogales to Tucson. A map appears in the background and covers the entire page, Sandoval seated in a chair on top of the map, with his right foot in Mexico and his left foot between Mexico and the United States. Also striking are the only two double pages in the centre of the comic that illustrate Sandoval's desert crossing, the five members of a family with whom he shares the journey and the coyote who guards the roads. The focus is on the weary faces of the children and the jerry cans of water that each carry as the only luggage allowed. The scene takes place at night, and except for the yellow lights of the patrolling patrols and the reddish hue of the chewing mask and cap worn by the coyote, the pages are illustrated with a monochromatic palette of greys that schematise anxiety, fear, humiliation and exhaustion. No dialogue, no balloons interrupt the image.

Rendez-Vous in Phoenix is another example of affective writing inherent to migratory narratives. On his third attempt to cross clandestinely, while waiting with other immigrants for the car to appear that will take them from the desert to Phoenix, Sandoval falls prey to hopelessness and despair. The only thing that keeps him going is his desire to become a cartoonist, symbolised by a felt-tip pen (Rotring 0.3 of course), which reaches exaggerated proportions and stands out as a powerful weapon, the only one capable of giving him the

strength he needs to move forward, leave the nightmare behind and finally reach the American dream.

THE COMIC REPORTAGE

Originally published in Italian in 2017, *The Scar: Graphic Reportage from the US-Mexico Border* (2019), by Andrea Ferraris and Renato Chiocca (translated by Carlos Gumpert) is succinct but intense portrait of the violence on both sides of the border. In an interview, Ferraris states that, on the advice of a friend, he went to the city of Nogales, referred to as “a hot spot at the migrant crossroads, a place that brings together all the characteristics of the disease of the wall: the drug cartel, the border patrol, the migrant police” (Tonfoni, 2017)². The friend he refers to is none other than Tony Sandoval.

The scar is a graphic reportage³ that documents what is happening in the border, which has become a “war zone”. Chiocca’s charcoal illustrations and rapid strokes resemble courtroom sketches and, similar to these, capture the personalities of the protagonists, the latent tensions in the atmosphere and undeniably generate reactions in the reader, while avoiding the morbidity implicit in the red note. This comic is divided into two parts, each set on a different side of the border. “A Night on the Border” is the story of the murder of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez in October 2012 by Lonnie Ray Swartz, a border patrol agent who fired sixteen bullets through the fence that separates Nogales, Arizona (USA) from Nogales, Sonora (Mexico). Ten of these bullets struck José Antonio in the back. A full-length page illustrates and emphasises the crime scene, the aerial shot forces the reader to contemplate both sides of the border in unison. In doing so, it symbolically reminds us that, although this perspective is practically impossible to achieve, it is the only one capable of providing a solution to the problem at hand. Two small boxes guide the movement in the reading of the image. The first, in the upper left corner, communicates the cause of death. The second, in the lower right-hand corner, closes the reading in a laconic but forceful way: “He was 16 years old”. The last vignettes reveal that Agent Swartz was acquitted of the crime, and as a silent tribute, a huge panel with the photo of José Antonio, Toñito, and a small cross at the scene of the crime, bear witness to his existence.

The second part, “A Day at the Border”⁴, focuses on the work of volunteers who provide aid to undocumented migrants crossing the Arizona desert without even imagining the hell that awaits them. Constructed on the basis of interviews, Ferraris and Chiocca outline the humanitarian side of those living on the US side of the border, which contrasts drastically with that presented in the first part. Bottles of water with messages of encouragement or indications of the missing kilometres, provisions, medical assistance and crosses as a reminder of the location of a corpse are some of the actions that try to alleviate the seriousness of the situation in this part of the border. To the danger of encountering border patrols is added hunger, thirst, fatigue, extreme temperatures, loss of sense of direction, snake and tarantula bites and scorpion stings... In *The scar*, the expressionist intensity of the line seems to want to capture the immediacy of the instant on the fly, while at the same time capturing the permanent anguish that rarifies the atmosphere. Between reportage and testimony of barely forty pages, it reminds us that, in the wound that separates borders, the wall is a scar.

COMIC-SCIENCE FICTION

Initially published in 2015 as a digital comic, the mini-series *Barrier*⁵ by Vaughan, Martín and Vicente consists of five books that were first published as a digital version and then as a single printed volume. *Barrier* is the story of a woman and a man who are separated by everything, but whose destinies come together by chance. The first volume starts opens with the introduction of the character of Liddy, a cattle rancher in Pharr, Texas. The full page shows a close-up that highlights the rough features of someone who has to prove herself equal to the task at hand. In this case it is a woman who must assert herself in the masculine world of Texas cowboys. And with a lettering of exaggerated proportions, the name of the main character is written: LIDDY. Although the next page takes up half of the face, what stands out is the map showing the location of the action, also highlighted by the lettering: PHARR, TEXAS. The presentation of the main character emulates the cinematic presentation of the western genre. She is a lonely character who distrusts everyone – such as cowboys – and she is only accompanied by her rifle. When Liddy discovers the remains of a horse as proof of the presence of the “Some Chicken-Shit Drug Cartel” on his ranch, that means she has to step up her vigilance.

The second main character, Oscar, a migrant from Honduras, will also be presented in the manner of a western hero, albeit without a hat. The resource used for Liddy will be repeated and the full-page showing Oscar’s close-up will be followed by a map showing his origins, large-scale lettering is used both in the main character’s name and his homeland: SAN PEDRO SULA, HONDURAS.

In addition to the barriers between Americans and Hispanics, there are also language barriers, exemplified in the comic by the alternation of languages. Thus, each character will express himself in his own language without any translation. Liddy always speaks in English and Oscar in Spanish. If their lives initially run parallel to each other, they will end up coming together when Oscar enters Liddy’s ranch illegally. However, they barely have time to try to understand each other, combined with the mix of dialogue in two languages, because at that point they will be abducted by an alien spacecraft. From the second book onwards, we witness the effort they both make to get to know each other. This step towards the other is also understood as a counter-response to the hegemonic anti-Hispanic discourse used in Trump’s presidential campaign. Similarly, book 3 illustrates a harsh critique of the American way of life through a landfill in which the American flag, some road signs, as well as logos and brands representing capitalism and showing its role in environmental deterioration are identified. Through something that resembles tentacles, the aliens will share Oscar’s memories with Liddy, who will finally be able to understand that there are forced migrations, as in the case of Oscar, who has been left with no other way out by criminal gangs. And we will also learn of Liddy’s personal struggle to protect her ranch after her husband’s suicide. Although science fiction may seem to detract from the seriousness of the subject matter, it should not be forgotten that these stories also highlight the link between human beings and their environment. The mostly apocalyptic scenarios are thus a thought-provoking warning about the way we treat the planet and a reminder that it is the only one we have. A combination of western and science fiction, *Barrier* stands as an original comic that plays with the polysemy of the word “alien”, which refers to both an extraterrestrial and an undocumented person (Marini, 2019, p. 174). It also reminds us that the wall, the barrier, is not only the one that is built along the border, but the one that day by day is fed by stereotypes and the absence of interest in getting to know the other.

THE COMIC-SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

The comic book *Ana* (Arriaga & Ramos, 2021) arose as an initiative within the humanitarian aid programme for the migrant population on the northern and southern borders of Mexico, a project financed by the European Union and implemented by Save the Children and HIAS Mexico in four cities in northern Mexico (Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali and Monterrey) and one in the south (Tapachula). The text by Guillermo Arriaga with illustrations by Humberto Ramos is the story of Ana, a girl who flees from violence in Honduras to save her life and that of her family, which will lead them to undertake the journey of forced migration to the United States. Like *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker*, the first of the texts presented here, *Ana* emphasises the situation of migrant children. In 2021 alone, the Mexican Ministry of the Home Affairs' census reported that 75,592 minors were detected entering Mexico in an irregular migratory situation. Of these, 42.9 per cent came from Honduras, 26.8 per cent from Guatemala and 9.1 per cent from El Salvador.

Ana is the story of a migrant girl waiting to be evaluated by a doctor at the Save the Children shelter. When the doctor shares her story with Ana, initial distrust and fear give way to a space of openness and communication. She will let Ana know that she also comes from San Pedro Sula (Honduras) and that poverty and gang violence forced her and her mother and brother to leave Honduras for fear of reprisals. Crossing into Mexico was not easy, and persecution and attempted assaults led them to join a migrant caravan to reach Mexico and board the goods train that would take them to the United States. Despite the fact that gang violence will continue along the way, it also highlights the positive side of those who made the journey with the same goal of seeking the best for their families. Once in Tijuana, danger will continue to stalk them until someone finally refers them to the Save the Children shelter for migrants. The doctor's story is Ana's story and Ana's story is the story of thousands of children who are forced to migrate. The aim is to raise awareness of the vulnerable situation of migrant children who are exposed to human trafficking, exploitation or death. In *Ana*, the facilitating function of the image in the learning process is combined with accessible language, as well as expressions and dialogues in which the similarities between Ana and the doctor are constantly emphasised. The latter could also be understood as a story of hope and empowerment for children who, like Ana, will be able to see in the doctor a model of resistance and resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

The hybrid nature of comics gives them a capacity for adaptation that allows them to use the languages of other genres to include and enrich them. Moreover, each of them corroborates the multiple communicative possibilities of comics when narrating traumatic events or experiences crucially connected to a contemporary social reality, even when they do so from two totally antagonistic perspectives as illustrated by the alien sensitisation in *Barrier* and the realistic one in *Ana*. Another comic called *Migrant: Stories of Hope and Resistance*, published by the Esperanza Border Institute (HOPE) and the Kino Border Initiative (KBI), also aims at raising awareness of the causes and issues related to migration. The explicit interest in sharing these migratory experiences with future generations is latent, as evidenced by the large number of graphic publications, in addition to comics, aimed at a youth or children's audience. Beyond the statistics that are constantly collected, these works seek to recover the human face of migration, whose

narratives (textual or graphic) highlight the expression of violence and anguish as a characteristic element. Either through the use of a chromatic range of blacks and greys that emphasises the emotional use of colour in moments of great tension. Or, with a stylistic variety from simple (Sandoval) and detailed (Ramos) lines to thick and fast (Chiocca), or crude (Martínez) strokes that permeate the graphics with pain and nostalgia. What is certain is that these comics open up paths to travel and recover paths populated by stories that are cut short, fragments of memories, lost or ignored voices, offering a balance between official version, the testimony of migrants and the vicarious experience generated in the reader.

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Notes

¹ In *Understanding comics. The invisible art* (1994) McCloud includes pre-Columbian manuscripts as an example of *avant-la-lettre* comics.

² Translated by us.

³ The English translation of this comic expressly refers to “graphic reportage”: *The Scar. Graphic Reportage from the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2019), (translated by Richards, J.), F.U. Press.

⁴ In his comparative analysis of *Churubusco* (2015) and *The Scar* (2017), both by Ferraris and Chiocca, [Tonfoni \(2019\)](#) highlights that these are groups of people “who question their origins as they take on another identity: they share with the ‘other’ the liminal physical condition of the border and acquire a hybrid identity trait” (p. 325).

⁵ In 2013, Brian K. Vaughan, Marcos Martin and Muntsa Vicente founded Panel Syndicate aiming at publishing and distributing the comic *The Private Eye*. This platform gives direct access to digital comics between creators and readers. *Barrier* numbers can be found at: <http://panelsyndicate.com/comics/barrier>.