

## A-Z OF MY LIFE AS A CARTOONERO

Ilan Stavans  
Amherst College

**ANGELITOS:** The groundwork for my graphic novel *Angelitos* (2018), done in collaboration with illustrator Santiago Cohen, the New Jersey-based Latinx cartoonist, began about five years before its publication. A common friend introduced us. I was an admirer of Cohen's children's books. I was eager to retell the story of how, when I was in my early twenties, I collaborated with Father Alejandro García Durán de Lara (1935-1999), aka Padre Chinchachoma, internationally known for his work with Mexico City's homeless children.

Although I delivered the script in a matter of months, it took a while for Cohen and me to find a syncopated rhythm for our collaboration. Finally, with a substantial amount of material ready, we showed it to an assorted group of editors. It was flatly rejected as being too dark and unappetizing to what was mistaken to be a

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Internationally acclaimed essayist, translator, poet, and short-story writer Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Humanities and Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College and the publisher of Restless Books, an international publishing house devoted to translating extraordinary literature into English, giving voice to immigrant writers, and reintroducing the classics to underserved communities through prisons and public libraries. His many books include *On Borrowed Words*, *Dictionary Days*, *Spanglish*, and a biography of Gabriel García Márquez. He has edited *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, the *Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry*, the speeches of César Chávez, and *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, among others. He is the author of children's books and graphic novels in collaboration with artists from different parts of the world, among them *Mister Spic Goes to Washington* (with Roberto Weil), *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (with Lalo Alcaraz), *El Iluminado* (with Steve Sheinkin), *Golemito* (with Teresa Villegas), *Angelitos* (with Santiago Cohen), and *Don Quixote* in Spanglish (with Roberto Weil). The recipient of numerous international awards and honors, his work, translated into 20 languages, has been adapted into film, theater, TV, and radio.

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mostly youthful readership of graphic novels. When it was released, *Angelitos* was greeted with enthusiasm.

The plot addresses the accusations of child molestation that were targeted against Padre Chinchachoma by the Mexican police. I set the story a few years after it actually happened in order to make it coincide with the devastating earthquake that shook Mexico City in 1985. I was already in New York at the time. My inspiration wasn't only the actual ordeal I experienced when I shadowed this almost mystical figure.

In response to the question of how much is real and how much is invented in *Angelitos*, I told Alex Dueben of Smash Pages<sup>1</sup>:

The early part of the narrative is close to reality. I remember that through phone calls and personal messages, I tried to find Padre Chinchachoma. It was difficult because he was always on the move.

I finally made my way to an abandoned building in Colonia Roma where he was said to spend the night along with a dozen homeless children. On my way there, I was mugged. At of nowhere, a band of adolescents descended on me. My wallet was stolen. Maybe my backpack too, where I kept notebooks, a novel I was reading, and so on. I was a college student at the time, penniless, interested in volunteering in programs committed to social justice.

Eventually I found Padre Chinchachoma. I asked him if I could become his assistant. He said he didn't need one but that I was welcome to help homeless children in ways all sorts of ways. I recall him saying, "There is no end to what they need!" But *Angelitos* isn't sheer autobiography. I have taken lots of liberties with the plot. For one thing, it is set against the backdrop of the earthquake of 1985 in Mexico City. I don't give away anything. However, by 1985 I was no longer there. The earthquake caught me in New York City. I had decided to become an immigrant. I enrolled in graduate school. I also wanted to try my talents as a writer. I'm telling you this because I wrote the story in English, not in Spanish. For me languages are filters through which we comprehend the world. By delivering it in English, the audience I have targeted isn't exclusively local.

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<sup>1</sup> The complete interview can be found at <http://smashpages.net/2018/02/27/smash-pages-qa-ilan-stavans/>.

Along the way, I wanted to pay tribute to a work of art I admire, one that has influenced me deeply: Luis Buñuel's film *Los olvidados* (1950). I have watched this extraordinary movie dozens of times. For some reason, in English it was called *The Young and the Damned*, which sounds like a Norman Mailer reportage. It deals too with Mexico's homeless children. Buñuel was a Spanish surrealist, although in his Mexican period he is more realistic.

In the history of Latin American film, *Los olvidados* is my favorite, along with *Y tu mamá también* (2001) by Alfonso Cuarón, *Amores perros* (2001) by Alejandro González Iñárritu, and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) by Guillermo del Toro. When I was in high-school, my school bus would pass by a block away from where Buñuel lived. I sometimes would see him come out the door and walk slowly toward the corner. He was already in his late seventies.

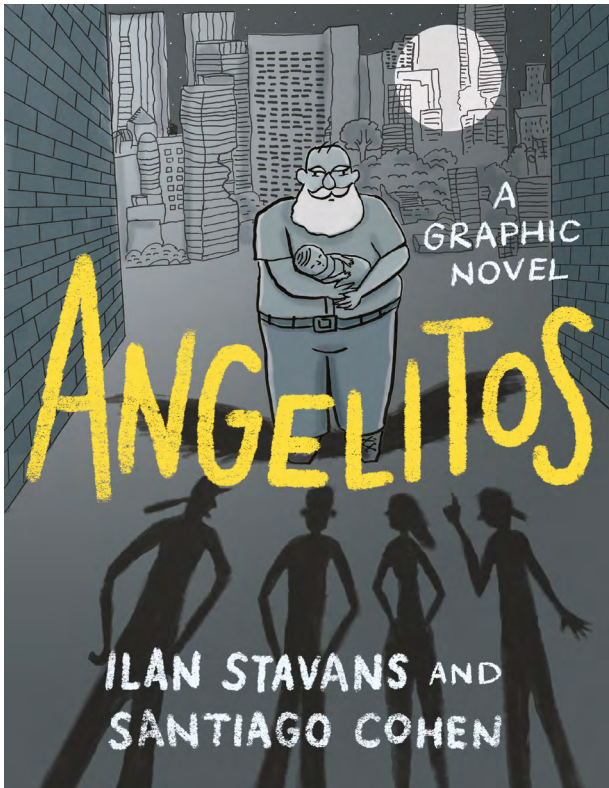


Figure 1. Cover of *Angelitos* (Columbus, OH: Mad Creek Books, 2018).

**BEGINNINGS:** My love for comic strips dates to my adolescence in Mexico City. There was a newsstand a few blocks away from my house in Calle Odontología #85, in Colonia Copilco, adjacent to the campus of UNAM. I spent the few pesos I made doing odd jobs in a dozen different comics. Some were US imports (Archie, Batman, etc.), others were national and continental (*La familia Burrón*, *Condorito*, *Kalimán*, and so on).

Having been an outdoors kid, around that time I suddenly became an avid reader of novels. The so-called Latin American literary boom, represented by writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, José Donoso, was by then a global phenomenon. I remember reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) in what felt like a single sitting that started on a raining afternoon. I also devoured *Hopscotch* (1963). Not surprisingly, in my mind my passion my literature and comics feels as it emerges from the same well.

Cortázar was the most genuinely experimental of these cadre. I remember the day I came across his comic *Fantômas contras los vampiros multinacionales* (1975). That a superb writer could borrow a pop-culture character to deliver his ideological message—in his later years, Cortázar became unwisely infatuated with left-wing causes—was simply magical. While I didn't quite like the content of the volume, I admired its hybridity.

Perhaps it was that volume that convinced me I could bridge the gap between visuals and the written word. I was also an avid follower of Umberto Eco's semiotic studies on Superman and other superheroes. And I kept a copy of Armand Mattelart and Ariel Dorfman's *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971). The primary lesson I learned from them was that high-brow art no longer existed in a bubble. The porousness between it and pop culture was everywhere. As it happens, that erasing of distinctions, commonplace in the twenty-first century, would be the terrain where I would eventually feel most comfortable.

My education at UAM-Xochimilco was important in my formation. Subcomandante Marcos was in the faculty. I read Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Fuentes, and others. The Mexican intelligentsia sought to connect high-brow and popular culture. There was also a desire to acknowledge the resilience of the indigenous past that was suffocated by the ubiquitous consumerism fostered by the United States.

**CARTOONISMO:** There is a vibe about Latino cartoons. They represent a crossroads of several traditions. Latin America comes from a pictorial past represented in the graphics used by indigenous cultures. The idols in indigenous religions are artfully designed. Likewise, the stone architecture. Add to it a cornucopia of color and the outcome is addictive.

There is also the European tradition in the Americas, brought at first by soldiers, explorers, missionaries, and renegades, and then by ceaseless immigrant waves. The street art of Mexican muralists emerges from these two traditions. I love Diego Rivera's broad-stroke experimental spirit, even his theatricality. (In contrast, I find Frida Kahlo too artificial.) Among my favorite Latin American painters, one in which the European influence is unavoidable, is Argentine Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solari (1887-1963), aka Xul Solar, whose passion for surrealist images and invented languages is a source of admiration. I also feel close to Uruguayan José Gurvich (1927-1974). His paintings are in some covers of my books.

My own *cartoonismo* is self-conscious in that it pays tributes to its roots. There are recurrent themes in it. For instance, readers in my graphic novels often read graphic novels, maybe even the one in which they appear.

***DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA:*** No other book exerts a larger show on me. I have read around fifty times. I have written about it continuously. And I still don't tire about it. My second collaboration with Venezuelan illustrator Roberto Weil, who was forced to exile during the Hugo Chávez regime, is an adaptation of it. Like the original, the version we produced is playful. It even makes fun of itself, not to say the author.

***EL ILUMINADO:*** I did this graphic-novel detective quest, released in 2012, with illustrator and young-adult author Steve Sheinkin. The topic of Crypto-Jews, in particular the odyssey of Luis de Carvajal the Younger, who was burned at the stake in an auto-da-fe in Plaza del Quemadero, in downtown Mexico City, in 1596. It takes place in modern-day Santa Fe. The plot delves into the currents of Hispanic anti-Semitism. The book remains a source of enormous pride for me.

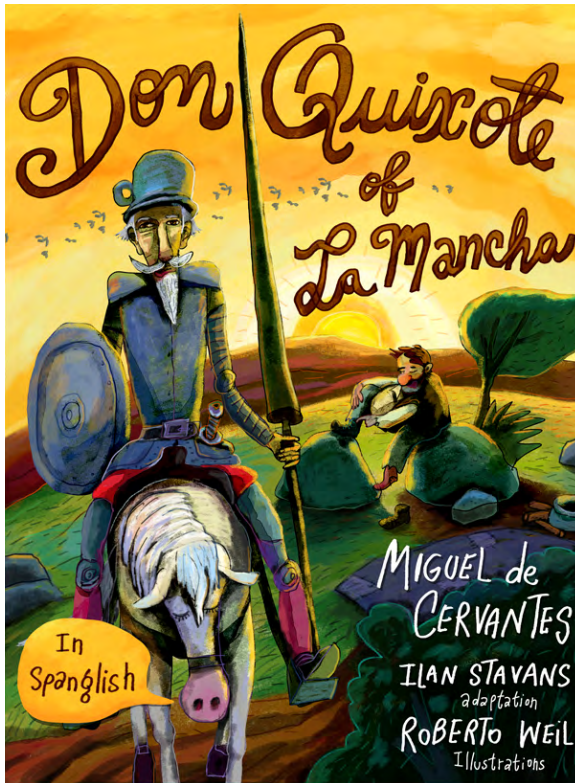


Figure 2. Cover of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).

**FANTASTIC CREATURES:** *A Pre-Columbian Bestiary* (2020), illustrated by Eko, isn't strictly a graphic novel. Instead, it is a gallery of almost fifty indigenous creatures, real and invented, from Latin America. I have been infatuated with this menagerie almost since childhood, when my mother would take my siblings and me to the city's *zoológico*.

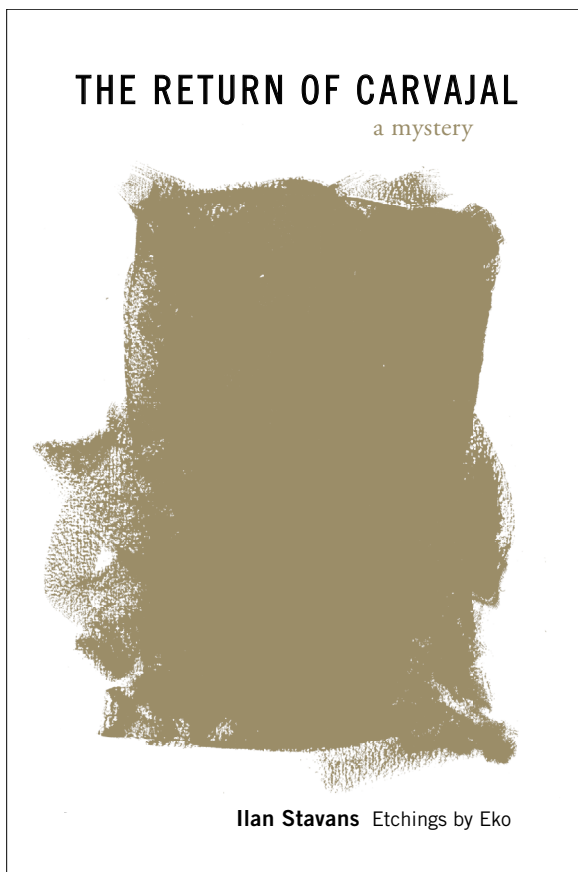
There were llamas, crickets, monkeys, birds, tigers, elephants, giraffes, hippopotamuses, and an assortment of fish in the nearby aquarium. I remember being struck by the Latinate names and, when available, with aboriginal names from Mexico, Central, and South America. My interest led me to the voyages of Charles Darwin and Alexander von Humboldt to various parts of the continent. I concocted about a third of the creatures in my bestiary.



Figure 3. Cover of *A Pre-Columbian Bestiary: Fantastic Creatures of Indigenous Latin America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021).

Over the years, I've collaborated with a variety of artists in creating non-existent beings. Once in the newspaper *El País* I published an arcade of political animals. For instance, one resembled Hugo Chávez. Another one fought in Latin America's wars of independence. My favorite—if memory serves me well—was one that was invisible yet dangerous in its capacity to corrupt everything around it.

Eko is a Mexican engraver with whom I've collaborated in numerous projects. He is part of the popular tradition of folk art popularized by José Guadalupe Posada. His work appears in the *New York Times*, and in many other newspapers around the world. I find his phantasmagorias enthralling. He also illustrated my book *The Return of Carvajal: A Mystery* (2018).



**Figure 4.** Cover of *The Return of Carvajal: A Mystery* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019).

**GRATITUDE:** I feel grateful to fate for the opportunity to ceaseless explore. I'm aware of the 1,001 alternative lives I have not taken. The one I've built through small decisions has allowed me countless possibilities. There is an entrenched sense of determinism in the DNA of the Hispanic world: things are what they are and change is unlikely. I have taken the opposite route.

**HISTORY:** History isn't the past but what we make of it. It is as fictional as any autobiography and as autobiographical as any fiction. I think of myself as a buccaneer who pillages history for the sake of literature.



**IMPROVIZATION:** This is what moves me, where I find my grip. Cartoons are the marriage of two qualities the human eye is proficient in: to follow a story either in words or in images. A successful graphic novel to me manages to retain its jazzy quality. It doesn't allow the visuals to run ahead of the plot, nor does it push the text to overwhelm—or to eclipse—the visuals. It is easy to fall into either of these traps. The way out has no formula. It relays on preparation but it doesn't stigmatize it because of it.

**JADED:** Boredom is the most serious illness of modernity. (Where people bored in biblical times?) It results from a sense of idleness and a lack of direction. Although comics have often been associated with boredom, particularly in the Hispanic world, in my view they are just the opposite: a source of knowledge and a conduit for change.

**KALIMÁN:** This superhero was created in 1963 by Rafael Cutberto Navarro and Modesto Vázquez González for a radio show. Ironically, the character isn't native but Egyptian, a descendant of pharaohs. His nemeses are Black Spider, Karma, and Namilak.

I remember being flabbergasted by the sheer existence of *Kalimán: El hombre increíble*. The pantheon of Mexican superheroes was minuscule. In my adolescence, he was the most accomplished. I didn't think for a minute about stereotypes of Middle Easterners or any other kind.

**LANGUAGE:** This is my prime lens. Everything is filtered through language. In my graphic novels, my language are words as well as visuals. How the two interact is crucial.

**MISTER SPIC GOES TO WASHINGTON:** My graphic novel *Mister Spic Goes to Washington* (2008) was my first collaboration with Roberto Welí.

An Ecuadorian colleague introduced me to his art. I love its plasticity. To me it is somehow reminiscent of Fernando Botero, although at a smaller, more accomplished scale. Weil was a political cartoonist in Caracas. His views often turned him into targets of animosity of opposing flanks.

This first graphic novel we collaborated in follows the unlikely ascent to power of a Los Angeles gang member. A few years before,

I had written a small biography called *Bandido* (2003), on Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, the loud-mouth Chicano lawyer who is depicted as a 300-pound Samoan in Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). Acosta was never part of a gang but he was furious and unforgiving in his relationships to others—and to himself, too.

**NIHILISM:** At times I have been described as a nihilist, a rejection of all religious and moral principles. I want to set the record straight. It is true that I don’t believe in superstitions but morality isn’t one of them. For the most part, my moral code is based on language: whatever is definable in clear, unobtrusive language, I look at it with at least a modicum of esteem.

Ambrose Bierce, in *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1906), defines a nihilist as “a Russian who denies the existence of anything but Tolstoi. The leader of the school is Tolstoi.” As to me, I deny the existence of Ambrose Bierce himself.

**Ñ:** My late friend, Argentine *hombre de letras* Felipe Yriart, lived in a Madrid convalescent home. I met him only once, during a lecture trip to Spain. One of his legs had been amputated as a result of illness. He was isolated in his minuscule dorm. His only contact with the world was a library computer he used daily for an hour or so.

Yriart and I engaged in a correspondence that last close to a decade. He translated a number of my stories and essays into Spanish. He also edited a special issue on me of *Ómnibus*.

He arranged for a lavish dinner to take place in my honor in our sole occasion. A generous number of his friends were in attendance. It must have happened around 2005. Yriart declared the meeting to be called “El Club Ñ.” There were writers and painters from Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay, and Colombia. He told us all that we were bound by talent. One of the artists made a gorgeous painting of the letter Ñ, which Yriart framed for me. I reminded me that Spanish is the only language that contains such a letter.

“This is our plight, Ilan,” he said. “You will show the world our uniqueness.”

**ORDER:** When I create a graphic novel, order is foremost in my mind: how is the story organized, what comes first and what comes last. I have

a mind obsessed with order. I need to know where everything else in my house, for instance.

**PROTEST:** I remain puzzled by *A Most Imperfect Union: A Contrarian History of the United States* (2014), my second collaboration with Lalo Alcaraz. If he was difficult to work with the first time around, our efforts on this book—right at the middle of Barack Obama’s second term and two years before the apotheosis brought by Donald Trump—were next to impossible.

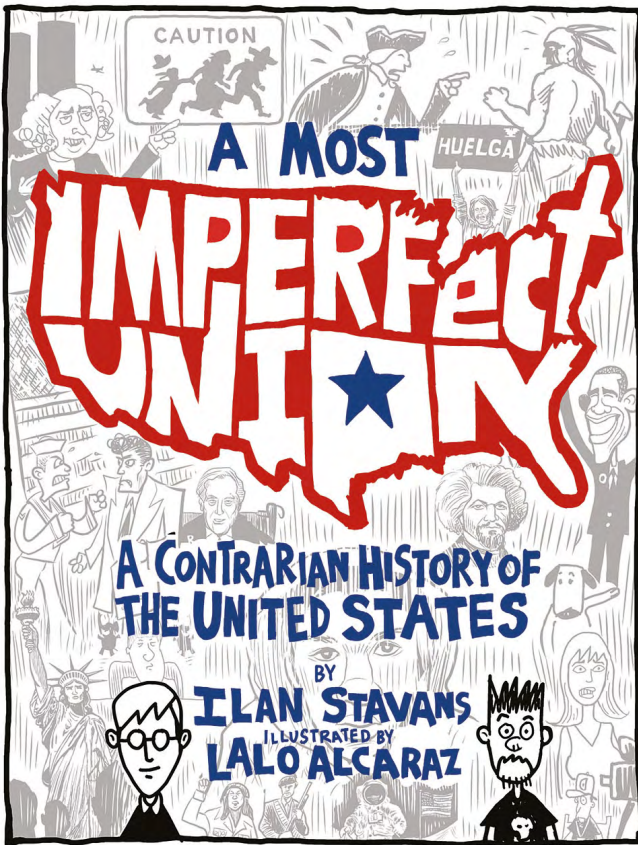


Figure 5. Cover of *A Most Imperfect Union: A Contrarian History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Alcaraz had been a heavy cocaine user. His family almost fell apart. He was unreliable in terms of deadlines. The worst part is that the quality of his work, at least in regards to longer projects, had begun to deteriorate. In spite of his delinquent deliveries, I tried as much as I could to encourage him to focus his full attention on the cartoons. But they often arrived half-backed.

Basic Books had published *Latino USA: A Cartoon History*. At a time when Latino history was seldom studied, I wanted to approach it not as a standard historian but as a lop-sided carnival of prototypes, archetypes, and prototypes. Its success was immediate. There were dozens of prominent reviews, including a controversial one in *The Los Angeles Times*.

Not surprisingly, the publisher wanted more. I also wanted another collaboration. I believe *A Most Imperfect Union* will be reassessed one day.

Alcaraz's *La Cucaracha* is a masterful creation. It was my discovery of it what led me to its creator. I like Alcaraz's anarcho-syndicalist attitude. His irreverence is refreshing.

**QUINO:** Joaquín Salvador Lavado Tejón (1932-2020), alias Quino, is another idol of mine. *Mafalda* is one of Argentina's most lasting 20<sup>th</sup>-century creations. Her critical thinking makes it clear that Latin America isn't only a backland that lives from importing replicas. She makes me think of Borges' character Pierre Menard in that she rewrites history—local stories, global history—with a refreshingly old perspective.

**RIUS:** It is by sheer alphabetical luck that Rius comes after Quino. Prolific cartoonist Eduardo Humberto del Río García (1934-2017), better known as Rius, almost single-handedly created the *For Beginners* books. When I was young, I remember reading *Marx for Beginners*, *Freud for Beginners*, and others. I wrote about my admiration for—and repulsion to—Rius in an essay called “My Debt to Rius” featured *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future* (2016), edited by Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González. I wouldn't have been able to create *Latino USA* without such forerunner.

**SPANGLISH:** Need I say more about Spanglish than I have in the last thirty years? I feel as if my entire life has been devoted to it. One

of my graphic novels, *Don Quixote*, is in Spanglish. (There is also an English version.) The reason behind it is that translation, in my eyes, is a synonym of appropriation. To have a visual *Quijote* in this jargon is to honor the hybrid nature of Latino culture and to give it what everyone else has: its own version of Cervantes' masterpiece.

**TEACHING:** I never aspired to be a teacher. I wanted to do scores of other activities. Yet today I can't imagine anything more satisfying. Even when I'm not teaching, I think as a teacher. *Latino USA, A Most Imperfect Union*, my adaptation of *Don Quixote*, *A Pre-Columbian Bestiary*, and some other cartoon volumes were conceived as non-didactic teaching tools, as a way to ponder knowledge from the perspective of popular culture.

**ULTIMA THULE:** This is a mythological reference to a distant and mysterious land. To me this is the address of Latino civilization, which, because it exists in America and because it is a byproduct of the utopianism—including the chivalric dreams of the Spanish renaissance—is a kind of double utopia.

**VERISIMILITUDE:** One of my recurrent sources of amazement is Erich Auerbach's book of criticism *Mimesis: The Representation of reality in Western Literature* (1946). How does Homer, Petronius, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Flaubert, and others recreate our universe through words? It might be argued, with the growth of Netflix and other streaming services, that verisimilitude is easier to achieve now than when literature was the primary source of entertainment. Indeed, what we see on the screen nowadays is stunning in its authenticity. I beg to differ, though. What the camera does is only one side of the coin. True verisimilitude is achieved by surveying the complex inner world of characters. There are first-rate examples in TV production but they are few. The vast majority of series engage in pyrotechnics. Their intension is to captivate our eye but not our mind.

The question of verisimilitude in graphic novels is complicated. The confines of the genre are shaped for escapism, though not for hypnotism. Some *cartoonistas* aren't even interested in surveying their character's inner world, thinking as they do that the form

they are using is all about appearances. Yet those private horizons are open, ready for exploration. My impression is that, as the genre matures, more shall be achieved on this front. It is possible to have depth and complexity in cartoons though it isn't a given.

**WONDERMONGER:** Since I often jump out of habitats, I am seen as an interloper. This results in a feeling discomfort for people. It isn't really me but what I symbolize. I'm a scholar, a teacher, a fiction writer, a poet, a translator, an editor, and a publisher. Since I'm a scholar, for instance, the expectation is that everything I do is learned. Yet I dislike the halls of academia. They are stiff and unwelcoming. Plus, I'm not good with protocols and like to subvert whatever is in front of me.

It is easy for *cartoonistas* to relate to other *cartoonistas*, translators to translators, and so on. I like cartoonists but not too much. The same goes for translators, teachers, fiction writers, poets, editors, publishers, and other iterations of the self. Mostly I like keeping my distance from others.

**XIBALBA:** Xibalba is the underworld in the *Popol Vuh*, the K'iche' book of origins. I published a retelling of it in 2020. It was illustrated by Salvadoran artist Gabriela Larios. I'm surprised the depiction of Xibalba in the book isn't more widely known. In its architecture, in my eyes it rivals Dante's portrait of hell in *The Divine Comedy* (1472).

The Larios images are stunning. They have a childlike quality to them. Needless to say, depicting the underworld visually is a challenge. The best attribute of that world is its ethereal—and thus, menacing—nature. Ever since she showed me drafts, I have obsessed over Xibalba. K'iche' people still refer to it with fear. Modernity has made us more ironic: come on, hell is just a mechanism of controlled employed by religion to generate guilt. But Xilbabla isn't about guilt. Every paragraph about it in *Popol Vuh* is earnest and straightforward.

**YIDDISH:** Yiddish is my mother tongue. I learned it from an early age. I have dreamed of one day publishing a graphic novel in Yiddish.

**ZORROPHILIA:** Zorro is my favorite superhero. This folk hero lives in second-rate novels and, far more fecundly, in dozens of movies. Years ago, I reviewed a non-existent one purported released in 1993.

My piece was published in *Post Script*<sup>2</sup>. Frustrated readers wrote to me asking for ways to access it. I believe a Zorro scholar wrote an encyclopedia entry on it. These are excerpts of my review:

[...]

*The Treason of Zorro* is an unqualified masterpiece. Its value lies in its clumsiness. As it reaches the hallmark of a twenty-fifth anniversary, it is clear it was meant as a reassessment *avant la lettre* of superhero vehicles, in particular those attending to minorities. Zorro, in this version, doesn't even have Spanish descent. He is a usurper, a man whose commitment to help the oppressed generates enormous anxiety in him. Does he really have to fight the establishment? If it was left to him, he would join it instead. The entire delivery is done with reticence. In other words, this is a mainstream movie unhappy with its pedigree.

Its director, René Carnicero, conceived it as a deliberate misrepresentation. Don Diego de la Vega is played by an Asian actor, Trevor Lin. His love interest is Cloris Leachman, who is Jewish. She looks like she is reprising the role of Frau Blucher in Mel Brook's *Young Frankenstein*. The setting is a hacienda, although the location is moved from El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles, in California, and in other versions from the vicinity of Santa Fé, in New Mexico, to the northern Mexican state of Sonora, which reframes the plot. Zorro is no longer an avenger against corrupt government officials, since the fictional town is plagued by scores of them. As a substitute, the acrobatic vigilante defends the vulnerable population against gringos who have arrived to turn the place into a tourist destination. That Universal Studios disowned the production before its premier is shrouded in controversy. The budget was 12 million, a fraction of what mega-movies of the nineties usually required. The script went through a number of iterations. At one point it was "doctored" by John Sayles, as did Michael Cimino and Paul Shrader. In the final cut, the storyline belongs to Tony Mancuso and Cleo Day (the names—I'm not the first to notice it—sound like a cheap tribute to the famous Shakespearean couple) but the screenplay itself is uncredited.

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2 *Post Script*, vol. 38, 2019, pp. 50-51. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-602365263/the-treason-of-zorro-1993>.

[...]

The linguistic dimension is quite lucid. Zorro is a clumsy English speaker. He can't roll his "r"s. A sequence I am particular fond of is when Lin declares he will never align himself with the Mexican government. As the close-up focuses on his facial gesture, he repeated his sentences twice, even more, frequently stumbling on the diction. This clumsiness is present elsewhere, highlighting the protagonist's speech impediment. A policeman asks, "Is he a stutter?" To which a bystander replies, "Can you be a popular hero and not finish a sentence?"

Carnicero never worked again. Trevor Lin didn't pursue an acting career either. None of this ought to be a statement of value on *The Treason of Zorro*, whose durability will increment with the passing of time. This Zorro, mounting his brace horse Tornado, is an anti-hero in an anti-Hollywood Hollywood product. By placing a legendary hero out of context and to question the value of "originalism" as an approach to culture, the movie is an ingenious refutation of blind casting.