

**BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE: THE SHADOW FEMINISM OF IZZY
ORTIZ RUEBENS**
**QUEMANDO LA CASA: EL FEMINISMO EN LA SOMBRA DE IZZY
ORTIZ RUEBENS**

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I analyze two stories featuring the character Isabel Maria “Izzy” Ortiz Ruebens – “Flies on the Ceiling” (1989) and the serialized story “Maggie” (2001-2004) – through the lenses of shadow feminism, failure, queer autonomy, and other theories of the “antisocial”. I argue that Izzy’s reclusive, capricious, haunted, “witchy” behavior may not be simply tragic or antisocial as some critics have characterized it. Instead, her character trajectory and relationships with other characters illustrate opportunities for distinct modes of friendship and womanhood that may also be liberatory in their radical resistance to intelligibility and efficiency.

KEYWORDS: shadow feminism, queer autonomy, Isabel Ortiz Ruebens, *Love and Rockets*, Jaime Hernandez.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo analizo dos historias donde aparece el personaje de Isabel Maria “Izzy” Ortiz Ruebens - “Flies on the Ceiling” (1989) y la historieta publicada por entregas “Maggie” (2001-2004) – a través de las teorías del “feminismo sombrío”, del fracaso, de la autonomía queer, y otras teorías de lo “antisocial”. Demuestro que el comportamiento solitario, caprichoso, turbado, y comportamiento “brujesco” de Izzy no es simplemente trágico o insociable como han argumentado otros críticos. Es más, la trayectoria de este personaje ofrece una oportunidad para crear maneras distintas de amistad y feminidad que pueden ser liberadoras en su resistencia radical contra lo comprensible y lo pragmático.

PALABRAS CLAVES: feminismo sombrío, autonomía queer, Isabel Ortiz Ruebens, *Love and Rockets*, Jaime Hernández.

1. ISABEL MARIA ORTIZ RUEBENS, LA LOCA

The long-running universe of Jaime Hernandez’s contributions to the *Love and Rockets* series —which contains stories by Jaime and his brother Gilbert, with occasional contributions from eldest brother Mario— is well-known for its expansive and diverse cast of female characters. Most of Jaime’s stories are set in a fictionalized version of Southern California, particularly the barrio of Huerta, aka Hoppers. These stories are so known for the female cast that they are often referred to as the “Locas” universe, so named after an early installment where six of the story’s women are introduced as such. However, despite this designation originally applying to a variety of characters,

“Locas” is most closely associated with the series’ two most prominent characters, Margarita Luisa Perla “Maggie” Chascarillo and Esperanza Leticia “Hopey” Glass. This association is reinforced by omnibus volumes specifically focusing on the stories including Maggie and Hopey which are entitled *Locas: The Maggie and Hopey Stories* (2004) and *Locas II: Maggie, Hopey and Ray* (2009). Although this second volume includes a male character, Ray Dominguez, it does not include arguably the most “loca” character in the *Love and Rockets* universe, Isabel Maria “Izzy” Ortiz Ruebens. Izzy appears in approximately 55 issues of *Love and Rockets*, including some of the most famous and popular stories, and she plays a crucial role in the lives of Maggie, Hopey, and the entire town.

Reclusive and strange, Izzy is often referred to as “crazy” and the “witch lady” by other characters, and her solitude, esoteric musings and pronouncements, and bizarre behavior often alienate and frustrate her friends and family. Reviews of the series often focus on Izzy as a tragic character, haunted by guilt and unable to sustain lasting connections with others – for example, a review in *The Comics Journal* of the most recent collection of stories that features Izzy argues that “her trajectory stops just short of being tragic” (Collins). A Jaime Hernandez retrospective by comics critic Rob Clough describes Izzy as “the tragic figure in all this, a broken woman who alternately is loving and protective but completely alienated from her environment” (Clough). Similarly to the “Locas” title being most associated with Maggie and Hopey, much of the scholarship on the Jaime Hernandez side of *Love and Rockets* has also focused on Maggie and Hopey, particularly scholarship interrogating the series’ explorations of queer desire and worldmaking (Saxey; Jones). Ana Merino has explored the character of Izzy more expansively, arguing that Izzy at times represents a metafictional authorial voice that helps the reader navigate the porous borders between the fantastic and the real in the “Locas” universe (Merino). Rocco Versaci uses the Izzy-centric story “Flies on the Ceiling” as an exemplar of a “successful” story through the lens of New Criticism, closely analyzing how the story establishes patterns and disrupts them, resulting in “ordered disorder,” which reflects the tension between Izzy’s past and present (Versaci 114). In this essay, I build on scholarship on queer worldmaking in “Locas” and on time, order/disorder by reading

Izzy's story arc through the lens of shadow feminism, analyzing her solitude, failures, and refusals not as exclusively tragic. As Jack Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2-3). I focus on two Izzy-centric stories –1991's "Flies on the Ceiling" and the 2001-2004 serialized story "Maggie"– in order to explore how Izzy's reclusive, capricious, haunted, "witchy" behavior may not be simply tragic or antisocial, but presents opportunities for distinct modes of friendship and womanhood that may also be liberatory in their radical resistance to intelligibility and efficiency.

2. SHADOW FEMINISM, AND QUEER AUTONOMY

In order to read Izzy's behavior as more than tragic or antisocial, I draw on various strains of queer theory, particularly those often classed as part of the "antisocial turn." In reading Izzy through an antisocial queer lens, I do not argue that she is necessarily a queer character in the sense of LGBTQIA+ identity, but rather that her relationships to herself, to others, to friendship, and to sex fundamentally refuse efficiency, knowledge-sharing, reproduction, and other functions necessary for the forward progress of the social or the state. Halberstam theorizes a "radical passivity" that animates queer antisocial projects: "In a liberal realm where the "pursuit of happiness" [...] is both desirable and mandatory and where certain formulations of self (as active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive) dominate the political sphere, radical passivity may signal another kind of refusal, the refusal quite simply to be" ("The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies" 150). In both analyzed stories as well as in most of Izzy's appearances in the series she continually refuses "simply to be," both in terms of fulfilling socially acceptable roles for women as wife, mother, mentor, or friend and in terms of "being" a person in the world, as she continually crosses between engaging with the "real" world and withdrawing into a world of shadows and spirits.

In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam theorizes "shadow feminism," which he describes as being oriented toward "negativity, rejection, and transformation". He additionally describes

this feminist orientation as “articulat[ing] itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing” (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 129). Halberstam also theorizes shadow feminism as masochistic, using examples of the performance art of Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono, who give themselves completely over to ego destruction at the hands of their audiences (“The Artist Is Object – Marina Abramovic at MOMA”). Izzy is a character that is often referred to by other characters as crazy and considered a shell of her former self after a traumatic experience —she behaves strangely, withdraws socially, and cannot seem to change her own circumstances or those of her friends or family. For instance, in the story “The Death of Speedy,” she seems to intuit that her younger brother Speedy will soon die, but either does not or cannot prevent this fate (Hernandez 129). Similarly, she is haunted throughout her post— “Flies on the Ceiling” appearances by manifestations of her past traumas and guilt in the form of flies, which she chases half-heartedly with a flyswatter but seems resigned to accepting. Izzy appears to other characters and to the readers as a figure strongly resembling Halberstam’s shadow feminist —evacuated of her former personality, refusing to behave in predictable or socially acceptable ways, and “unbecoming” herself more and more as she withdraws into her solitary existence in a supposedly haunted house. Thus, Izzy presents a useful figure through which to analyze how shadow feminism might present opportunities for alternative modes of sociality and resistance through passivity (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 133).

Much of the scholarship on *Love and Rockets* emphasizes the way that the series uses time, particularly the disruption of linear time via undated flashbacks, multiple versions of character backstories, and use of visual techniques that disrupt or challenge the reader’s understanding of the narrative (Versaci 111; Hamilton 38; Saxey). These repetitions and disruptions, although some of the most studied and praised elements of the series, can also be read as failures to conform to linear and efficient storytelling —indeed, the series has been published on and off since 1982, and characters have experienced multiple “endings” to their story arcs that seem to contradict one another, despite the characters aging in an approximation of “real world” time. In his chapter “Out of Sequence: Time and Meaning in Los Bros Hernandez,” Patrick L. Hamilton discusses how the works

of both Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez play with time and sequence, which are both crucial elements of the comic medium (Hamilton 26). Jan Baetens further contends that the reading of comics is most conventionally approached as a “reading for the plot,” where readers will want to take as little time as possible to read in order to move the narrative forward (4). Baetens also argues that the structure and publication schedules of comics are traditionally oriented toward this narrative efficiency as well; serialized comics generally come out on a regular schedule so that readers know when to expect the plot to progress, and the arrangement of panels on the comics page has long been standardized into a grid format for ease of reading (5). Versaci notes that while Jaime Hernandez’s contributions to *Love and Rockets* typically follow a nine-panel grid, where panels are laid out evenly spaced on each page, the comic also often disrupts its own temporality: “...images depict tension between the character’s present (attempting to write) and her past (various conflict-laden incidents), but the uniformity of panel size, shape, layout, and style presents everything, visually, at the same level of reality, so the time shifts are not apparent. By presenting wide variations in time, space, and perspective in a consistently structured style, page one establishes an aesthetic of ‘ordered disorder’” (114). Versaci here refers to the story “Flies on the Ceiling,” one of the two Izzy-centric stories that I will discuss in this essay.

In contrast to the normative organization toward efficient delivery of narrative and less time spent reading that Hamilton and Baetens discuss as being standard in the comics medium, concepts of queer time provide a lens for analyzing the disruptive potential of media that do not aim to produce temporally efficient narratives or reading experiences. Elizabeth Freeman argues in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* that “strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals” are meant to organize human life as efficiently as possible, and that queer temporalities and their excesses and failures resist this organization (Freeman 4). Leah Claire Allen and John S. Garrison argue that traditional modes of friendship, including “chosen family,” are also strategies for living that reproduce an orientation toward sustaining the future, and thus “rather than awaiting the future arrival of

sustainable friendship, we value friendship's failure to deliver connections and communities" (235). Allen and Garrison propose examining and valuing difficult, destructive, and fleeting "anonymous friendship," as well as "queer autonomy," which they theorize as a radical rejection not only of the social, but of the self (245). Izzy's increasing solitude and withdrawal from not only the world but also her conscious self – she often appears vacant, speaking in nonsensical phrases, sleepwalking, and inappropriately nude in public, for example – again call to mind these antisocial queer orientations toward relationships with others. Through these lenses of shadow feminism, failure, and queer autonomy, we can examine some of the major narratives that revolve around Izzy and imagine her not as a tragic figure, but as intentionally passive and evacuating the self as a means of resistance.

3. "FLIES ON THE CEILING" (1989): REFUSAL AND FAILURE

First published in 1989, "Flies on the Ceiling" tells the tale of what happened to former gang leader, professor, and author Isabel Maria "Izzy" Ortiz Ruebens during a trip to Mexico. From previous stories, the audience is aware that "something" terrible befell Izzy while she was away in Mexico after the collapse of her marriage to her much-older professor, and that this event is what turned her into an eccentric recluse (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, "100 Rooms" 15). The first page of "Flies on the Ceiling" summarizes the circumstances that led Isabel to leave home and hide out in Mexico through a sequence of panels. These panels tell the story of her departure presumably chronologically, and without any text: a shattered wedding photo represents her divorce; a protest outside a Planned Parenthood clinic signifies her decision to have an abortion after her divorce; a cartoonish scene of Izzy with steam coming from her head yelling at an equally perturbed man (who sits in front of a plaque reading "Hogar Dulce Hogar") suggests her falling-out with her father; interspersed close-ups of Izzy's sweating, crying face and her typewriter show her anxiety over a lack of progress on her book, which we saw her struggle with in 1982's "How to Kill A," the first Izzy-centric story (G. Hernandez and Hernandez). The last panel, a close-up of bandaged wrists reaching out from a hospital bed, illustrates the culmination of these misfortunes and frustrations: a suicide attempt that provides

the catalyst for Izzy's departure to Mexico (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, "Flies on the Ceiling" 1)¹.

This sequence demonstrates the use of panel sequences and gutters (the white spaces between panels) in playing with traditional flows of space and time. The panels of Izzy getting frustrated and beginning to cry seem to take place one after the other, which gives the impression that the panels with non-continuous settings are flashbacks or haunting memories. This introductory sequence disrupts traditional ideas of "recaps" and what kind of information should be available to the audience by eliminating dialogue and forcing readers to either think back to earlier volumes of the story (for readers who have been following the series) or interpret the discontinuous scenes. It is not necessarily important to know the precise details of Izzy's past (e.g., that her ex-husband was her graduate adviser, that she is trying to write an academic study) to understand the events that happen while she is in Mexico; a rough idea of the kinds of traumas she has been through suffices to understand why she is haunted by her past. This vagueness and discontinuity reflect the narrative's decentering audiences from normative notions of knowledge and facts; in her analysis of Maggie and Hopey's queer desires, Esther Saxey argues that Jaime Hernandez presents the reader with "desire without closure," arguing that the narratives "work far more with 'repetition, alternation and accrual' than with closure; through this they offer a new form of pleasure in inconclusive desire" (Saxey). Through the meshing of the past/present, real/fantastic, and author/subject, as Ana Merino theorizes Izzy's role in the greater narrative of the "Locas" stories, the reader enters the story destabilized from fixed notions of fact or history (213). Though the recapping of Izzy's backstory in a short sequence of panels could be read as visually efficient in that they take up minimal space on the page within the comic, the ambiguities of time and place subvert this efficiency. As Versaci argues, showing the past and present on the same visual plane creates temporal ambiguity and "render[s] the narrative more disorienting and impressionistic than sequentially coherent" (111).

Immediately after the title page, which shows Izzy standing next to a shadowy, Satan-like figure (the first indication of haunting the reader receives), the story cuts to a scene of Izzy wandering down a

street with a suitcase in hand. The setting is indicated to be Mexico by the title page, which subtitles the story “The Story of Isabel in Mexico” (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, “Flies on the Ceiling” 2). After several pages depicting Izzy living happily in a charming small town with a single father and his young son Beto for an indeterminate amount of time, Izzy sees a strange man on a bridge whose height seems to grow as she looks at him (7). As she sits contemplating this strange encounter and its meaning, a crucifix falls off of the wall next to her and lands standing upside-down on the floor. Interpreting this as a bad omen, Izzy reasons to herself, “I’m not the first person that ever got a divorce...or an abortion...or attempted suicide” (8). Although frightened, she maintains her refusal of matrimony and motherhood, and establishes an ambivalent orientation toward suicide – she is not actively seeking self-destruction, but does seem to be masochistically preparing herself for future failure and torment. In Halberstam’s articulation, “shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 124). She does not praise herself or articulate her resistance as active or intentional, but rather passively accepts that she is one of many people who have made these refusals, and masochistically dwells on these “sins,” further highlighting her failures to conform.

In her self-effacing acceptance of her haunting due to her “failure” as wife, mother, daughter, and being, Izzy demonstrates two of Halberstam’s three tenets for resistance through failure: “resist mastery” and “privilege the naïve or nonsensical” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 12–13). A voice interrupts her thoughts from a crack in the wall, explaining that it is not her “sins but [her] guilt” that results in her being haunted (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, “Flies on the Ceiling” 8). Izzy argues for a while with the voice, identifying him as a demon (she calls him “Mr. Satanico”) and insisting that he shows himself to her. While she initially insists that she is not afraid of the demon, and defies his threat to appear to her as “[her] own baby,” she quickly becomes paranoid, rejecting her potential nuclear family life with Beto and his father, glaring at suspicious shadows in a staircase and insulting a lucha libre promoter dressed as Satan who she believes is an attempt from Mr. Satanico to scare her (9). The last panel of page 9 shows Izzy sitting at a desk writing a letter to her mother. She

is dressed in a brassiere and skirt, and a tattoo is visible on her right upper arm. The tattoo shows a spider with the word “Widows” inscribed above it and “Hoppers 13” below it, and is a reference to her past as a gang member; earlier issues of *Love and Rockets* explain that Izzy founded a Chicana gang in Hoppers called the Widows, who were feared by many of the local residents, including male gangsters. Izzy no longer participates in the gang, and after this journey in Mexico she rarely participates in community life at all despite moving back to Hoppers —however, her tattoo remains indelibly inscribed on her arm as a marker of her alienation from the community. She “failed” the community in rejecting the gang for academic life, and then failed in academic life as well, continually struggling to write her book. In the panel on page 9, Izzy writes a letter to her mother explaining that she’ll “come home when you get rid of the vermin” (“the vermin” being a reference to her father). Although she returns home, she continues to be haunted by vermin —her father is dead, her mother having taken no decisive action to break from him, and Mr. Satanico promises to return to her as the titular flies on the ceiling.

The sequence between the letter-writing scene and the decision to return home contains the central events of the story, a surreal and nightmarish chain of experiences that convince Izzy to go back to Hoppers and deal with —or perhaps succumb to— the demons (whether literal or figurative) that haunt her.

Gutters and background settings again play an important role in interpreting the various scenes of this sequence. Michael Chaney theorizes the comics gutter as a paradoxical space that represents the “torn flesh” of a wound between panels while simultaneously containing “nothing” (no images or text) (Chaney 10). In this sequence, the interplay between the darkness within the panels and the white nothingness of the gutter evoke Chaney’s idea of a “reversed” ruptured wound, where the indeterminate interior of the gutter reveals the void of certainty in the narrative rather than the presence of blood or viscera in a body. After signing the letter to her mother, a dark shadow begins to obscure more and more of Izzy’s body (her tattoo is covered immediately) until she decides to take back her promise to visit her mother. She begins to sweat, laugh, and then cough uncontrollably, and the settings start to shift dramatically

between panels. Between the third and fourth panels of the page she is suddenly wearing her shirt again (10). She shifts to a bathroom setting, where she vomits lizards into a toilet bowl; she is then out on the street with her suitcase, where she collapses. A devil's face like the one on the title page appears, and then we see Isabel and another child playing a wedding or church game in a bedroom. The three panels of the children playing bring the reader's attention back to the religious imagery employed earlier in the story; the crucifix that fell off of Isabel's wall is on a dresser in the room, as is a statue of the Virgin Mary. When the children open the top drawer of the dresser, the severed head of a crucified Christ stares up at them (11).

The innocence of the playing children, who imitate a religious wedding ceremony with veils and hands clasped in a prayer position, is disrupted by the graphic imagery of the severed head. The presence of Christ simultaneously as a cherished emblem of righteousness (the crucifix on the desk) and as a terrifying secret (the head in the drawer) again demonstrates Izzy's failures to conform to normative models of womanhood, Latinidad, and being in the world. She cannot fit the model of La Virgen, the "good woman," whom she desires to emulate as a child (her veil and the position of her hands mimic those of the statue on the dresser) because of her "sins" of divorce, abortion, and attempted suicide, and thus the childhood fantasy of being a model woman ends. After the discovery of Christ's severed head, time leaps forward again, and she finds herself waking up in labor, with two crone-like midwives assisting her (11-12). Isabel gives birth to a shriveled, lifeless creature, and throws her head back in grief. Once again, she does not experience her refusal of motherhood as a radical choice that she made, but rather as something that happened to her and continues to happen to her as she fails repeatedly to "birth" her book as well.

At the story's conclusion, Izzy's newly-long hair suggests that she has been outside of the normal spatiotemporal flow for quite some time and signals a change in her attitude as well (12). She rises from her bed, dresses, and walks out the door with her suitcase to reunite with her lover and his son, only to quickly realize that things are not as they were before, and she must move on. She packs her bag again and goes to leave, explaining to her lover, "I was wrong. It's not over. It never is" (14). Before she leaves to confront her past, however,

she is pulled toward a particular woman she sees dancing at a fiesta. She walks toward the woman with an angry look on her face, interrupting the dance to confront her. For six panels, the reader is left in the dark as to why Isabel needs to speak with this stranger. However, the second panel on page 15 reveals that the dancing woman's footprints are those of a chicken, with the image of chicken tracks having recurred throughout the story from the third page (first page after the title page). Although the woman asserts that Izzy is "not afraid anymore" and Izzy returns home, the story ends with a panel depicting Beto and his father embracing in near-total darkness, with only their silhouettes and the crucifix on the wall illuminated. While Izzy has refused yet again to be a wife and mother, Beto and his father appear much more placid and domestic than they did either at the start of the story or immediately before Izzy's departure (15).

Despite her failure and refusal, Izzy's relationships with the father and the boy appear to have transformed their relationship to one another – they embrace and hold one another in the darkness. As Allen and Gilbert write in critiquing the idea of family, including chosen family, "narratives of chosen family are often replete with notions of choice and futurity that link fulfillment with relation to others" (Allen and Garrison 227). However paradoxical it may seem; it is Izzy's departure that solidifies the bond between Beto and his father. Izzy's fleeting sexual/romantic relationship with the father and motherhood/friendship with Beto were vexed and tenuous, but as Allen and Garrison argue in favor of antinormative, disappointing friendships, nonetheless valuable. Izzy's retreat into solitude and severing of relationships with others also plays a major role in the 2001-2004 serialized story "Maggie," and similarly, her "unachievable" friendship with Maggie proves valuable and even liberatory for both women.

4. "MAGGIE" (2001-2004): QUEER AUTONOMY AND MASOCHISM

Published from 2001-2004, the serialized story "Maggie" is, as of publication, the most recent story in which Izzy plays a significant role and is seen outside of flashbacks or references. Although Izzy has appeared in other stories since "Flies on the Ceiling," "Maggie"

is the next story in the series that focuses primarily on Izzy, rather than featuring her in only short appearances. The gap in real-world time between “Flies on the Ceiling” and “Maggie” —twenty years— calls to mind Baetens’ argument that comics serialization is typically structured to move narratives forward. However, the idiosyncratic publication of *Love and Rockets* itself resists this narrative efficiency. The story begins with Maggie, now in her forties and managing a small apartment complex in the San Fernando Valley, being asked to host Izzy in her apartment and take her to appear on a television show to talk about her recently finished book (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* no. 1 (2001) 2)². Maggie complains vociferously to best friend and sometime lover Hopey about having to interact with Izzy, especially bringing Izzy to her home (3). Based on the characters’ visual appearance, a lot of time has passed within the story between the last time we saw Maggie and Izzy interact, and it appears from the start of the story that their friendship has been frustrating at best in the intervening years. Izzy continues to vex Maggie during her stay —one panel depicts a terrified Maggie sleeping on the couch as Izzy sleeps in her bed, while shadows that resemble clawed hands creep up on Maggie from behind the sofa (5). Izzy also screams, sleepwalks, strips nude, chases flies with a knife, and displays other frightening and inappropriate behaviors. With Maggie’s help, Izzy goes to the television show, but is cut for time due to the self-centered host’s blathering, and Maggie ends up getting in a fight with the host. While Maggie protests that Izzy didn’t get to appear, Izzy walks off set before the show has even ended filming, angering Maggie with her passivity and refusal to perform the task for which she enlisted Maggie’s help. Seemingly aware of yet unable or unwilling to stop these behaviors that scare and anger Maggie, Izzy laments while crying across several panels, “Margarita Luisa Perlita Chascarrillo, I am so ashamed. Can you ever forgive me for putting you through this? You’re such an angel. I should have dedicated that chapter [of her book] to you instead of Hopey. Oh god, what was I thinking?” (13). While Izzy appears to be contrite and guilty for these behaviors, she also makes no effort to stop them, nor does she promise Maggie to either cease these behaviors or dedicate a chapter to her at a future date.

In the continuation of “Maggie” in issue 3, Izzy answers the door of Maggie’s apartment nude, with her face half in shadow, and gives a seemingly nonsensical response to a new acquaintance of Maggie’s who asks if she has the right apartment—we see that Maggie’s apartment number is 7, and when Izzy answers the door she simply says, “Catorce” (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* no. 4 (2001) 1). Later in the same issue, Maggie explains that a tenant had reported a stray dog, but then later denied having actually seen it, to which Izzy replies “They never do”, calling back to her various hauntings by demons and creatures (4). As she gives this response, she is still nude with her face in shadow, but her eyes are highlighted in white to give the appearance that they are glowing. As the “Maggie” story goes on, the idea that Izzy is being consumed by the shadows either literally or figuratively as a metaphor for her obsessions becomes an increasing visual motif in the story. Izzy also appears to age rapidly, with noticeable wrinkles and mid-length dark hair at the beginning and waist-length white hair and a decades-older appearance by the end of the story, which appears to take place in a matter of days or weeks. Again, Izzy fails and refuses to conform to chronological time or ideal feminine productivity—she fails in this story as a mentor, a friend, an author, and a woman aging gracefully. As Halberstam writes, shadow feminism “speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter [...]” (Halberstam, “Unbecoming” 274). Although Izzy and Maggie are not literally mother and daughter, Maggie was cared for in her childhood by Izzy, and as an accomplished author, it would be easy to imagine Izzy as a mentor or role model for Maggie; however, Izzy refuses mentorship or nurturing care for Maggie. In issue 9, Maggie rants to herself about her continuing friendship with Izzy, noting that Izzy used to encourage her to run into traffic and pull her back at the last minute when they were kids and asks herself “Christ, Maggie, haven’t you had enough? The woman has given you constant grief for so many years, yet you keep coming back for more. Is it sisterly love or pitiful self-torture?” (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* no. 9 (2001) 11). Maggie too affirms her friendship with Izzy, going so far as to compare it to family in the form of sisters, but also highlights the masochistic element of their relationship and goes on to call it “bullshit” (11).

Maggie, with the aid of Hopey, forces Izzy to return to her home in Hoppers, where Izzy lives in solitude in a supposedly haunted house. After being convinced by a troublesome acquaintance that Izzy stole a valuable folk-art object, Maggie returns to Hoppers and after failing to speak with Izzy, reunites with her sister and mother. They discuss the strange legends that seem to revolve around Izzy and the house, including the flies, dogs, and the devil being reborn as someone's baby, an explicit call-back to "Flies on the Ceiling" (9). As Maggie goes to Izzy's house one more time to try to convince Izzy to return the folk-art object, she notices that Izzy appears to have covered the house in black paint, which in appearance mimics the shadows we've seen consuming Izzy throughout the story. However, Maggie follows a trail of paint from Izzy's house out into the street and realizes that it is a flammable liquid which is in the process of setting the house ablaze. Despite lamenting their continuously vexatious friendship and declaring it "bullshit" and that Izzy is "on [her] own" (11), Maggie runs back toward the house screaming Izzy's name (13). In the final episode of the story, Maggie searches for Izzy amidst the charred ruins of Izzy's house. She is bothered by some local goth teens, who seem to revere Izzy as a Satanic deity despite never having actually met or interacted with her – as they opine, "We love her. She is the light in our darkness. The hell in our heaven" (J. Hernandez and Hernandez, *Love and Rockets no. 10* (2001) 10). Izzy's relationship with the teens recalls the model of anonymous friendship theorized by Allen and Garrison; although fleeting and one-sided, the teens' admiration for Izzy does seem to motivate Maggie to continue to search the house's remains for Izzy, even as their flattery irritates her. Despite her endless frustration with Izzy's refusal of mutual care, companionship, or mentorship, Maggie's contemplation of the house leads to a multi-page sequence of flashbacks that show the reader and Maggie how instrumental Izzy has been in shaping the trajectory of Maggie's life. Maggie alternates between seeing flashbacks to moments with Izzy and visions of being stalked by the black dogs and demons and seeing Izzy levitate, seemingly leaving her body (18-23). Maggie gains clarity about the nature of her own relationship with guilt, past failures, and hauntings via Izzy's radical antisocial act of burning down her own home—a home in which Maggie also occasionally lived, and which represents much of Maggie's own past relationships with the Hoppers community.

The story concludes with Izzy's and Maggie's separate and conflicting understandings of what Izzy's act of arson means for Maggie. Notably, as we see Izzy arguing with an unseen demonic presence (presumably the "Mr. Satanico" of "Flies on the Ceiling"), she only briefly addresses her own motivations for burning the house, sniping at Mr. Satanico that maybe she was once sentimental about the house, but that he "didn't leave much left to be sentimental for, did you?" (24). As we see her hand the flammable liquid and matches to a strange boy to set the house ablaze, we also see in the same panel a juxtaposition of Maggie in her dream-state witnessing this action; Izzy continues talking, presumably to Mr. Satanico, but from the reader's perspective it appears that Izzy is talking to Maggie. Rather than offering words of comfort, solace, or even defiance, Izzy scolds Mr. Satanico/Maggie, saying "Stop the bogus tears already. As if it's going to hurt. Everybody knows you and flames go hand in hand" (24). She goes on to say that Maggie will sleep in "her nice, warm bed. God knows, she's had it coming" and hopes that Maggie may someday forgive her (25). Although Izzy is literally wishing Maggie well, using the phrase "God knows she's had it coming" and hoping that Maggie will forgive her casts her actions in a more sinister light. Rather than intending to liberate Maggie from the hauntings plaguing both women, Izzy radically destroys all that is left of their friendship with an attitude akin to a shrug, appearing stoic throughout the scene. She has also cleaned up her appearance, rinsing the black shadows/paint off her body with a garden hose, neatly plaiting her long white hair, and donning a collared shirt, tie, and slacks; while the fire appears to have started with Izzy already out of the house, it is not clear what happened to her, and we do not see her again (25). The focus then shifts back to Maggie, who retreats from the house's ruins with the demonic black dogs following her; however, as Maggie walks further from the house, the dogs fade away until she is left alone (26). The story then cuts to the next day, where Maggie is sitting by the newly-filled pool in her apartment complex, watching children and families splash and play in the bright sunshine (27). The story concludes with Maggie deriding Izzy on the phone to Hopey, going so far as to say "Fuck Izzy" in reference to the chaotic and upsetting events of the house's burning and Maggie's dream-like journey. However, Maggie also is finally able to say "I love you too" to Hopey, after having

wondered if she heard Hopey say it to her on a malfunctioning phone earlier in the story. In the sunshine, surrounded by joyous residents she helped, and professing love to the person closest to her in the world, it seems that Maggie is, at least for the moment, content and no longer haunted by the demons of her and Izzy's past. However, the final panels show Maggie hanging up, clutching the phone to her chest, and re-entering her apartment with an ambiguous expression. Although her failed friendship with Izzy and Izzy's final act of self-negation have freed Maggie from the demons of their shared past, Maggie's own tenuous and often explosively frustrating relationship with Hopey is one of repetition and potential failure as well.

5. CONCLUSION

In examining failure, refusal, and negative relationships so extensively in Izzy's trajectory throughout *Love and Rockets*, it would be easy to conclude, like comics critics Collins and Clough, that Izzy is a tragic character whose guilt and bizarre behavior result in her alienation from her friends, family, and community. However, in reading her journey through the lens of shadow feminism and queer autonomy, we can alternatively understand her journey as one of radical self-negation, as her solitude enriches the lives of those around her in equal, if not greater, measure than the frustration her refusals to be a "normal" friend, lover, mentor, or mother create. Allen and Garrison, though writing in line with the "antisocial" turn in queer theory, also invoke the utopian theorizing of José Esteban Muñoz in order to explain how the antisocial and the failed could result in valuable possibilities: "What happens when we conceptualize friendship as a relation marked by unachievability or what José Esteban Muñoz calls the "not quite here yet"? (1) Rather than awaiting the future arrival of sustainable friendship, we value friendship's failure to deliver connections and communities" (Allen and Garrison 235). Muñoz himself explores the utopian possibilities of acts of radical self-negation in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, examining the final performance/suicide of dancer Fred Herko:

The history of actually realized utopian enclaves is, from a dominant perspective, a history of failures. Hope and disappointment operate within a dialectical tension in this notion of queer utopia. Queerness's failure is temporal and, from this project's perspective, potentially

utopian, and inasmuch as it does not adhere to straight time, interrupting its protocols, it can be an avant-garde practice that interrupts the here and now. To perform such interruptions is not glorious or heroic work. This aspect of Herko's story speaks to the material toll that a burning queer incandescence takes (Muñoz 155).

Izzy's quite literal "burning queer incandescence" ends her story in the *Love and Rockets* series; whether she self-immolated in the blaze of her cursed house or managed to escape to another place or even temporality, Izzy's final (as of 2025) act of destruction —of both her home and her friendship with Maggie— does provide the foundation for Maggie and Hopey to potentially strengthen their own relationship, even if that relationship is also tenuous and ambiguous. Izzy's story refuses a tidy closure —the reader does not know what literally happened to her after the house fire, and perhaps it doesn't matter. Halberstam argues that shadow feminism privileges "erasure over memory," and Izzy's story concludes with her erasure from both the physical neighborhood of Huerta/Hoppers and from Maggie's life, as Maggie appears to move on from their failed friendship (*The Queer Art of Failure* 14). Isabel Maria "Izzy" Ortiz Ruebens is a tragic figure in the narratives of *Love and Rockets*, but we can also understand her as performing the non-glorious, anti-heroic interruptions necessary for the story to continue for all the characters whose failed relationships with her nonetheless opened up valuable possibilities for their own futures.

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NOTAS

- 1 The pagination for "Flies on the Ceiling" refers to the trade paperback edition published in 1991 entitled *Love and Rockets vol. 9: Flies on the Ceiling*; the story was originally published alongside other stories by Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez in *Love and Rockets* #29 in 1989.
- 2 The pagination for "Maggie" refers to the individual issues published between 2001 and 2004 under the title *Love and Rockets*. The series' numbering starts over at 1 in these issues – to disambiguate this first issue from the original 1982 *Love and Rockets no. 1*, I have reproduced it as *Love and Rockets no. 1* (2001). The "Maggie" stories have also been republished in trade paperbacks *Ghost of Hoppers* (2005) and *Esperanza* (2011).