Neoliberalism in the Gutter: Latin American Comics and Society since the 1990s

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In a 2012 strip published in the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*, political cartoonist Ricardo Kandler shows two individuals who happily claim, "¡Somos libres!" 'We are free!' They begin to jump and eventually fly, as dotted lines show their flight pattern. At the bottom of the frame, we soon find out that the dotted lines are in fact strings held by another pair of men, and the flying individuals are like kites. One man asks the other, "¿Hasta dónde aflojamos el mecate?" 'How much string do we give them?' as the flying individuals continue to enjoy their illusion of freedom. Since the 1990s, Latin America has undergone important economic, social, political, and cultural transformations marked by the consolidation of neoliberal policies that swept through the region and helped define its contemporary societies. Reading between the panels—in the gutter—this essay explores comic books and cartoons produced by Latin American artists during this period, interrogating the various ways in which the graphic narrative medium has both reflected and reacted against neoliberalism's impact throughout the continent. Kandler's comic strip is representative of how these artists have engaged with the big, contentious issues of contemporary Latin America, including foreign intervention, loss of national sovereignty, political corruption, poverty, and insecurity. Since cultural products such as comics are not produced in a bubble, I am interested in discerning what type of cultural and political interventions they make as part of the multitude of discourses generated in recent years in Latin America around the topic of neoliberalism. In fact, because of their tremendous popularity and ease of access in traditional comic book cultures such as Mexico and Argentina, comics "are one of the national cultural media in which conflict over the neoliberal period played out for public consumption during this same period" (Campbell 3).

In neoliberal Mexico, comic books have been used by government officials both to promote free-market policies and to resist them. For example, President Vicente Fox's administration published *A mitad del camino* ('Halfway There') in 2003, a comic that sought to explain and promote its free-market economic and social policies. A response to the conservative government's use of *historietas* ('comic books') as propaganda was *Historias de la ciudad* ('Stories from the City'), produced by the center-left administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), then mayor of Mexico City. One issue, "Las fuerzas oscuras contra AMLO" ('The Dark Forces versus AMLO'), employed the superhero trope to depict the federal government's policies as evil in the context of the 2006 presidential election. In the end, López Obrador narrowly lost the 2006 election to

Fox's successor, Vicente Calderón. Independent comic book authors and cartoonists from throughout the continent have also employed this medium to respond to the new realities taking place around them and to generate new possibilities of artistic and political expression. This essay will focus on works by these independent artists, published from the early nineties through the present day.

Neoliberalism and Latin America

Neoliberalism is broadly defined as a set of economic liberalization policies that seek to enhance the role of the private sector in the economy, including fiscal austerity, reductions in government spending, free trade, privatization of state-owned businesses, deregulation, and the opening of markets to foreign investment. In general terms, neoliberals reject the role of the state in the economy beyond "night watchman"; assert that the "suitable imperative to provide 'order' in an economy is that of the market, not state planning"; and "subscribe to the government failure approach, which rejects the welfare economics view of the state as a benign and omnipotent social guardian that maximises social welfare" (Wylde 25). In Latin America, these policies were promoted since the late 1970s by the United States as part of the so-called Washington Consensus, with international financial entities such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund playing a key role in their implementation. In traditionally social-democratic countries with heavy government control of the economy and welfare policies, such as Mexico and Costa Rica, neoliberalism was implemented beginning in the 1980s as a response to severe debt crises that threatened the region. In other cases, the shift in economic policy came earlier; in Chile, for instance, conservative military dictator Augusto Pinochet forged ahead with liberalization policies following the U.S.-assisted 1973 ouster of socialist president Salvador Allende.

Even though the experiment with neoliberalism has evolved over the decades and has taken different forms throughout the region, Latin America has been profoundly transformed during this period. Sectors of the economy such as manufacturing, agricultural exports, finance, and telecommunications have experienced tremendous growth in several countries. A perfect example of this bonanza is Mexican businessman Carlos Slim, who is now one of the world's richest individuals. On the other hand, inequality has grown throughout much of the region; unemployment and underemployment have increased; social safety nets have deteriorated; violence from gangs and drug trafficking has spiraled out of control in places such as Honduras and Mexico; and migration has risen, particularly among the rural poor and Indigenous communities that have been excluded from progress. The negative consequences of this new economic paradigm were felt soon after implementation. For instance, the number of those living in poverty in the region increased from 78 million to 150 million between

1982 and 1993, a phenomenon that the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has termed "la brecha de la equidad" 'equity gap' (Petras and Veltmeyer 1).

After more than a decade of debt restructuring and other pro-liberalization measures, the signing in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada, and Mexico became a milestone in Mexico's "official" transition to a neoliberal state (Campbell 2). This milestone also represented a catalyst for contemporary social movements and counter-official activism. The same year that NAFTA went into effect, Mexico experienced the emergence of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, an Indigenous uprising in the southern state of Chiapas whose agenda was a clear rejection of free-market policies and globalization. In South America, Argentina became the poster child of neoliberalism gone wrong. Policies instituted during the 1990s led to a profound socioeconomic crisis, unemployment, and a fragile state apparatus that lacked "institutional safeguards and social safety nets . . . to catch people when they started to fall into poverty" (Wylde 88). These and other factors led to *El Argentinazo* of December 2001 and January 2002, when in a period of only two weeks the country saw five presidents, the largest debt default the world has ever experienced, the devaluation of the peso, and protests all over the nation that were met by a strong wave of repression from the government (Wylde 86-87). While the World Bank and the IMF would explain these consequences as the inevitable forces of productive and social transformation, many critics of neoliberalism see them bluntly as imperialist exploitation: "an assault on the region's raw materials and human conditions facilitated by the neoliberal policy agenda imposed by Washington" (Petras and Veltmeyer 1).

The impact of neoliberal development strategies has led to a variety of reactions across the continent and the establishment of more heterogeneous development policies in a number of countries. According to Andersson and Christensen, "some countries have opted for strong nationalist policies such as the nationalization of energy resources and strong state intervention in the economy, while others maintain more market-driven approaches, while an emphasis on socially oriented policies seems to be on the rise across this divide" (5). Socialist populism has risen in countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia in an effort to provide a viable alternative to what many view as free-market totalitarianism and excessive influence by foreign financial institutions and local business elites. Other countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay have in recent years responded to neoliberal crises by electing left-of-center regimes in what contemporary scholars have labeled the rise of the "pink tide"—so called because these regimes are less radical than twentieth-century socialist governments and because they "have chosen a more moderate path, sensitive to the constraints placed on it by both domestic society and an international system dominated by the

interests of capital" (Wylde 15-16).

As a result of these developments, many scholars have asserted that Latin America has now entered a post-neoliberal period. However, parts of the continent are still very much operating within neoliberal structures. As recently as 2009, Costa Rica ratified (following a contentious referendum) the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which the other signatories had approved between 2005 and 2007. In 2015, two-way trade between the nations engaged in this agreement totaled $53 billion ("CAFTA-DR"). With the exception of Nicaragua, the CAFTA-DR block has elected centrist or right-leaning governments that mostly favor neoliberal policies. The pink tide also appears to be fading. In Argentina, the post-crisis reform governments of Néstor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2003-2015) ended with the election of Mauricio Macri, a right-wing candidate with a pro-business and pro-foreign investment agenda. And Brazil, which rose to international economic prominence during the administration of Workers' Party's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), experienced a significant economic slowdown, rising inflation, and increasing unemployment during the government of Lula's successor, his former chief of staff Dilma Rousseff. Amid allegations of widespread bribery, Rousseff was impeached in 2016 and the country took a turn to the right as the interim government of Michel Temer has rolled back social policies (Watts).

Comics to the Rescue: Hybrid Responses to Deterritorialized Realities

How have graphic narrative artists been influenced by the significant social, economic, political, and cultural changes brought about by neoliberalism in Latin America? How have they inserted themselves into the socio-political, cultural, and artistic conversations of the region and the world during a watershed period marked by globalization and unprecedented developments in communications and digital technologies? To answer these questions, one must first consider that the universe of literary and other forms of cultural production in Latin America also underwent a profound transformation during the 1980s and 1990s. During the second part of the twentieth century, Latin American literature reached global prominence thanks to the popularity of magic realism and so-called Boom writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. While this phenomenon finally placed Latin American narrative on the world map, it also led to a reductionism of the region's literary production among international markets and by international audiences—which now associated all writing from the region with a certain style and expected emerging writers to deliver new "Macondos."[1] This reductionism was heavily criticized in the 1990s by the McOndo writers and the Crack generation, which included the likes of Alberto Fuguet and Jorge Volpi. In fact, since the publication of the *McOndo* anthology in 1996 as a reaction to the suffocating influence of the

Boom on new Latin American writing and writers, the region's literary production has dealt with a "globalization that emphasizes technological advances, a deterritorialized sense of identity that has more to do with the personal and the global than the national" (Robbins and González 2). Robbins and González also argue that Latin American literature since the 1990s has been marked by the influence of popular culture and "is no longer a conflict between a national (elite) high culture and a (low class) popular culture, but a case of global popular culture that shapes the Latin American subject versus the Latin American state's archaic view of a 'national' culture" (7).

Comic book production in Latin America has also experienced important shifts in style and ideological preoccupations. Since the early 1930s, Mexico has traditionally been the undisputed leader in comic book production and distribution in Latin America. *Historietas* became so popular in Mexico that the production of comic books and *fotonovelas* (comics with photographs instead of drawings) tripled between 1970-71 and 1981-82, rising from 38 million copies to about 80 million copies monthly (Hinds and Tatum 5). Popular themes of Mexican comics include family life and social satire (*La Familia Burrón*), superheroes (*Kalimán*), romance and soft pornography (especially in *fotonovelas*), Mexican history (*Episodios Mexicanos*), and political satire (represented by the work of Eduardo del Río, or Rius). Argentina also developed an important comics industry, especially in the 1950s when publication shifted from "uninteresting, badly translated foreign comics" to works by a new generation of local artists (Accorsi 28). These artists include Héctor Germán Oesterheld, creator of the popular science fiction series *El eternauta* (*The Eternaut*), and Joaquín Lavado, better known as Quino, who created the internationally known *Mafalda*, "one of the funniest, most intelligent, thought-provoking strips in the history of humor" (Accorsi 30).

However, the commercial success and prolific output of Mexican, Argentinian, and other comics from throughout the continent were not enough to prevent a crisis of the industry in the 1980s and 1990s—mirroring the crisis the region endured as neoliberalism spread south of the Rio Grande. In Mexico, sales of comics declined rapidly as a result of factors including television's omnipresence and the allure of telenovelas and comedies as new forms of popular entertainment; the way publishers became bogged down in the same formulas they had employed for decades; and the elimination of locally produced *historietas* in favor of U.S. superhero comics and Japanese manga (Peláez 212). In Argentina, the severe economic crisis of the 1980s led publishers to cut costs by replacing their finest artists with newcomers, which compromised quality and cost them readers (Accorsi 37). During this period of uncertainty, the Latin American comics industry responded by putting an emphasis on experimentation, but results would never match the glory days in terms of output. Other important changes included the proliferation of specialized comic book shops and the rise of alternative and auteur

comics (Peláez 212), some of which began to reflect and question the new Latin America at the turn of the millennium. Just like contemporary writers, comic book authors have engaged in experimentation with new forms and styles; have absorbed and reconfigured influences coming from U.S., as well as Japanese and other comic book industries; have established dialogues with global popular culture; and have taken advantage of the Internet, social media, and other digital technologies to both create and distribute their work and to engage with their readers and other artists in ways that were unimaginable before. In a globalized context that has included the migration of millions of Latin Americans across the world, comics and graphic novels have also experienced the rise of trans-Latin American writers and artists who problematize traditional notions of national literatures or cultural industries.

Two key characteristics that define late twentieth century and early twenty-first century Latin American literature/graphic narrative are deterritorialization and cultural hybridity, which go hand in hand. In *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1989) (*Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*), Néstor García Canclini refers to deterritorialization as a process that implies the loss of the "natural relation" between cultural aspects of a country and their social and geographical territories (288). According to García Canclini, the relocation—or rather, the "dislocation"—of contemporary national cultures is intimately connected to the transnationalization of symbolic markets at a time of increased globalization (288-90). This process of deterritorialization, García Canclini explains, is capable of generating new forms of cultural production that are highly hybrid and dynamic and are no longer bound by the borders and cultural traditions of nations. Hybridity, and in some cases hyper-hybridity—including the fusing of various cultural influences, genres, digital and non-digital formats, new ways of combining images and text, traditional and new themes, intertextual and hypertextual strategies, etc.—marks this contemporary, deterritorialized graphic narrative production. In *New Trends in Contemporary Latin American Narrative*, Emilse Hidalgo writes that recent Latin American literature is marked by "the incorporation of a heterogeneous symbolic imaginary that mixes the local with the foreign, the national with the transnational, the popular with high culture, and the traditional with the contemporary and the postmodern" (109). Similarly, in *Spanish Fiction in the Digital Age: Generation X Remixed* (2011), Christine Henseler points out that contemporary authors engaged in digital technologies are not looking for a universalized Spanish or Latin American identity as their predecessors did, but instead are more interested in the identities of daily life: sometimes marginal ones, sometimes made up of several cultural links that turn them into hybrid identities that are hard to classify by traditional cultural standards (15-18). In the next pages, we will see how deterritorialization and hybridity operate in contemporary comics as they take neoliberalism (and the societies it has transformed) to task.

Comics produced in Latin America during the neoliberal period employ diverse styles, influences, genres, and storylines to address the region's complex and often contradictory realities. The works studied in this essay can be classified into two groups: 1) cartoons that rely on parody and satire to make poignant commentaries on current social, political, or cultural issues; and 2) fantasy and science fiction comics that serve as allegories of real-life conditions and/or historical developments.

Different Shades of Political Cartooning: *El Cerdotado* and *El Mundo de Kandler*

Political cartooning has a longstanding tradition in Latin American journalism and the comics industry. Cartoonists during the neoliberal period have continued this practice, often mixing non-traditional formats and also taking their work outside of the realm of the newspaper to increase exposure through online distribution platforms. In Mexico, one unique example is *El Cerdotado*, created by Monterrey-born artist Leopoldo "Polo" Jasso (1969). An anthropomorphic pig, El Cerdotado is an anti-hero who fights injustices plaguing society but sometimes engages in unlawful acts for his own benefit. The character first appeared in the 1990s in the fanzine *Psicomix* and two self-published comic book issues where the story was further developed. Starting in the late 1990s, Jasso found a new venue for his creation, publishing *El Cerdotado* comic strips weekly and then daily in the nationally syndicated Monterrey newspaper *Milenio*, where it is still published today. *El Cerdotado* thrives on word plays, contradictions, and hybrid identities. The character's name is a play on the Spanish words "cerdo" 'pig' and "dotado" 'endowed,' thus creating confusion and humor from the very beginning. Jasso constantly parodies the superhero genre. El Cerdotado's behind-the-cape identity is Anacleto Kal-el Pacheco (an obvious reference to Superman), while the hero has powers similar to those of the Man of Steel—except he is afraid of heights. Additionally, this character is overweight; suffers from alcoholism, depression, and porn addiction; and defies all traditional attitudes toward morality and ethics present in superhero comics by profiting from his powers or taking bribes.

A flawed and contradictory superhero such as El Cerdotado can certainly set the stage for a humorous strip. But more importantly, El Cerdotado's characteristics allow Jasso to tackle serious issues from the perspective of a down-to-earth character with whom ordinary citizens can identify: a youngster with a good heart but who also falls into temptation from time to time. El Cerdotado's origins also make him relatable to Mexicans suffering from the consequences of neoliberalism and violence: his father, also a superhero, was killed by an evil butcher and turned into chorizo sausage (also slang for corruption or thief), so Anacleto grew up fatherless and in extreme poverty. A common theme often

addressed in the El Cerdotado stories is modern Mexico's economic, social, and political instability, which disproportionately impacts poor people (including the hero), forcing them to make tough choices.

The daily strips tend to criticize or satirize pressing issues, including political or police corruption, crime, and drug violence. For instance, in the March 28, 2017 strip (see Fig. 1), the hero awakens in the middle of the night to a call for help. He reluctantly gets up and readies to go "fight for law and order," but ends up slamming his door shut when realizing criminality outside has gotten dangerously out of hand, even for a super-powered swine. As he falls back asleep, he says, "¡Bueno! Al cabo que ya nadie se acuerda qué es la ley y el orden" (Jasso "Ley y orden") 'Oh well! Nobody remembers what law and order is anymore anyway.' In another cartoon ("Balas en la rocola," which is notably more somber than the typical Cerdotado offering), the hero and police officers stand aghast amid a scene of death highlighted by dark shadows. The comic depicts a July 8, 2011 Monterrey bar massacre, where more than 20 people were killed as a result of a dispute between rival drug cartels. It also makes reference via a musical intertext to the assassination of Argentinian singer Facundo Cabral in Guatemala City by organized crime hitmen the following day. This comic brilliantly captures the nature of contemporary Latin American violence as a deterritorialized and transnational phenomenon.

Fig. 1 In the world of *El Cerdotado*, Mexican society has become so riddled with crime that not even a dedicated superhero can muster enough courage (or sleep) to fight it.

The political cartooning work of Costa Rican artist Ricardo Kandler (1955-2017) is more traditional than Jasso's in terms style and genre.[2] However, it masterfully and succinctly conveys the contradictions inherent in a country that has experienced booming economic progress alongside growing inequality and corruption during the neoliberal period. His work is published in the daily *La Nación*, one of Costa Rica's most important mainstream media outlets, and has also been distributed via social media in recent years. Kandler's strips have a very

defined style: they only include one panel; favor images over words, which serve mainly as headlines or captions; and feature simply drawn human figures with little-to-no facial details. The latter aspect of the artist's style is the most salient in his unapologetically and unmistakably political approach to cartooning and satire. Some commentators have said that Kandler "le ha tomado el pulso al país con la sutileza de un aguijonazo" (Chaves) 'has taken the country's pulse with the subtleness of a sharp sting.' More specifically, a majority of Kandler's cartoons include large human figures that are associated with power (political, religious, economic, etc.) alongside very small, almost stick figures that represent ordinary citizens.

Thanks to this very deliberate representational choice, Kandler swiftly and poignantly depicts everyday life in Costa Rica as an uneven power struggle between the elites and the populace—precisely the struggle that is at the heart of the discussion over neoliberalism and its consequences. In "Brecha social" 'Social equity gap,' from October 21, 2012, the cartoonist splits the two words of the title to create a visual abyss that separates two groups of individuals. One of the individuals asks, "¿Y si ponemos un bailey o una platina?" 'What if we use a Bailey bridge or a steel plate?' This strip is a perfect example of Kandler's combination of messages that can widely resonate across Latin America (the equity gap) and issues specific to Costa Rican reality (in this case, the government's habitual use of temporary bridges and other Band-Aid fixes to unsuccessfully deal with the country's crumbling infrastructure). Meanwhile, Costa Rica's dependence on U.S. capital and security cooperation is denounced in "La alfombra mágica" 'The magic carpet' from April 28, 2013 (see Fig. 2), where government officials roll out a

Fig. 2 The dissenting masses are represented by Kandler as mere scribbles as they get swept under the rug of neoliberal diplomacy.

gigantic mat that reads "Welcome Mr. Obama" over a crowd of citizens, in an attempt to both silence dissent and hide the challenges facing the country from the visiting U.S. leader.

Of Angels and Mutants: Reality is Scarier than Fantasy

Moving away from political cartooning and brief comic strips, other Latin American graphic artists have created longer, more complex narratives that interrogate the region's contemporary issues through the use of fantasy and science fiction genres. Narratives that rely on monsters or other supernatural phenomena are often disregarded as escapism. However, scholars have theorized that these types of stories are useful for reflecting and exploring society's anxiety over uncertainty and lack of control. According to Per Schelde, horror and science fiction narratives tend to "depict a kind of bleak universe where people try to muddle by in a world where they have no control of the most important forces impinging on their lives" (27). This is precisely what happens in comics such as *Operación Bolívar* ('Operation Bolívar'), *Animal Urbano* ('Urban Animal'; Tato Dabat, Guillermo Grillo, and Edu Molina, Argentina, 1993-present), and *Elisa y los mutantes* ('Elisa and the Mutants'). Each of these narratives employs the fantastical in different ways to deal with the "evils" of foreign intervention, a haunting national past and its present-day implications, and the difficulties of navigating life in an alienating postmodern society.

The text that most directly dialogues with the threats of neoliberal policies and U.S. meddling in Latin American affairs is *Operación Bolívar*, a graphic novel published initially by Gallito Cómix and later by Editorial Planeta and Ediciones del Castor. Beginning with the tile, Clément is making an intertextual connection to Operation Condor, a campaign of political repression waged in the 1970s by right-wing South American regimes against socialist sympathizers and leftist rebels with support from the U.S. government (Grandin 75). In addition to fighting communist influence in the Americas, Operation Condor also sought to suppress opposition to the neoliberal policies that were beginning to be promoted by Washington across the hemisphere (Klein 126). In the comic, a super-powered Mexican mestizo named Leonidas Arkángel finds out about Operación Bolívar, a secret plot by U.S. intelligence agencies designed to take over the Americas by trafficking a powerful narcotic made from the bones of angels. These angels are supernatural creatures that live in Mexico, and their body parts and fluids can be used for the production of a variety of industrial products, medicines, potions that provide special talents, and the aforementioned narcotic. The trick is, only those descended from Indigenous shamans can kill an angel and take advantage of its miraculous properties. Leonidas, the comic's protagonist, is one of them. He is a trafficker who wonders if what he and his fellow angel hunters do is right, but

justifies his actions by saying: "Pero es lo único que sabemos hacer; y lo haremos mientras haya gente que pague" (Clément 7) 'But it's the only thing we know how to do; and we will do it as long as there are people who pay for it.' This statement reinforces a common criticism of the U.S.-led war on drugs in Latin America (which coincides with the timeframe of neoliberal expansion), in the sense that intervention in narcotic-producing countries will not stop the flow of illegal substances as long as there is strong demand from U.S. consumers.

While angel hunting and trafficking is a relatively small business, the U.S. government and its Latin American allies seek to turn it into a transnational business anchored in the distribution of the addictive "polvo de ángel" 'angel dust.' They do this by cutting off the hands of a shaman, which are subsequently used to attack and massacre large numbers of angels with the aid of military equipment and personnel, thus turning the local angel trafficking into an operation of (military) industrial proportions. At this point in the narrative, the drug war and neoliberal discourses collide. Mexico (and by extension Latin America) will occupy its typical role as supplier of raw materials for the manufacture of a lucrative product that will be commercialized and distributed by the Americans thanks to the implementation of a hemispheric free trade zone—a predecessor of NAFTA that Clément brilliantly outlined in his comic. As Fernández L'Hoeste has pointed out, *Operación Bolívar* presents a particularly idiosyncratic vision of Mexican identity (17). Thus, the massacre of thousands of angels and the unscrupulous use of their remains does not allude to Christianity, but rather criticizes and mourns the loss of Mexican political autonomy and cultural identity in the face of foreign intervention and international influence during a period of increased globalization. The angel in the comic is El Ángel de la Independencia 'Angel of Independence,' the iconic Mexico City statue that has become a symbol of Mexicanness as much as the Virgin of Guadalupe (Fernández L'Hoeste 16). This reading is supported by the text, as the visual rendition of the Archangel Michael that appears in it (see Fig. 3) closely resembles the statue (Clément 39). Despite this strong nationalist impulse in *Operación Bolívar*, it is also important to note that the comic is a decidedly postmodern, hybrid, transnational, and deterritorialized text that combines storylines and styles from detective novels, science fiction, U.S. and Latin American historiography, Judeo-Christian and Aztec belief systems, and Mexican traditional art (such as *lotería* cards), among others.

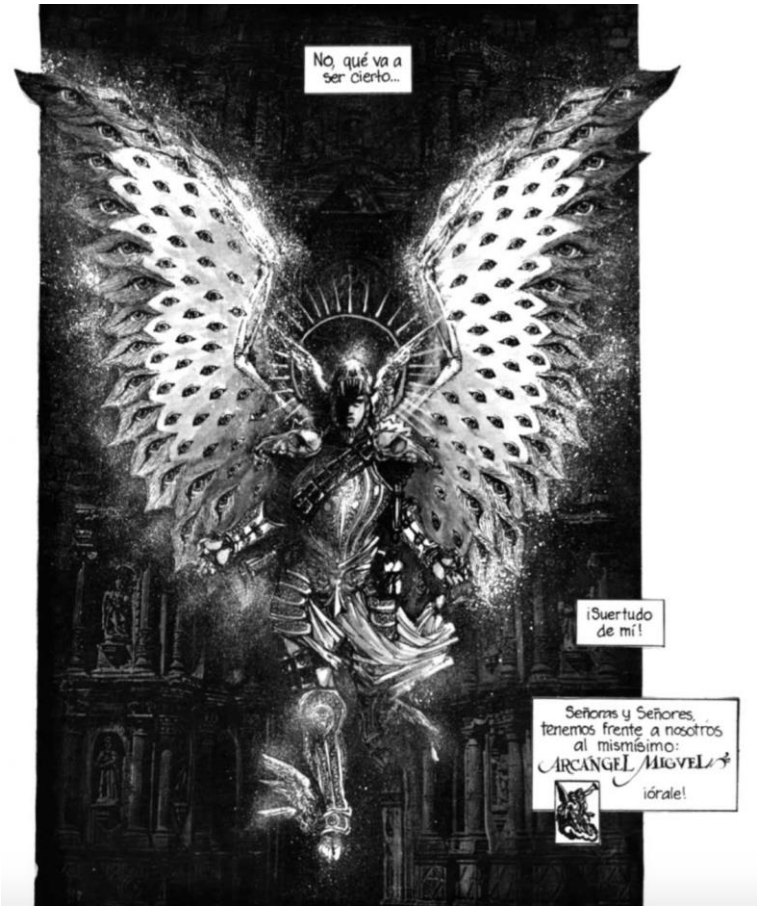

Fig. 3 The Archangel Michael as Mexico City's iconic Angel of Independence.

In South America, comics that wrestle with the consequences of neoliberalism from the perspective of science fiction tend to favor mutants in their storylines. This is significant because the mutant of comics and sci-fi films is by definition a hybrid being, split between his humanness and monstrous otherness and occupying interstitial spaces of indetermination. In this regard, it serves as an appropriate and powerful metaphor for nations caught between the violence of their past and the anxiety of their present conditions as well as the deep societal transformation (mutation) they continue to experience.

It is no surprise, then, that the pages of *Animal Urbano* mesh together Argentina's unresolved past and contemporary crises, as a dock worker and leftist militant who was "disappeared" during the country's Dirty War (mid-1970s to early 1980s) reappears 20 years later as a mutant and takes it upon himself to fight corruption and other threats facing his compatriots (see Fig. 4). The comic could be easily dismissed as a tale of revenge against the atrocities perpetrated by the military government responsible for the Dirty War. The protagonist, Juan Aníbal

García, was kidnapped and dropped into La Plata River in one of the military junta's infamous "death flights." There, his body interacted with an unknown substance that gave him powers and allowed him to come back to life, albeit with a deformed and grotesque appearance. Upon his return, the first villain Juan kills is a corrupt police officer, an act that serves as a sort of poetic justice carried out in retaliation against repressive government forces of the past. Nonetheless, the mutant's presence in the Argentina of the 1990s and beyond and his subsequent actions to aid his contemporaries make him a hero of neoliberal times. In more recent adventures, Juan protects a journalist who has uncovered "un asunto sucio" 'a dirty matter' involving a network of corrupt politicians and neo-Nazis (Grillo and Molina, *Asunto Sucio*). He also rescues people affected by a flood in a 2014 comic created in response to a real-life catastrophic flood that affected the region of La Plata a year earlier. Politicians were blamed for their inadequate response to the disaster, which the comic editorializes by having its hero save the people in the absence of help from the state (Grillo and Molina, *Inundación*). For the artists involved in creating *Animal Urbano*, it is important to depict the mutant as a witness and victim of both past and present Argentinian governments—as the decisions made during the 1970s are historically connected with the expansion of neoliberal policies that have marked Argentina ever since.

Fig. 4 Animal Urbano is often shown fighting corrupt police officers and government officials.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Chile, the artists of Mapache Studios created the web comic *Elisa y los mutantes* in 2014. In this story, a young girl goes to college only to find out that her classmates and other people at the university are turning into mutants. In order to retain her humanity, Elisa must fight them to avoid assimilation into their mindless and meaningless culture. Mixing the styles of traditional Latin American *historietas,* U.S. comics, and Japanese manga, *Elisa* operates on two different levels. One of the one hand, it is a light-hearted, funny, and highly relatable exploration of contemporary Latin American university life. Among other obstacles, first-year student Elisa Rojas manages to resist the humiliating practice of *mechoneo* 'hazing'; avoids the assault of the *intelectócratas* 'intellectocrats' who conceive learning as a competition; and deals with the intransigent mutant in charge of the photocopy center, a staple of Latin American universities that provides students (particularly those of lower economic means) access to books and other course materials on the cheap.

But *Elisa* also operates on a much deeper ideological level. The rejection of hazing is a rejection of alienation and conformity, as the protagonist refuses to "convertirse en otro más" (de Peña and Vargas, "Capítulo 1") 'to just fit in.' Ignoring the absurd "knowledge wars" of the *intelectócratas* represents an affirmation of the value of education, as Elisa notes that in high school she and her "nerd" friends read and learned together through constructive discussion and by joining social protests where they would put their knowledge and collective strength to the test (de Peña and Vargas, "Capítulo 1"). Finally, the lack of access to photocopies underscores the difficulty many Chilean and other Latin American students experience in accessing educational materials and quality education in general. This struggle is enacted in the comic as a confrontation between Elisa and the copy center monster, a green dinosaur that aptly stands for greed and an outdated educational system that fails its students (see Fig. 5). She demands, "¡Sólo queremos nuestras fotocopias!" 'We only want our copies!,' to which the mutant replies by breathing fire and destroying the entire copy center and its contents—a metaphorical burning of books and, by extension, censorship of knowledge (de Peña and Vargas, "Capítulo 3"). In the end, the comic manages to engage its readers with the issues facing students (especially those of limited means) in neoliberal and post-neoliberal times. The irruption of the monster motif creates a hybrid storyline that shows, through humor, the dangers of conformity, social and political apathy, anti-intellectualism, the corporatization of learning, and a deficient educational system that is underfunded and threatens to turn future citizens into mindless mutants that are unlikely to challenge those in positions of power.

Fig. 5 Elisa faces the copy center monster, demanding her invaluable educational materials.

Concluding Remarks

In Latin America, comics have historically been a powerful communication medium. They can quickly spread complex ideas in a simple format that is accessible to broad audiences (because of its use of images and low cost), especially popular classes that are typically marginalized from the discussion surrounding important national issues that affect them. Since the 1990s, comics and political cartoons have employed a variety of narrative and visual strategies to reflect and speak out against the often negative consequences of neoliberal policies implemented in the region from the latter part of the last century and into the 2000s. These strategies include the use of parody and satire that yield powerful commentaries on current social, political, or cultural issues, as well as the use of fantasy and science fiction tropes such as mutants that serve as allegories of real-life conditions and/or historical developments in the region. Bruce Campbell's *¡Viva La Historieta! Mexican Comics, NAFTA, and the Politics of Globalization* (2009) is one of the few studies that have explored the valuable contribution of comics to the discussion surrounding neoliberalism and globalization in contemporary Latin America. More work is needed to mine the richly diverse collection of comics produced in other parts of the continent and during more recent years, looking for productive intersections between graphic narrative and the

textual interventions they make in the context of neoliberal and post-neoliberal societies. In this essay, I have concentrated on political cartooning and science fiction comics from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico, which provide a broad picture in terms of styles, genres, and geography. There are many other countries/borderlands and aesthetic/narrative approaches that remain to be explored— including works by U.S. Latino authors that often dialogue with their own transnational and transcultural realities; a new wave of comics that interrogate present-day conditions from the perspective of alternative futures or dystopian universes; and the emergence of comics by women artists in a field traditionally dominated by males.

Notes

1. Macondo is the imaginary town that Colombian magic realist writer Gabriel García Márquez recreated in many of his books. It became synonymous with the narrative style of magic realism.

2. Kandler died in June 2017, less than two months after the first draft of this essay was written.

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