

Review Essay: “Borders and Monuments”

Jared Gardner

Gilbert Hernandez. *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003.
Jaime Hernandez. *Locas: The Maggie & Hopie Stories*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004.

This past year has seen major milestones to which scholars will turn when the literary history of comics is finally and fully written in coming decades. Jeff Smith’s long-running *Bone*—a remarkably multi-layered epic drawing on both *Pogo* and *Lord of the Rings*—was published in a single volume weighing in at over 1300 pages. 2004 also saw the publication of the first academic monograph devoted to a contemporary graphic novelist: Daniel Raeburn’s *Chris Ware*, published by Yale University Press. But of all the publishing events which have marked how very far the comics form has traveled in the past generation, none is more important than the two massive volumes devoted to the work of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez—Los Bros Hernandez as they are affectionately known to their many long-time readers. In 2004, Fantagraphics published the second of these volumes, *Locas*, which along with *Palomar* (published the previous year) covers over 1400 pages of the twenty year career of the brothers’ remarkable work.

For if these publishing events signal how far the medium has traveled in twenty years, it is to the *revolutionary* and *sustained* (adjectives rarely juxtaposed in describing any art form) achievement of Los Bros that the new landscape on which we find ourselves is to be credited. It would challenge the boundaries of this review to enumer-

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ate fully the influences of the Herrnandez's on the comics of a generation, but a few of these influences demand acknowledgement up front. First and foremost, Jaime and Gilbert's work has opened up the form to a new generation (now *two* generations) of readers and creators who would never have turned to comics had it not been for these portraits of unlikely heroes (a Mexican accordion teacher and a lesbian punk rock bassist, to name only two). The world of comicbook shops in which I grew up in the 1970s was the most homogenous market of both consumers and producers imaginable. To walk into a comic book store today is to encounter diversity (gender, ethnic, age and class) unimaginable a generation ago, a diversity of backgrounds and readerly appetites that is indebted to this pioneering work. The world of comic publishing in 1978, when Los Bros were beginning to formulate their life's work, was one dominated by two commercial publishers, with a few remnants from a once-vibrant counterculture of alternative comix on the back walls. Los Bros almost singlehandedly made Fantagraphics the publishing institution it is today. And with Fantagraphics, *Love and Rockets* created a new market not only for commercially viable "alternative comics" but for the new form of the trade paperback, which has brought new commercial and creative life to both alternative *and* mainstream comics in the last decade or so.

For this reader, and for many others, the experience of reading *Love and Rockets* has been the experience of a generation. I share a birthday with Jamie's Maggie Chascarrillo and over the course of twenty-odd years I have grown up and middle-aged with her. Indeed perhaps the most innovative and remarkable achievement of this work, one that can only now be fully appreciated after nearly a quarter century, is that the characters who inhabit the worlds of Palomar (the south-of-the-border setting of Gilbert's stories) and Hoppers (the north-of-the-border setting of Jaime's tales) exist and age in human, mortal time. We have watched Maggie's ongoing struggles with her sexual identity, her self-esteem, her weight issues and her conflicted identities. Luba arrived in Palomar in 1983, struggling to make a home for herself and her four girls in the hermetically sealed community, and we have witnessed her growth over the years (both spiritually and physically) into the very heart (and mayor) of the town. Against these lives, we are invited to map and measure our own, making this perhaps the most powerful example of the unique potential of twentieth-century serial forms.

Of course these volumes serve not just to memorialize the life read (and lived) of a generation, but also to introduce a new generation of readers to this body of work. Yet it is nearly impossible not first to acknowledge what is inevitably lost in reassembling the thousands of pages and hundreds of sketches of the serial *Love and Rockets* into ponderous hardbound volumes. To someone reading the Hernandez brothers' work for the first time, there might at first seem to be little of great moment that is sacrificed in the translation: we lose some random short pieces, the development of "minor" characters, folktales or genre sketches. But of course these moments are more than simply filler or digressions, just as the interweaving of the two narrative universes in the original serial publication was more than simply a contingency of the form. The sum of *Love and Rockets* has always been greater than its parts, and that includes the work of each brother—a fact which they discovered after ending the first series of the comic in 1996 to pursue "solo careers," only to resume the collaborative comic with the launch of a second series in 2000. And just as each brother's unique style (Gilbert's

folk sculpture and Jaime's pop culture collage) is strengthened and complemented by its juxtaposition with the work of the other, so are their characters.

Although the worlds of Palomar and Hoppers rarely intersect directly, they comment on each other at every turn. Sometimes the commentary is direct, as when in an early Jaime story, "100 Rooms," Sherrif Chelo and a young Vicente, denizens of Gilbert's Palomar, intrude to comment on a strange turn in the narrative; or when Maggie and Hopey make a brief cameo in Gilbert's "Ecce Homo," ironic tourists in the messy festivities that unfold in the small Mexican town. Usually, however, the commentary is indirect, as two sides of a border that serves as both dividing-line and blood-line through the disparate narratives of this collaborative universe.

For example in Jaime's story, "Flies on the Ceiling" (1988-89), which does not find its way into *Locas*, we learn of the experiences of Isabel Ortiz—long-time friend and mentor to Maggie and Hopey—in Mexico after a particularly traumatic period in her young life (divorce, abortion and suicide attempt). She has left Hoppers to escape from her demons and her family and she ends up employed as caretaker to a boy named Beto, ultimately falling in love with the boy's father. But what looks like might be a happy ending for this troubled character comes to an abrupt end when her old demons return and drive her away from her own mythic Palomar back across the border to the Hoppers that is incapable to assimilating her dark vision. Without this story, Isabel remains merely spectral, haunting the stories in *Locas* as she does the kids in the neighborhood. But Isabel's attempt to cross the border and become a mother to "Beto" (the nickname that Gilbert uses to sign the majority of his work) and the ultimate impossibility of this border-crossing gets at the pathos and the pain of both brothers' work more fully than can be realized when those borders are reinforced by turning the stories into Great Books. These are not novels, and were never meant to be. They offer complex and often brilliant commentary on the limitations of traditional novelistic narrative, particularly in terms of time and complex social spaces. For all the magic and science fiction that punctuates these stories (the "Rockets" in *Love and Rockets*), these are ultimately deeply realist works of fiction that demonstrate why the novel must ultimately give way to new form—including narrative comics.

Yet if there is much that is lost in transforming this work into something that resembles a novel, there is also much that is gained, especially for the long-time reader. Tales that had once seemed often motivated by a deep romanticism of Palomar and its residents here reveal a deeply critical commentary on the town and its residents—particularly in the retreat into conservatism or romanticism on the part of many of its strongest characters. For example, Carmen, who we first encounter as a young girl wise beyond her years and most of the adult population of the town, seems destined to serve as narrator for the community—a storyteller whose impish vision will serve to bring together the disparate narratives of the community. But all-too quickly, Carmen retreats into a reactionary silence, one that has devastating effects for those who cross the increasingly intricate moral lines with which she surrounds herself. As the volume reaches its end one can feel Gilbert's increasing frustration with his characters and their failures, complicating the deep, almost mystical romance with which he begins his series. But ending the

volume with the arrival of Isabel Ortiz in the decimated city, we have a promise of the kind of more meaningful border-crossings that would allow both Palomar and Hoppers to find at last the larger meanings and connections that might break down the barriers (internal and external) holding them forever from where they wish to be.

The effect of reading *Locas* is in many ways very different. Where Gilbert's *Palomar* stories always had about them a novelistic feel, Jaime's *Locas* stories deploy a much more complex cast of urban characters and a more intricate fragmentation of time and space. The result is that Jaime's work often seemed almost improvistroy, and increasingly as the series progressed. During the run of the first volume, Jaime seemed to change his conception for the series and his central characters in fundamental ways, and it was often hard to conceive of the larger structures binding these pieces together. Thus it was something of a revelation to read the stories collected in *Locas*. The whole demonstrated more consistency and organic vision than I had realized in this work when reading it serially.

It is a strange romance, in that Maggie and Hopey spend more time running away from each other than they do in each other's arms, and for much of the second half of the book they are wandering across the southwestern landscape—away from Hoppers and each other—aimlessly and almost always miserably. But for all the many failures and foibles of his central characters (and they are too many to list here), Jaime's greatest gift as an artist is his deep capacity to not only forgive his characters, but to love them for their faults. We are not asked to love Maggie despite her decidedly unromantic history—her clutsiness and flatulence, her deadend jobs (including a turn as a prostitute), and her often thoughtless use of the people around her—but because of it. Where Gilbert's stories seem to ultimately sacrifice their original romance for the characters for an almost existential cynicism, Jaime seems to move from postmodern ironist to romantic visionary in the course of his career with these characters.

It is only together that these twinned acts of critical judgment and forgiveness articulate their larger demands on the readers, and thus it remains together that these two volumes should be read. While a serious critical study of *Love and Rockets* ultimately requires rigorous engagement with the serial form and the warp and woof of judgment and forgiveness, a full and deep appreciation of the world Los Bros have created is possible through these volumes. One can hope that it will bring about the serious study that this achievement deserves. I can think of no other important body of work in the last generation that has been more disgracefully neglected by academic scholarship. Los Bros Hernandez have transformed the world of comics, but their achievement properly extends far beyond those boundaries. As these volumes make beautifully clear, Gilbert and Jaime have transformed the way the world looks and reads as completely as did realism in the nineteenth century or modernism in the early twentieth. These volumes stand as a challenge to scholars to finally account for the revolution that has come upon us as gradually and as naturally as layers of fat on our aging bodies, or layers of dust on the streets of our Palomar.