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Questions of Canon in Gilbert Hernandez's "Palomar" Comics

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Love, Rockets, and the Literary Canon:  
Synthesizing the Formative Influences of Gilbert Hernandez’s *Palomar* Comics

**Introduction**

As half of the genre-defining duo behind the comic series *Love and Rockets*, Gilbert Hernandez is well-known by fans and critics of graphic novels as an influential figure from the medium’s formative years. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, as writers and artists from all sides of comics were striving to expand the field’s literary and aesthetic scopes, *Love and Rockets* consistently stood out as one of the era’s defining titles. What started as a self-published effort from three punk rock-loving brothers ended up achieving the type of commercial and critical success that has rarely been seen in the world of comics, “literary” or otherwise. Alongside his brother Jaime, Gilbert Hernandez wrote and illustrated fifty issues of *Love and Rockets* between 1982 and 1996, the stories ranging from quippy one-pagers to serialized novellas often reprinted in the following decades. And while *Love and Rockets*’ cultural and artistic legacy stretches far beyond the *Palomar* stories – Gilbert anthologized other projects in the magazine (including the sci-fi work “BEM,” the LA-set, realist “Love and Rockets X,” and a biography of Frida Kahlo) and Jaime created an entire parallel soap-opera in his *Locas* series – it’s the novel length works like *Human Diastrophism* and *Poison River* that are still held up as benchmark examples of both literary graphic novels and contemporary Hispanic literature.

Gilbert, Jaime, and older brother Mario were born in the late 50s and early 60s in Oxnard, California, outside of Los Angeles, to Mexican-American parents. Their mother was a member of an established Chicano (Mexican-American) family with roots in the Southwest, and their father, who died when the boys were young, was a first-generation Mexican immigrant. Growing up, the brothers spoke English in what they considered a working-class, multi-ethnic community (Merino 255). As Gilbert explained in a 1989 interview with *The Comics Journal* editor Gary
Groth, “I always felt that I was living in two worlds. One was the little Mexican world, because nearly everyone I knew, relatives and cousins and even kids in the neighborhood, were Mexican. The school was a different world. It was pretty ethnically mixed; I had a lot of black, white, Japanese friends” (Merino 255).

Growing up Chicano in the 1960s and 70s came with its own set of cultural expectations. According to historian Mario Garcia, “in the 1960s, the term Chicano was discovered, or rather reclaimed, by a new generation – the Chicano Generation. This generation saw itself as countercultural, but in a politicized way. To be a Chicano in the 1960s and 1970s was to be an activist in the Chicano movement” (Garcia 4). With an epicenter in California and the Southwest, the Chicano civil rights movement was inspired by the parallel Black Civil Rights movement being waged across the country. Under political leaders like Cesar Chavez and artists like novelist Tomas Rivera and poet Alberto Delgado, the 1960s and 70s were a vital period in which Chicano figures worked to assert their presence in the greater American cultural and artistic landscape. Tangential to but separate from the Chicanos were other Hispanic art movements throughout the Americas – from the Nuyorican poets’ community in Manhattan to the critically-acclaimed work of magical realist “boom” authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Latin America (Kanellos 177, 196). These communities were distinct geographically and politically but shared the intention of carving out new lanes for Latinos in the larger culture.

And while the Hernandez brothers were undoubtedly exposed to these new ideas about Chicano pride and cultural politics, their passion lied not in activism but rather in the two distinctly Anglo-American art forms that shaped their childhoods: comic books and rock music. Gilbert cites his mother as comic fan herself, who used Archie comics to teach her children to read (Merino 252). As the Comics Code-censored horror and crime comics of the ‘50s gave way
to Marvel and DC superhero stories and eventually the countercultural “comix” of the ‘60s and ‘70s, Gilbert and Jaime were in a position to experience almost everything the medium had to offer – from Steve Ditko’s *Amazing Spider-man* to Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix* and everything in between. Skilled even as children at visual art, the aesthetic impact of these comics is obvious in the work both brothers would go on to create - visually, tonally and stylistically. Both brothers were also longtime fans of rock and roll and its specific flavor native to 1970s Southern California – punk. Growing up alongside the subgenre’s rise, the Hernandez brothers were in a unique position to connect with punk’s values – youthful, anti-establishment energy, and a do-it-yourself mentality about art (Habell-Pallan 223). The brothers frequently cite the artistic momentum of punk, as well as their older brother, Mario, involved in DIY printing, as the motivation for publishing their own comic book in the first place. Some of the first paid art jobs the brothers had were illustrating gig posters for local bands, and Jaime’s love of punk goes so far that it plays a central role in the ongoing drama of his *Locas* stories (Merino 253). While Gilbert would eventually develop his own tastes and “sophisticated” literary influences beyond ‘60s comics and punk music, these cultural moments – along with a growing Latino conscience - were incredibly important to the comics he would make in the beginning of his career.

Examining the three graphic novels that make up the majority of *Palomar – Heartbreak Soup*, *Human Diastrophism*, and *Poison River* – readers can trace the evolution of Gilbert Hernandez from an amateur cartoonist, indebted to his influences, all the way to a truly great artist of the craft. While *Heartbreak Soup* was ambitious in some respects, comparing it to later works emphasizes Hernandez’s ultimately unrefined skills. He set out with the intention to add a distinctly Latino flavor to the comic medium he loved so much – not painting the culture as monolithic, but rather creating something true to the version of it that raised him.
And while *Heartbreak Soup* falls flat for a variety of reasons, with each consecutive work, Hernandez became more skilled and ambitious. By the time *Poison River* was published in 1994, he had established himself as more than a mimic of his formative influences. Instead of contrasting the “lowbrow” elements of his inspiration – teen romance comics, Mexican soap operas, the often-exaggerated family stories passed from generation to generation – for a gag, Hernandez works through and challenges the cultural and symbolic narratives embedded within. *Human Diastrophism* and *Poison River* use comics to tell a story that are not bound by the medium but liberated by it, which utilize its visual nature and storied (as well as problematic) history to create multilayered metanarratives that address postcolonialism and political violence in the margins while keeping the forward momentum of the plot focused on what’s important: character.

Few writers, let alone cartoonists, are able to take these sorts of disparate influences and tell stories that not only have an emotional core but also comment on the nature of the literary canon – what, how, and why we read – in the process. In the *Palomar* comics, Hernandez is able to take a set of inspirations grounded in time and space – 70s Chicano punk-rockers – that is uniquely his and spin from them a story that is not only universal in its themes but comments on what it means to experience the whirlwind of today’s literary canon.

**Heartbreak Soup**

Perhaps because of the nature of its content, most of the academic attention on *Love and Rockets*, specifically Gilbert’s stories, revolves around structure and contributions to the evolving form of the graphic novel. Beyond briefly mentioning its similarities in setting to “classic” Latino stories such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or dozens of other similar small-town narratives, little has actually been written putting any of
Palomar in conversation with the rest of the Latin American literary canon. Reading *Heartbreak Soup*, Hernandez’s first major work in the Palomar series, this begins to make sense. The graphic novel is not bad, exactly, but when held to the same standard as later work like *Poison River*, it’s lacking in its unrefined art style and clunky plotting. There are certainly successes in *Heartbreak Soup*, especially when one considers it to be the first novel-length work from a young cartoonist – it does a great job of establishing Palomar’s dozens of characters in a short number of pages, as well as its most important thematic question: the disconnect between community responsibility and individual passions – but its works better as a portion of a larger saga than as its own novel. *Heartbreak Soup* is the best example of how Hernandez’s early stories found him so artistically dominated by his influences that he was unable to step out of their shadows. He spends most of the novel riffing off and subverting his influences, as opposed actually synthesizing them into something uniquely his.

As a young member of the burgeoning alternative comics scene, one of the main things that early *Love and Rockets* stories like *Heartbreak Soup* set out to do was to subvert expectations of what a comic book could be. Though his artwork and storytelling were inspired by fan-favorite cartoonists like the weird sci-fi of Steve Ditko and the hippie-inspired underground art by R. Crumb, what Hernandez set out to do in his first long-form piece was something different – borrow from the visual tradition these comics, but introduce a genuine, emotional, and personal narrative (Tullis 293-294). *Heartbreak Soup* is set in a fictional, south-of-the-border town called Palomar that seems out of step with modernity and where many borderline-magical things can happen. Hernandez spends the novel following several characters from birth into adulthood, focusing on their role in the community, their personal love affairs and friendships, as well as how oftentimes these various social positions can be at odds with each
other. The tone and setting feel very similar to the types of stories that had made waves in Latin America in years prior – work by Garcia Marquez and Borges, for example – but Hernandez claims to have never read these authors until well into the publication of *Palomar*. Instead, he says his inspiration was from the lively yet not all-that-believable verbal storytelling tradition he experienced in his Mexican and Chicano family (Tullis 301).

So, in his first real attempt to take the visual language of comics and combine it with the Latino literary tradition, Hernandez focuses mainly on subverting expectations of what a comic book can be *about*. Scholar Brittany Nicole Tullis explores some of the ways he does this, challenging the “canon” of alternative comics and its values – in terms of plot, language, and gender. Before the Hernandez brothers and their contemporaries in the 1980s, American comics fell into three main sectors – genre comics for men (superheroes, western, crime), genre comics for women (generally teen romance stories), and the “hippie” underground, which had the main aim of being provocative, often at the expense of women and minorities. Obviously, there were exceptions to these patterns in forward-thinking comics from both the mainstream and underground, but for the most part the American comics industry was created by and for white audiences of mostly men. As Tullis puts it,

> “While comics at the mid-century mark were created with both male and female audiences in mind, the texts created in ways that clearly divided the market: mainstream (superhero) titles that celebrated masculine power and the ideals of justice, order, and the protection of the weak; and titles designed for women that in many cases reinforced contemporary notions of idealized femininity” (Tullis 203).

And while Jaime Hernandez was striving to sincerely depict lesbian characters in his half of *Love and Rockets*, most of the underground was less fair in the way they depicted women and LGBTQ characters. Cartoonists like Crumb created over-the-top, sexually provocative comics, with different intentions than those of the mainstream, but that Tullis argues were just as harmful. She writes, “while these images openly contested the boundaries of the representation of sex and
sexuality in modern comics, they also reproduced the sexism and misogyny latent in contemporary notions of gendered sexuality” (Tullis 210).

A major recurring theme of *Palomar* and *Love and Rockets* is femininity and challenging the patriarchal notions of literature that came before, and much of this can be traced back to *Heartbreak Soup*. The novel introduces many of the main characters of the whole series, most of who are powerful and assertive women – matriarchal Luba, jaded yet responsible Chelo, and free-spirited, sexually liberated Pipo. The way these women challenge and ultimately take over the power structures of Palomar will come to be important in later stories, but the beginning is here. *Heartbreak Soup* finds its women protagonists in positions without much actual physical or institutional power, but lots of social influence behind the scenes - Luba is a single mother new in town, but her entrepreneurial success is putting her on many people’s radars while Pipo is just a young girl but has men literally killing each other over her affection. A particularly interesting example can be seen in Figure 1, which depicts a scene between the sheriff and Chelo the bathhouse owner, his mistress. While most of the beginning of the novel depicts the sheriff as an antagonist – greedily meddling in other people’s affairs in the name of his control – behind closed doors with his mistress we see Chelo physically as well as sexually dominating the sheriff, who she pushes to his knees and makes beg for her. While the other residents of Palomar see Chelo as a sexual object or someone who can provide a service, this scene shows how outside of the public sphere, interpersonal complications such as sex and family can challenge existing power structures. It’s also significant that while Chelo is able to exert a new sort of power outside the pretenses of the public sphere, her intentions are not totally benign or put on a pedestal in any way by Hernandez – quite the opposite, Chelo uses the sheriff for the business protections she knows she needs, just as he would surely do if the situation was reversed. The
women of Palomar rely on a combination of ambition, sexuality, and social intelligence to thrive in their small-town environment, subverting the traditional role of women in comics as damsels in distress or in Latino literature as sexual “firebrands” (Tullis 295, Kanellos 217).

Figure 1- Heartbreak Soup pg. 44: Chelo “tames” the sheriff of Palomar

The fact that the story is set in a Spanish-speaking Latin American country is a subversion in of itself, too, as both Tullis and Latino scholar Nicolas Kanellos point out. Examining the politics of language choice in Love and Rockets, Tullis points out how in Heartbreak Soup, Spanish is the language of the majority of the characters, and unlike in US comics, it’s not marked in some way to distinguish it so. As Tullis writes, “Without the
bracketing of the conversations [traditionally how foreign languages are depicted in comics],
these conversations flow seamlessly with the English… making a subtle statement about the lack
of differences between English and Spanish speakers” (Tullis 295). This may seem a minor
difference at first, but to a 1980s comic audience that was used to seeing Latinos as unnamed
villains and the butt of rude jokes, this representation was a big deal. It’s another example of how
the Hernandez brothers attempt to normalize real Latinos (in their minds, at least) in the
comic-consuming world – not as caricatures or plot devices, but multidimensional people.

Kanellos, in his book *Hispanic Literature of the United States*, would classify this era of
*Palomar* stories as perfect examples of native Hispanic literature – meaning that it is concerned
with “Latino” themes, but not in the context of immigration. He writes,

> “The Chicanos and Nuyoricans of the 1960s, along with the civil rights movements, claimed a new
and separated identities from the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans ‘on the island…’ They proclaimed
multiculturalism and bilingualism, mixed and blended English and Spanish in their writing, and
created a new aesthetic that was interlingual and transcultural” (Kanellos 192).

While the Hernandez brothers are creating comics slightly after this era, the sentiment is largely
the same. *Heartbreak Soup* is a “Spanish” story, written in English by an American citizen. The
plot deals with things that happen “south of the border” and are undoubtably personal to
Hernandez’s identity as a Latino, but he has no illusions about his own perspective in writing.
He’s writing a comic about Latin America, but for an English-speaking, mainly American
audience. Instead of creating something specifically Latino, he is, in the words of Kanellos, using
the Hispanic aesthetic from the perspective of a Californian Chicano to tell a story with Hispanic
subject matter but themes that are more or less universal. In its own way, this type of writing is
subversive, too – Hernandez is writing a comic about Latinos without any claim of being *the*
monolithic Latino comic, something unseen in comics prior to *Love and Rockets*. Rather,
Hernandez is creating the sort of intentionally-vague “south of the border” setting that is
preferable from an artistic standpoint, giving him something of a cultural sandbox to play within, where cultural presumptions can be challenged and the “canon” of the world can be the same telenovelas and Archie comics that the author grew up with, too.

In practice, *Heartbreak Soup* works more as a challenge to the established tropes of alternative comics than a great piece of literature in of itself, but when considered as a key portion of the *Palomar* saga, its importance is very clear. Hernandez is still developing artistically, and even in his attempts to subvert preconceptions of what comics should be, he hasn’t yet moved past his influences and created a great piece of work himself. *Heartbreak Soup* may be less challenging structurally and narratively than the work that would cement Hernandez’s legacy, but his attempts to create a personal, Mexican version of the comic book - with novel ideas about language, gender, and tone - would come to be very important for his own work and others. Without the first, admittedly clunky, instalment, the thematic direction of the rest of *Palomar* wouldn’t have been established, preventing developments in later stories. Despite its flaws, *Heartbreak Soup* is an essential step in the development of an artist that would come to challenge so many preconceptions about graphic and Latino literature.

**Human Diastrophism**

After establishing the setting and characters of Palomar in *Heartbreak Soup*, Hernandez took a break from long-form stories for a while, instead writing short one-offs and character-focused pieces featuring his cast after the events of the first novella. In between the end of *Heartbreak Soup* and the second long-form piece he was building up to, Hernandez explored and fleshed out his characters in stories like “Ecce Homo,” “For the Love of Carmen,” and “Duck Feet.” (Hernandez 137-258) While these pieces lacked the type of thematic sophistication that novel-length stories allow, they worked to build up the backstories of new characters like
Tonantzin, Carmen, and Luba’s daughter Maricela, as well as showcasing Hernandez’s rapidly improving artwork. By the time Hernandez finally got around to his second novel in Palomar – Human Diastrophism – his literary and artistic storytelling skills had increased tremendously, and he tells a much more impactful story that depends upon yet also subverts readers’ expectations of what Palomar is about.

Human Diastrophism finds Hernandez in an artistic sweet spot in between the “highbrow” literature he challenged the comics medium to strive for and the “lowbrow” comedy and thrills of the genre comics that inspired him. The plot finds Palomar in a state of crisis when a serial killer arrives in town and focuses on three characters’ unique responses to what is happening. Luba, established as an entrepreneurial matriarch figure, runs away from her children and business responsibilities, looking for comfort in the arms of an old lover. Tonantzin, meanwhile, finds herself religiously radicalized, and interprets the killings as punishment for the town’s hedonism. And new character Humberto, a young artist, is the only one who knows the killer’s identity, but refuses to report to the authorities and instead throws himself into his work, looking for the same type of meaning that the masters’ pieces have. Hernandez utilizes a genre-influenced plot to explore his previously-established themes of social responsibility in new ways. As Hatfield explains,

“It is Humberto and Luba… who serve as focal points for Hernandez’s exploration of social responsibility. Neither seem aware of the ripples of consequence spreading from his/her actions. Luba struggles to salvage her confidence as she loses her hold on [her lover], heedless of the town’s disintegration. Just so, Humberto tries desperately to improve his art and to define its social place and value, regardless of the chaos erupting around him. As Luba puts herself and her family at risk through her sexual liaisons, so Humberto puts himself and others at risk through his single-minded dedication to his art” (Hatfield 80).

And beyond the increase in overall quality from his first to second novel, the significance of Human Diastrophism in terms of Hernandez’s development is his newfound focus on the political. In the same tradition as many Latino writers before him, he aims to say something
about the looming threat of foreign influence and encroaching modernity but does so in a way that’s unique to the serialized, community-perspective, serio-comic stories he’s trying to tell.

While Luba and Humberto are thematically significant in the way their subplots challenge notions of collective responsibility and individual passions, most of the politics in *Human Diastrophism* are explored through Tonantzin and her radicalization. Somewhere between the previous story, “Duck Feet,” and the beginning of the novel, Tonantzin is introduced to a prisoner named Geraldo, who through the mail introduces and eventually indoctrinates her into a religious cult. Tonantzin’s naïveté had been a focus in the stories leading up to *Human Diastrophism*, and it’s here when this subplot comes to its climax. The crisis unfolding in Palomar, combined with her indoctrination, sends Tonantzin into a downward spiral to the point where she ends up refusing the “modern” way of life of her fellow villagers and adopting an Aztec-inspired way of dressing and preaching fanatic religious ideas. The serial killer’s violence being the result of outsider influence – clear to both Tonantzin and to readers – is a true threat, though Tonantzin refuses to see the “omens of the encroaching modern world” as inevitable (Hatfield 79). Instead, she throws herself into an ideology that her friends and family see as insane, but which represents to her a form of agency apart from the dangerous outside world.
Figure 2 - Human Diastrophism pg. 121: Tonantzin's self-immolation
Even after the killer is discovered and the town’s state of crisis is over, Tonantzin remains committed to this fanatic stance, leaving Palomar altogether on a religious mission. The novel actually ends in the United States, with two American characters watching a televised tragedy – a woman we find out is Tonantzin self-immolating as protest for some unknown cause. As seen in Figure 2, the Americans are fascinated and confused by “this protest in front of some embassy somewhere,” and what possibly moved “this girl” enough to do what she did. Ultimately, they decide that “it takes real love to go that far… however modest the change” (Hernandez 121). The fact that readers are watching this unfold alongside these Americans, on TV, instead of through the eyes of Tonantzin or her fellow villagers, is not insignificant. Hernandez seems to be calling out his (presumably American) readers here, pointing out them being complicit in this all-too-familiar yet distant enough tragedy, the non-specificity of its setting once again allowing for an uncomfortable sense of resonance. If Love and Rockets is about the stories we read and hear, our own personal “canons,” in this scene Hernandez seems to be targeting the way that, despite their distance, these stories do have real human consequence.

Rather than dealing in outright political themes, Hernandez’s uses the looming presence of dangerous outsiders – representing encroaching modernity, the United States, or any number of potential threats to the Latin American campo narrative – to represent the creeping threat of political realities. In a way Nicolas Kanellos would describe as similar to the literature of Hispanic exile, Hernandez is writing comics that are “nostalgic for the patria” and “epic in nature…. even in their tragic downfalls” (Kanellos 35). In Human Diastrophism, Tonantzin represents Latin America – genuine and beautiful yet naive in her susceptibility to these types of dangerous ideas. She is the Latin America of the past: before the encroachment of foreign powers and looming military and political threats. And in a state of crisis – be it from the serial
killer in *Human Diastrophism* or any of the dozens of political realities that the killer could symbolize – it is Tonantzin who is sacrificed for a cause that Hernandez, smartly, doesn’t write off as right or wrong. He incorporates these political undertones as an additional layer on top of his already-strong character work, and as seen in Figure 2, lets things culminate in a powerful image of martyrdom that is neither heavy-handed nor explicitly political, yet speaks for itself.

Beyond the continued development of Hernandez as a graphic storyteller, starting to incorporate elements of politics into his work, what makes *Human Diastrophism* unique is the author’s combination of a genre-inspired plot with characters’ interpersonal relationships. As Hatfield puts it, “the crux of *Human Diastrophism* is the question of personal responsibility for the social good, yet ironically much of its dramatic tension stems from characters who remain unaware of, or unmoved by, the needs of the community as a whole” (Hatfield 79). Be it through Luba shunning her family for sex, Humberto not turning the killer in, or even Tonantzin sacrificing herself for some unnamed, probably-futile political cause, the collective insanity of Palomar’s citizens during a state of crisis is the driving force of the story, making a point about responsibility to the community in the process. This key piece of irony that Hatfield points out – that we’re reading the crisis through the eyes of the most disengaged, self-absorbed citizens - is the reason that *Human Diastrophism* works as a dense work of literature to be studied as well as a graphic novel to be casually read. It marks Hernandez’s maturation as an author, being able to explore complex ideas in a uniquely-Latino and graphic manner. And while the narrative itself is successful, the way that Hernandez is able to tap into our collective consciousness as consumers of media – whether that be international news coverage, infatuation with serial killers and true crime, or simply the visual nature of reading a comic book – gives *Human Diastrophism* exponentially more layers to unpack.
Poison River

In Heartbreak Soup, Hernandez established Palomar, its characters, and its themes. In Human Diastrophism, he introduced the outside world to his idyllic, south-of-the-border village, and the resulting message about politics and community responsibility deepened the nature of the story Palomar told. It wasn’t until Poison River, his prequel and quasi-climax to the Palomar series, that Hernandez truly created his magnum-opus – messing with readers’ preconceptions about old characters and jumping through time to tell a story that is structurally challenging, politically nuanced, and most importantly, reinforces the larger themes of the series with a unique twist. It’s in Poison River that Hernandez finally comes into his own as a graphic novelist, telling a powerful story that holds its own against the best of the canon of twentieth century Latino and graphic literature, not just riffing off the tropes of his formative influences but rather combining them meaningfully to tell a story that is in a lot of ways about the tropes it’s engaging with as much as it is its cast of characters and plot.

While the publishing realities, experiments with panel and page structure, and compilation of serialized chapters into a singular, bound format, are significant in any formal analysis of Poison River, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the cultural and thematic elements of the text. If early Palomar stories like Heartbreak Soup found Hernandez making a name for himself as an author of feminist, magical-realist, small-town Latino literary comics – all in an attempt to subvert preconceptions – Poison River is the opposite. It’s not a feminist novel at all, and instead of a quiet village setting, it jumps throughout the decadent world of gangsters and criminals – full of sex, drugs, and violence. In Poison River, Hernandez explores the past of the established character Luba – from her childhood until where readers had first met her at the beginning of Heartbreak Soup – and in the process challenges everything
readers think they know about her. This is not insignificant. Poison River is challenging – both structurally and thematically – but in this complexity Hernandez manages to step out of the shadow of the cartoonists and Latino authors who inspired him. He taps into readers’ presumptions about Cold War politics, domestic relationships, as well as his own past work in an attempt to create a story both familiar and completely new. The result is a full-length graphic novel that is so unlike everything else Palomar was about that it is jarring, but a fitting culmination of the political and personal themes Hernandez had been developing.

Like Human Diastrophism, Poison River’s plot relies on the irony of watching a country’s politics crumble through the eyes of two self-absorbed characters – a young-adult Luba and her new, middle-aged husband, the gangster Peter Rio. Through each of the characters’ vices – Luba’s experience in a world of luxurious comfort and drugs, or Peter’s inability to deal with his sexual fetishes and ex-lovers – Hernandez tells a decades-long story about the intersection of his characters’ personal lives falling apart and a civil war in the country the gangsters try and control. Peter’s criminal activities in drug trafficking and gangland warfare directly cause the unstable economy and foreign intervention that lead to the unnamed country’s instability, but he and Luba are too engrossed in their own familial drama to recognize the consequences. Hatfield writes, “Here Hernandez concentrates less on the life of a community, more on the complex interweaving of past and present circumstances (familiar, cultural, and political) in a single life.” (Hatfield 88) Ultimately, it’s the consequence of the Rio’s own actions that topple their empire.
Figure 3 - Beyond Palomar pg. 89. Ofelia watching a political execution
By the end of the novel, Peter is rendered disabled in a gangland attack, shattering his life that for so long had been “built around an exaggerated split between cozy domesticity and the harsh realities of business” (Hatfield 94). Her illusions of security gone, Luba ends up fleeing the capitol with her cousin Ofelia, and while in the campo witnesses firsthand the war that Peter and her life of luxury had been sheltering her from. As seen in Figure 3, the ensuing panels are some of Hernandez’s most graphic in all of Palomar, with Ofelia leaving her and Luba’s safehouse for supplies and witnessing the brutal execution of several rebel troops by the townspeople. In the panels, Hernandez juxtaposes the images of still, dead bodies with the screaming faces of an angry mob. The soldier’s bodies are torched, and Ofelia stands aside, unable to do anything to help. Instead, she’s shown leaving the scene alone, with townspeople watching the smoke from the bodies in the background as an image of the new, wartime version of domesticity. Such violence wasn’t present in the Palomar stories prior to Poison River, or at least not presented so bluntly. Contrast the violent but silent imagery in Figure 3 with the equally consequential but wordy, and therefore different, presentation of Tonantzin’s self-immolation in Figure 2. In these panels, Hernandez is not only trying to subvert readers’ expectations of his own work, but of the larger Hispanic literature of the nostalgic patria that he’d long been established in (Kanellos 35). These panels are jarring yet effective, like much of Poison River – nothing will be the same, except the events being depicted are actually sequentially before the rest of the Palomar comics. It makes readers’ rethink prior issues of Love and Rockets, effectively challenging Hernandez’s own canon.

The end of Poison River – Luba and Ofelia’s escape to the country (eventually, the town of Palomar) – tells a different story about agency within one’s community than the earlier novels. Instead of focusing on the power of strong female characters like Luba to shape society,
Hernandez shows an impossible situation in which the women have no choice but to try and survive. It’s another conscious choice that the soldier’s dead bodies are the only political images (besides throwaway dialogue) depicted in *Palomar* up to that point. Up to this point, war and politics had only been discussed in abstract, in closed doors far from Luba’s sheltered ears. That it’s the actions of Peter and Luba that started this conflict, yet it’s the otherwise-innocent cousin Ofelia that needs to confront the ugly parts, is not a coincidence. Luba’s life is indirectly shaped by politics and ideology, but ironically, she never confronts any of these ideas herself.

Hatfield summarizes this connection when he writes, “As *Poison River* jumps through time, it insists on the overlap between the personal and political history, examining, like *Human Diastrophism*, the interexchange of private and public life” (Hatfield 99). This uncomfortable truth, the fact that every individual is, to an extent, complicit in the history of a community serves as both *Poison River* and the whole of *Palomar*’s culminating point. In this point – characterized perfectly by the development of Luba from a carefree teenager to the jaded matriarch of a village – Hernandez manages to weave abstractly political themes into his work while still remaining incredibly intimate with his large cast of characters. He avoids boiling political messages down into heavy-handed, simple solutions, and instead challenges his characters’ and readers’ preconceptions about things like obligation to society, in the process, he cements his place as another talented author in the long tradition of political Hispanic art.

In *Poison River*, the community themes of *Heartbreak Soup* are combined with the political undertones of *Human Diastrophism* in a way that is tragic yet a fitting end to *Palomar*. In the tragedy of Peter and Luba, ignoring to the violence around them in favor of their own personal problems, Hernandez brings the series to a fitting conclusion. He tells stories that are political, yet more empathetic than heavy-handed, focusing on the heartbreak embedded
throughout (fictional) history. Combined with the best art of his career and the fact that the serialized chapters fit nicely into a collected graphic novel, it’s clear why *Poison River* is held up not just as the best of *Love and Rockets*, but among the best graphic novels, period. It is the moment when Hernandez achieved his goal – stepping out of the shadow of his influences, synthesizing them with his own thematic focus to create a great, forward-thinking, graphic novel.

**Conclusion**

As *Love and Rockets* reached the end of its first run in 1996, the comics industry and the concept of the literary graphic novel had gone through an incredible amount of change in a short period of time. While in 1982, Gilbert Hernandez entered the comics world as an amateur with big goals, *Poison River* cemented his legacy as a formal pioneer in formative decade. With *Poison River*, he not only proved himself a comics auteur, but also created a new lane in alternative comics altogether – a narrative-driven “third way” somewhere in between the avant-garde of Art Spiegelman and the countercultural subversiveness of R. Crumb. Most significantly, he opened a space for the incorporation of new cultural values into a heterosexual white male-dominated industry. *Palomar* is no more “the” Latino or Chicano comic than *Maus* is “the” Jewish comic. Instead, with his increasingly complex writing and powerful art, Hernandez has created an avenue for dense comics with sophisticated themes that don’t have to sacrifice the cultural flavor and readability that the best literature thrives on. Without Gilbert Hernandez, *Palomar*, and the contributions they made to the graphic novel medium, would comics today be the same? Would stories like *Persepolis*, itself embraced into the literary and academic world, be able to exist? Maybe, but without Hernandez’s influence and breaking ground, it’s hard to say that things wouldn’t be different.
But perhaps most importantly, what Hernandez has managed to do with *Palomar* is create something that stands alongside not just the best graphic novels, but the best of 20th century Latino literature as a whole. Anglo-American critical and academic attention of the literature of Latin America and its diaspora has always been lacking, and probably in part due to its graphic nature, *Palomar* is no different. For every Sandra Cisneros or Junot Diaz that manages to make waves in mainstream literature, there are dozens if not hundreds of other artists whose works are just as significant but are passed over in favor of stories more digestible by the gatekeepers of the industry. *Palomar*, and more specifically *Poison River*, deserves a spot within that canon. In fact, Junot Diaz, Pulitzer prize-winning author, has cited *Poison River* as a formative influence of his own, one that he considers the “great unknown novel of the twentieth century,” and without which he wouldn’t have become a writer (NY Times Editorial). It’s not a coincidence that Diaz is neither a cartoonist nor a Chicano – he’s a short prose writer, whose stories of the Dominican diaspora are wildly different from Hernandez’s. The admiration from Diaz, a generational talent himself, is not a just mutual respect between Latinos, but between great authors. Hernandez’s comics work as literary graphic novels, as cultural artifacts of the Latino experience (though they have no illusions of being definitive), but most importantly, they manage synthesize the two to the point that *Poison River* stands alone as a great novel, period.

Issues of canon are messy and political, and incorporating new mediums like comics into the equation just increases the inevitable controversy. And while some of Hernandez’s early work lacks on many fronts, *Poison River* is a perfect example of the type of high-quality work that’s difficult to categorize and ends up excluded altogether because of it. This is a mistake. Instead of shunning challenging works like *Poison River* – synthesizing genres and cultural expectations – the academic world should embrace them for their artistic value and complexity.
*Love and Rockets* was a landmark piece of art for the people and cultures it represented, beyond just the high-quality writing and artwork, and there’s a reason why. Throughout his *Palomar* novels, readers could watch Gilbert Hernandez grow from a young artist – ambitious but indebted to those who came before – all the way to a fully-developed novelist, managing to write in *Poison River* a work that’s essential but not exclusively-important to the (sub)cultures from which it came. Hernandez is a generational literary talent who, because of his background and chosen medium, may be doomed to be relegated to sidelines of canon, but whose work truly is universal and will continue to inspire future generations of writers – Latinos, cartoonists, and beyond.
Works Cited


