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## **Undocumented Latinx Comics: Resisting the Biopolitical Nation**

I use the term Latinx throughout this work instead of these other terms such as Latina/o or Latin@ because it used by undocumented transgender activists such as Jennicet Gutiérrez to demand inclusivity and recognize the fluidity of gender and sexuality. In the context of escalating hostility toward immigrants in the U.S., several comic artists have turned their attention to representing undocumented Latinx experiences. For example, issue 987 of DC's Action Comics 2016 depicts Superman shielding both Latinx and Middle Eastern undocumented workers from a white supremacist shooter<sup>1</sup>. While Superman directs the police to protect them, the undocumented subjects have no voice other than to plead with the shooter and thank God for Superman's intervention. While the visibility of undocumented people in this work may be appreciated, it does not recognize how undocumented people also take part in confronting their marginalization.

Because undocumented subjects are widely excluded or essentialized, I ask how and why the comics form has become an effective vehicle for narratives that portray undocumented Latinx people as agents of resistance and change. I narrow my scope to Latinx creators whose representation of undocumented people is informed by having at one time been undocumented or by having undocumented family. While these kinds of works are not necessarily better equipped to foreground agency, their connection to undocumented people may provide a greater potential to remain anchored in their experiences and perspectives.

Comics increase readers' access through the appeal of popular culture and readability. They also open up a back door to these stories because their extra-textual form may be used to

combat the historical erasure of undocumented people from traditional literary texts. Of course, unlike performance art, the comics form often relies on text. However, I argue that because it combines text with visual representations of the human body, the comics form may remain ethically rooted in its responsibility to recount undocumented experiences within institutional spaces that historically have excluded them. While not endeavoring to privilege this form's ability to accomplish this over any other, I will show how these works epistemologically prioritize proximity to subjugated people and experiential knowledge over objectivity.

Like Jonathan Inda and Ines Valdez, I examine how undocumented experiences are shaped by structures of power by using Foucault's conceptualization of biopolitics, meaning governmentality's protection of a population and exclusion of threatening subjects, which are created to maintain the State's legitimacy. Whereas Western governments used to take life to protect themselves, the rise of Western political economy in the 18<sup>th</sup> spurred governments to make 'worthy' populations live and allow the 'unworthy' to die. Because Foucault's work does not flesh out strategies of resistance, I also will use the term everyday undocumented disobedience to examine how these comics confront biopolitical forces by creating spaces in which undocumented lives warrant emotional and physical care. "Everyday undocumented disobedience", is used Michael Allen to refer to resistance that takes place, not by resentfully complying with the law such as slaves dragging their feet, but actively avoiding "any publicity in actually breaking...the law" (47). This occurs by simply being present in the U.S. without permission. To protect undocumented people's identities and make their stories available to others, privileged surrogates publicize the disobedient acts of undocumented people that they believe are justified, which is consistent with civil disobedience because it invites people to reconsider" (47). These narratives enjoy a relative safety, as they do not require "extraordinary

moral courage” often found in the Undocumented and Unafraid activist movement. Yet they too merit attention, especially since civil rights movements have historically not required that the majority of subjugated people take such risks to their personal well-being.

To illustrate, I analyze the formal techniques used in undocumented Latinx comics, including how they manipulate the space between their panels, which are called gutters, and speech balloons, to question political borders, simulate injustice, and recount everyday undocumented disobedience. Here, I will share my close-readings of 2 comic projects: Vicko Alvarez’s zine called *Rosita gets Scared*, directed toward Latinx youth, and an ethnographic cartooning project involving migrant dairy farm workers called *The Most Costly Journey/El viaje más caro*. They are both geared toward improving the physical and mental health conditions of undocumented people and manipulate the space between their panels to question political borders, simulate injustice, and recount everyday undocumented disobedience.

### **Rosita Gets Scared: Comics as a Safe Educational Space**

In 2017, Vicko Alvarez self-published the bilingual zine *Rosita Gets Scared/Rosita se asusta* to help children discuss their fear of deportation. Previously, she launched her ScholaR Comics series online and used it to help students share adversity in their own lives during an after-school program for middle schoolers on the South Side of Chicago. Much like Alvarez’s earlier comic, *ScholaR Gets Angry*, *Rosita se asusta/Rosita Gets Scared* is a counter-story as it uses marginalized composite characters to embody shared gendered and racialized Latinx subjectivities. While the character ScholaR combines Alvarez’s own experiences as a child with those of other second and later Latinx generations, Rosita represents immigrant Latinx children (Moreno).

Both works ask young readers to complete the comic by writing or drawing about their own feelings. *Rosita Gets Scared* invites children to cope with their own fears and relate empathetically to the experiences of undocumented people, regardless of the readers' backgrounds and immigration status. It endeavors to establish a relationship of trust with readers and allow them to feel they are in safe space to share their own stories. Visually, Alvarez does this by having Rosita sit cross-legged with her hands on her lap to show that she is listening and inviting a response (1, 4). In some panels, Rosita rests one hand to the side as if to suggest that the reader sit next to her. This physically welcomes the reader into the narrative and visual space. Later, Rosita's pose is more relaxed as she sits on a swing or braids her hair, which visually indexes greater intimacy. Having already shared narrative time and space together, Rosita seems to suggest that she and the reader/viewer now know each other better.

Now to turn our attention to the gutters: some are partially open while others are closed. Nearly all of the panels that use porous gutters are those that ask the reader to contribute to the comic, thereby complicating the boundaries and relationship between reader and creator. The comic prompts readers eight times to interact with Rosita by adding their own written reaction, drawing, or coloring. The questions begin with simple reporting and build up to more reflective and emotionally difficult tasks. In contrast, fully closed panels are used when Rosita bears witness to her experiences, to being bullied and seeing her neighbor taken away by ICE. The reader is invited only to listen, learn from and relate to Rosita's experiences. One exception is the last page which uses partially open gutter transitions although the reader is not asked to physically add anything to the panel. This may suggest that the reader/viewer should follow Rosita's example as she remembers and gives thanks for her support system. While Rosita acknowledges that she continues to have many questions and feel scared, she repeats the phrase "I

am happy” five times (12). In this way, Alvarez insists on marking the ways that undocumented people manage to find joy, despite overwhelming institutional structures that work to silence this kind of resistance.

The last two pages arm readers with a list of key vocabulary and information about immigrant rights. By opening up its panel borders to blur the roles of creator and reader/viewer, and by empowering its audience with information to protect undocumented people, *Rosita se asusta* decolonizes knowledge production. Both the undocumented subject, Rosita, and potentially undocumented or otherwise disempowered readers/viewers are positioned as sources of valuable experiential and procedural knowledge. From the margins of the page and society, readers/viewers are able to enter into this discourse and take stock of their own agency to protect themselves and others. Vicko Alvarez serves as a surrogate to express the everyday undocumented disobedience of the students she has worked with and her family before they received amnesty in 1986. Rather than rely on the protection through the passage of time and resolution of immigration status, the second comic series to be examined here depends on medical professionals and artists to render the stories of Latinx people who are currently undocumented.

### **El Viaje más caro: Storytelling in Vermont**

*El viaje más caro/The Most Costly Journey* was designed to improve the physical and mental health conditions of undocumented dairy farm workers in Vermont by mitigating isolation through storytelling. This collaboration began in 2016 between the workers, the Vermont Folklife Center, The Open Door Clinic, as well as anthropologists and health workers from the University of Vermont. Interviews from undocumented dairy farm workers were transcribed, translated and then incorporated into 19 comics created by several New England

artists. While they are available online in both English and Spanish, hard copies in Spanish are also distributed to undocumented people through a Migrant Education program. While the content and visual representation of each of comic is mediated through a number of non-migrant participants, the migrant workers chose the details provided and gave feedback to the artists.

Many comics in this series describe traumatic experiences in ways that reveal biopolitically driven limitations to the life chances and survival of undocumented subjects. They also build a network of support by sharing advice with newcomers. In this way, they along with other comics that I examine in my work simultaneously engage with biopolitical forces that subjugate and the everyday resistance. Neither is ignored for the sake of highlighting the other. I contrast these kinds of collaborations with melodramatic and individualizing journalistic accounts, such as the bestseller *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario. These comics refuse to erase the systemic and racialized nature of injustice.

Undocumented bodies are often acted on biopolitically when, through legislation and everyday social practices, they are subjected to exclusions that judge and render their lives as 'unworthy' of protection. The most immediate ways that U.S. policy allows undocumented people to die is through the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, which forces migration through desert areas. Several of the works in *The Most Costly Journey* depict interviewees' border-crossings but they avoid the sensational tone found in other documentary comic projects.<sup>ii</sup> One example from the series is, "Painful to Remember". Artistically rendered by Marek Bennett, this comic features the story of José, who recounts his journey from Guatemala to Vermont, the death of two fellow travelers, and his gratefulness to be working to support his family.

The first panel uses a connected series of speech balloons to introduce the character. They also cut across an underlying map of the U.S. and Mexico. Rather than rely on the top to bottom orientation of global north and south, the map is positioned so that Guatemala is on the left and the US on the right. The reader's eyes move along José's migratory path, since the speech balloons are also sequenced from left to right. Modifying the orientation of the map pushes back against the neoliberally naturalized dominance of the global north and the easy assumption that traveling north inherently denotes progress and a better life. Although José explains that he is currently in Vermont, the speech balloon tails point to several locations along his way to the US. José continues to speak from these sites simultaneously because he carries bodily experiences and memories of those places with him. In comparison with the rounded tails throughout the rest of the work, these are drawn sharply to signal resistance to the map's national borders by spatially highlighting how migrants cut across them, regardless of anti-immigrant legislation and policies.

This comic also blurs panel borders to represent the trauma of border-crossing and its biopolitical consequences. The gutters are transformed and crossed in order to highlight the violence perpetuated by the militarization of the border. The disorienting whirring of a border patrol helicopter's blades and the ensuing fear felt by José and his group are simulated by the repetition of the blocked letters "DUB DUB DUB". Here, this onomatopoeia replaces the gutter, creating its own border between the top and bottom panels. While readers may most likely be able to follow the chronology of the story, the relationship between the subject/reader and time/space is violently altered. The filling up of space between the two sections helps to visually underscore the confusion and panic of this moment. The density of images and text mimics the reduced ability of the characters to move through space. A couple traveling with José realizes

that neither one is holding their baby, who must have been separated from them when they abandoned a truck to flee from the helicopter (11). The onomatopoeia continues on the following page of the comic but it is now placed behind the speech balloons in which the father expresses hope that the police will let them look for their child. In this way, fear is shown as becoming secondary to the parents' resolve to search. Linearly drawn gutters are gradually reestablished between the panels, highlighting their agency and resistance to this biopolitical attack. José then expresses doubt that the couple will find their child, again, balancing the agency of migrants with the way that the desert is biopolitically weaponized against them. Rather than create a binary, it allows for the coexistence and tension between human will and systemic subjugation by refusing to erase one simply to provide additional space for understanding the other in a vacuum. The unknown fate of the couple and their child may feel like a potential climax except there is no resolution; José does not know what has happened because he continues onward while the couple does not. This may lead readers to contemplate the vast number and continuation of migrant deaths, as well as the biopolitical forces behind them<sup>iii</sup>.

Proximity to undocumented bodies is simulated by three human figures that reach into the margins of the page toward the reader. The first two are fellow travelers who die while crossing. The third is a photo of José's daughter, who continues to live in Guatemala. Despite the sadness of his memories, José describes finding meaning by focusing on how his struggle allows him to support his family in Guatemala. However, the silence in the following panel slows down time and allows the reader to contemplate the unspoken pain and the unlikelihood that he will be able to return to his family.

"Now That I Have My License" combines the stories of four migrants, again through the artwork of Marek Bennett. It begins with Piero's unsatisfied desire for more independence. He



would like to get a license because of the isolation he faces without one, but has not because of the paperwork needed and his limited mobility. The other three demonstrate resistance by getting a license, but face the risk of being stopped by the authorities for minor infractions and discovered as undocumented. Several panels include labeled diagrams to help newcomer migrants understand the system, including how to maintain the car in perfect order to avoid attention and which Department of Motor Vehicles office is less likely to call immigration authorities. This sense of safety is marked as relative throughout the project, Latinos are treated “much better” in Burlington, so it’s “...a little less dangerous” (6). Yet, the continued risk and need to engage in everyday undocumented disobedience is never resolved.

By creating networks of support, these comics resist stories that demonize and/or dismiss undocumented bodies and highlight the agency of undocumented people. This kind of work should be included in a variety of educational contexts, because while Latinx voices are often appropriated in colorblind approaches to multiculturalism, these stories cannot so easily be folded into myths of meritocracy. They show that no amount of hard work can earn undocumented individuals a place at the table. Moreover, they insist on foregrounding both everyday undocumented disobedience and the biopolitical forces that limit life chances.

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i A 2017-18 Exhibit at Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum entitled *Looking Backward, Looking Forward: U.S. Immigration in Cartoons and Comics* curated by Jenny Robb and Jared Gardner reads, “Eighty years after Superman’s arrival, America’s most powerful undocumented immigrant continues to fight for the powerless. In this issue he defends a group of undocumented workers from murder at the hands of a white supremacist. Against the backdrop of today’s heightened rhetoric, some commentators greeted the storyline as a “propaganda tool for the defenders of illegal aliens.”

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<sup>ii</sup> In contrast, another testimonial comic, *Migrant: Stories of Hope and Resilience/Migrante: Historia de Esperanza y Resistencia*, sensationalizes border-crossing by promising readers that it is “Offering a story you haven’t heard” and ending the first page with the action-packed teaser in large red and tattered lettering, “Running for our lives”. As it is also informed by interviews with undocumented people, the comic effectively documents the diverse experiences of DREAMERs and a demonstration to protest the exclusion of undocumented people staged symbolically through a posada, a traditional reenactment of Mary and Joseph being turned away before they are finally recognized as the Holy Family. However, this comparison may limit urgency, if a final solution is portrayed as inevitable. Even more problematically, the historical context of immigrant exclusion provided is limited and the tone often verges on inviting the reader to enjoy migrants’ plight as they would an adventure story.

<sup>iii</sup> It is also important to note that the coyote, the man paid to lead the group across the border, is not portrayed in a melodramatic, bad-guy fashion as is the case in some journalistic and Hollywood portrayals. While there are many documented cases of coyotes abusing human rights, including extortion and kidnapping in the comic “Suffering to Come Here”, in this series, the coyote in this work is not made to be sensational. Little is known about his character, most likely because of José’s limited relationship with him. The coyote may be depicted as unfeeling as he tells the group to leave the dead and reminds the couple they will be deported if they return for their child, that they must continue on. However, the coyote is not demonized.