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Comics and Civic Formation
5. The Role of Comic Books in the Civic Formation of Cuban Youth

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Cuban graphic narrative since the Revolution, whether a single-frame political satire or sequential art appearing in a strip or comic book, principally distinguishes itself from North American models by its socialist themes and ideology. Like other Cuban mass media that countered and still counters hegemonic and imperialist representation by design, graphic narratives similarly underwent systematic de-Disneyfication during the Cuban Revolution (Fernández and Poblete 2009). In this paper, I will briefly explore the historical context surrounding Cuban comics, known in Cuba as *historietas*. In an attempt to illustrate their explicitly didactic role in the civic formation of Cuban youth, I will then offer a critical analysis of select recent comic books published by Editorial Pablo de la Torriente.

Graphic narratives play important roles in shaping national and political identities (Fernández and Poblete 2009). As a reaction to the Walt Disney Company’s efforts in Latin America during the 1940s to support Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, and later during the Cold War, Latin American comic artists began to appropriate the medium to express their own identities.

Although the Cuban Revolution signaled a dramatic shift in Cuban mass media, cartoons and caricatures offering political and social commentary were already a mainstay of Cuban newspapers and magazines in the first half of the twentieth century. Eduardo Abela’s El Bobo played a critical role in Cuban politics during the Machado dictatorship, as did René de la Nuez’s El Loquito during the Batista regime. Cartoons during this period critiqued the United States’ influence in Cuba (Lent 2005, 194) while others surreptitiously expressed their support for the Revolution (Hernández 2002).

Not every cartoonist, however, supported the direction that the Revolution would soon take. Antonio Prohíbas, prominent satirical cartoonist for the newspaper *El Mundo*, was publically critical of Fidel Castro in 1960 and, consequently, found exile in the United States. By January of 1961, Prohíbas had developed a new comic, “Spy vs. Spy.” It was a massively popular strip that parodied the Cold War intrigue of the day and ran in *Mad Magazine* through 1990.
Before he left Cuba, Prohías trained his replacement, Francisco Blanco Ávila, popularly known as “Blanquito” (Lent 2005, 195). Early on, the revolutionary government saw value in furthering their agenda via graphic narratives. In an interview, Blanquito recalls his promotion: “A commission was formed to take control of the paper. The commission decided to give me Prohías’ job; they knew me and wanted me in the position. They decided to keep me even though I was not a professional cartoonist, but I was loyal to the working class” (Lent 2005, 206).

Caricatures, editorial cartoons and other comic arts were increasingly used for national development and propaganda purposes, as for example, Blanquito’s comic books and Juan Padrón’s character, Elpidio Valdés (Lent 2005, 196) in the early days of the Revolution. It was at this time that American superheroes such as Batman and Superman had their Cuban visas definitively revoked (Hernández 2002). To counter the superheroes of capitalist comics, Cuban comics rejected them outright, turning instead to portrayals of human characters who reflected the values of Cuban socialism. One of the most representative characters of this was Elpidio Valdés, created in 1970 for Pioneros magazine. Elpidio Valdés was a fictional officer in the Cuban Liberation Army of the late nineteenth century who heroically fought for Cuban sovereignty against an inept and corrupt Spanish army. In short, Elpidio embodied all that it meant to be Cuban while his wife, María Silvia, exemplified the new role of the revolutionary woman (Elvy 2008).

In December of 1985, the Unión de Periodistas de Cuba (Cuban Journalists’ Union) founded their publishing wing, the Editorial Pablo de la Torriente. Named after the anti-imperialist reporter and father of Cuban testimonial journalism, this publisher’s mission is to train journalists, including
caricaturists and cartoon artists, and to offer them a venue in which to publish. During the first six years of its existence, Pablo de la Torriente published over three hundred historietas and two comic magazines (the monthly Cómicos and the quarterly Pablo, both with print runs of fifty thousand). It also published El Muñe, which included historietas but also interviews and commentary (Armas Fonseca 2003). These titles were popular, sold out rapidly, and revitalized Cuban comic art during the late 1980s (Mogno 2005).

Reflecting on the evolution of Cuban comics and their recovery, the Cuban cartoonist Orestes Suárez recalls:

“There was an educational purpose of those comic books. The new generation that read the books needed that education…. We had to make strips to show the development of the new identity—over the influence of capitalistic monopoly of information…. The educational work we did about Cuba had fruits, and we began to do comics about heroes [and] martyrs from other Latin American countries.” (Lent 2005, 205).

Publishing in Cuba was dramatically affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, ushering Cuba into the Special Period (Lent 2009, 85). With the importation of paper severely curtailed, many newspapers and magazines either closed or severely reduced print runs, and published far fewer titles. Comics were a very low publishing priority and Editorial Pablo de la Torriente nearly ceased operations. To survive, they published irregularly with very poor print quality, often surviving by utilizing scrap paper or foreign donations (Lent 2009, 86).

In the last decade, publishing at Editorial Pablo de la Torriente has expanded, although their materials often remain of lesser quality. The paucity of quality materials to this date precludes the publication in Cuba of hardback graphic novels with glossy pages, such as those increasingly published throughout the rest of Latin America. Many Cuban historietas are compilations or selections of previously published strips that originally appeared in newspapers or magazines, specifically in Cómicos or Pablo. Since 2001, in addition to historietas, the Editorial now publishes the Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta, a scholarly journal on comics published throughout Latin America. Nonetheless, the print publication consists of double-sided photocopies, stapled within a simple colored paper cover.

Several themes recur consistently throughout the Cuban comics published by Editorial Pablo de la Torriente. They include the corrupting social forces of capitalism, a respect for the heroes of the Revolution and a reverence toward its martyrs, the importance of loyalty and the shame of treason, the significance of the historical and ongoing struggle for Cuban sovereignty, and the necessity for solidarity with others in Latin America.

After Elpidio Valdés, Roberto Alfonso Cruz’s Yarí perhaps best exemplifies the civic mission of comics within the Cuban Revolution. Yarí is a young
*taíno cubano* (indigenous Cuban) living in a utopian socialist society at the time of the Spanish conquest and its subsequent corrupting colonization. Like Elpidio Valdés, he resists colonization and its value system while remaining true to his people and beliefs. He befriends a runaway African slave or *cimarrón* and, in doing so, conveys to Cuban youth the importance of solidarity: “Si lucha contra los hombre crueles, es también nuestro hermano” (Cruz 2004).

As in Elpidio Valdés, Spaniards are depicted as ignorant, greedy, ready to steal from each other, and lacking in honor. In juxtaposition, Yarí and his culture live in harmony with nature. Yarí contributes to his society according to his ability and, at those times when he attempts to take more than his share, whether lobster, oysters or other natural bounty, there is always a shark, electric eel, caiman, snake, or giant squid to remind him of the Marxist principle, “to each according to his need.” His foil, Adrián, already corrupted by his cultural upbringing, is fearful, spiteful, ungrateful, gluttonous, ignorant, greedy, and a bad shot with an arrow. He also finds incomprehensible the Taínos’ utter lack of interest in money.

As in many other historietas, treason is a common theme. In one scene, Adrián enlists the aid of a Taíno boy to defeat Yarí in exchange for material goods. As evidenced by his use of Spanish colonial attire, the young Taíno has
already begun to sell out his culture. Yarí dubs him a “miserable traitor,” and soundly sends him on his way after a solid whack on his rear end.

Figure 3. Selection from Yarí (2004). Yarí defeats his rivals.

Another example of fictional role models living in historically significant periods is Yami. Published in 2008 by Cecilio Avilés, one of the most popular contemporary Cuban cartoonists, Aventuras de Yami recalls an earlier publication, Aventuras de Camila, originally published in Cómicos, about another strong, independent woman of ideals. Set in contemporary Cuban society, Yami is a confident young Afro-Cuban woman, a former model who possesses strong values and exemplifies good citizenship. Like Nancy Drew, Yami places herself in danger to catch car thieves, purse-snatchers, and black market contrabandistas. In Yami, the enemies are fellow Cubans who seek personal gain, collectively and pejoratively dubbed delincuentes. True to the purpose of the neighborhood Comité de Defensa de la Revolución (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution), the civic message to Cuban youth is to be observant and vigilant in their neighborhoods and to inform the police of suspicious behavior. The stories are also full of action: Yami is grabbed twice by Frankenstein-looking delincuentes, threatened with sexual and physical violence, almost run over intentionally, and attacked twice with knives.
Figure 4. Cover of *Yami* (2008) by Cecilio Avilés.

Figure 5. Yami confronts some “delincuentes.” From *Yami* (2008) by Cecilio Avilés.
Historical comics comprise another genre among Cuban historietas. True to their didactic mission but surprising for comic books, these often include a bibliography of works consulted. These comics overwhelmingly focus on the exploits of consecrated Cuban heroes and martyrs such as José Martí, Manuel “Piti” Fajardo, Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Antonio Maceo. These comics provide much historic information, are serious in tone, and those dealing with martyrs are almost hagiographic. One of the principal graphic artists of this genre is Blanquito, the one-time apprentice to Antonio Prohías at *El Mundo* in 1960.

![Figure 6. Cover of *José Martí contra dos imperios* (2007) by Ángel Velazco Hernández.](image)

In 2005, Roberto Alfonso Cruz and Manuel Pérez Alfaro published *La epopeya del Granma*, which details the training and voyage of the invading Cuban expeditionary force in 1956. It exults in the expeditionary force’s strong ideological conviction and dedication to the Revolution, as well as its members’ training and skills with firearms.

The historic feat is framed in this historieta by a contemporary visit to the Museo de la Revolución (Museum of the Revolution) in Havana in which a Cuban grandfather recounts the role of the yacht, *Granma*, in the history of the Cuban Revolution. The target audience actively participates in the story itself, as the eager grandchildren. With a nod to the tremendous social influence
Figure 7. Cover of *La epopeya del Granma* (2005) by Manuel Pérez Alfaro and Roberto Alfonso Cruz.

Figure 8. Selection from *La epopeya del Granma* (2005) that illustrates the comic’s intended audience and references comic hero, Elpidio Valdés.
of another Cuban cartoon character, the authors depict Elpidio Valdés on the T-shirt of one of the grandchildren. The young Cuban reader is likewise encouraged to interact with this historical comic by using provided stickers to complete the story, work a crossword puzzle with the names of the members of the Movimiento 26 de Julio (July 26 Movement), and to confirm his or her completion of these civic efforts by signing the inside cover.

In the 2005 title, Bolívar en Martí by Blanquito and his son, Francisco Blanco Hernández, the Cuban youth audience is again an integral aspect of the comic itself. They are featured as characters reading José Martí’s La edad de oro, which opens this metanarrative. As a leitmotif, Cuban school children and their teacher appear throughout the comic to discuss the historical text itself, which is the heart of the comic. The historieta serves as both entertainment and supplementary educational material to Martí’s work. Of special note here is the direct connection made between the Cuban struggle for self-determination in solidarity with Venezuela, as embodied by Martí and Bolívar and the contemporary project for the Americas via the work of Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro, respectively.

Figure 9. Cover of Bolívar en Martí (2005) by Francisco Blanco Ávila and Francisco Blanco Hernández.
Likewise, *Tupac Katari* (2008), by Ángel Velazco Hernández, directly connects Quechua uprisings in the eighteenth century with the election of Evo Morales to the Bolivian presidency in 2003. The colonizing Spaniards return to reprise their role as unjust, exploitative, and torturous colonizers, here with the help of a Quechua *cacique* (local chief) who turns traitor. As this historieta concludes, Tupac Katari’s goal of self-determination becomes embodied in the work of Ernesto “Che” Guevara one hundred fifty years later, further eliciting the solidarity between Cuba and Bolivia that continues to the present day.

In a final example, Cuba’s solidarity with Venezuela’s Chávez government is on display in *Misión Barrio Adentro* (2006) by Marcelino Feal and Joel Pernas. In this historieta, Cuban, and likely Venezuelan readers, are educated on the socialist mission of Cuban doctors in Venezuela in contrast to the greedy capitalist doctors in the private Venezuelan medical system. The principal lesson is to serve others by keeping one’s word.
Figure 11. Cover of *Tupac Katari* (2008) by Ángel Velazco Hernández.

Figure 12. Cover of *Misión Barrio Adentro* (2006) by Joel Pernas and Marcelino Feal.
With the possible exception of *Misión Barrio Adentro*, these Cuban historietas are destined almost exclusively for Cuban readers on the island, but are not generally collected by Cuban libraries. Likewise, current holdings in US and European research libraries are scattered and meager. Due to their unique ideological messages, Cuban comics are valuable research material and play a singularly explicit didactic role in the civic formation of Cuban youth.

REFERENCES


