

LOVE IN THE TIME OF COMICS: THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND  
LATINO CULTURE IN GILBERT HERNANDEZ'S *PALOMAR*

by

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(Under the Direction of Sujata Iyengar)

ABSTRACT

In 2003, a series of Gilbert Hernandez's tales from the comic book *Love and Rockets* were collected into a single graphic novel: *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. Critical reception was overwhelmingly positive, but while Hernandez received numerous accolades for his skillful depictions of female characters, his equally impressive portrayal of a Latin-American community went virtually unnoticed. Following a brief discussion of comics-related terminology, this thesis examines the ways in which Hernandez uses both the visual and the textual elements of the book to confound stereotypes regarding gender, Latino culture, and, ultimately, a combination of the two.

INDEX WORDS: Comics, Comic books, Graphic novels, Gilbert Hernandez, *Palomar*, Latino culture

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B.A., Washington University in St. Louis, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of  
Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005

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August 2005

## DEDICATION

To Brian Shortess, Matt Thebo, Charlie Olson, and every other comic book nerd I've been fortunate enough to count as a friend.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, two brothers from Oxnard, California, officially entered the world of comic books in 1982, they joined a field boasting few Latinos<sup>1</sup> and few women and improbably turned a comic book with Latino, primarily female, characters into one of the most successful underground comics of all time. *Love and Rockets*, published by Gary Groth's Fantagraphics Books, ran for 50 issues, from 1982 to 1996, and made Los Bros Hernandez, as they are affectionately known, "arguably the most widely read Chicano writers in America today" (Saldívar 540). *Love and Rockets* was a critical hit from its inception, and, by underground comics standards, a commercial success as well. The comic, which saw only three to four new issues per year, consists of various narratives, each written and illustrated by one of the brothers. Jaime's *Mechanics* stories center around Latina punk rock girls Maggie and Hopey, while Gilbert's *Heartbreak Soup* stories focus on the inhabitants

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<sup>1</sup> The debate over which term—Latino, Chicano, Hispanic, etc.—is proper could be an MA thesis in itself. Without delving too deeply into the topic, I will say that from my research, I gather that "Latino" is most commonly used by contemporary scholars, as "Chicano" refers only to "persons of Mexican descent born or residing in the United States" (Aquino 155) and "Hispanic" excludes "Latin American nationalities...which neither have ties to Spain nor are necessarily Spanish-dominant groups—for example, Brazilians...and various non-Spanish-speaking indigenous groups from diverse Latin American regions" (Oboler 4), among other reasons. I will, therefore, follow their examples. See also Rodriguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States*.



of Palomar, a small town in an undefined Latin American country south of the United States; each brother created other, less frequently-appearing characters, but is best known for his aforementioned work.

Fantagraphics recently collected the complete runs of the brothers' most famous works into two massive hardcover editions: Gilbert's *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories* (2003) and Jaime's *Locas: A Love and Rockets Book* (2004). These collections prompted a fresh round of critical attention, with newspapers and magazines across the country publishing reviews of the books and interviews with the brothers. The reception of both books was almost universally positive; critics praised the Hernandez brothers' art, characterization, and storytelling, and several lauded them for their nuanced depictions of female protagonists.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the books in particular garnered a fair amount of attention; Salon.com's Amy Benfer, for example, reports,

What I find fascinating is how central the women are to the narrative. First of all, because these fabulous women

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<sup>2</sup> *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and *Booklist*, among others, had nothing but raves for Hernandez, and after searching several databases, I was unable to find a *single* negative, or even tepid, reception. I offer the following quote from the *Washington Post*'s Jessa Crispin as an example of the reviews' overall tone: "Palomar is not simply an example of some of the best comic writing of the last 50 years. It's an example of some of the best writing of the last 50 years, period."

are drawn by two boys, and second of all, because the comics industry is one in which there are so few female characters to begin with. (Benfer)

While the practice of male writers employing female protagonists is not exactly a recent development--Duco van Oostrum notes that "in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literature, female protagonists suddenly proliferate in comics written by men" (9)--that practice was seldom employed in the comic book industry in or prior to the early 1980s. With the exception of DC Comics' well-known Wonder Woman, female characters were usually relegated to the role of sex object, love interest, or, at best, second-tier superhero. The Hernandez brothers deserve credit for bucking this trend, and for the novel, often subversive, attitudes toward traditional gender roles expressed in their texts. While several critics ascribed the brothers credit for just that, however, most failed to acknowledge an equally innovative aspect of *Love and Rockets*--its status as one of the first (and to this day, only) comic books to focus on Latino characters.

Aside from an inevitable nod to Gabriel García Márquez, the racial and cultural aspects of the books are generally ignored by critics. While the Hernandez brothers' treatment of gender stereotypes is noteworthy, their treatment of cultural

stereotypes is no less so. *Palomar* is a fascinating exploration of a Latin American town that fits few preconceived notions the American public might hold about Latin American towns. Critics are not exactly wrong to focus on Hernandez's unconventional interpretation of gender-related issues such as female protagonists, the artistic representation of women, aggressive masculinity, and homosexuality. What they fail to do, though, and what I hope to do here, is examine these issues *within* a Latino framework; to look at both gender and cultural issues within *Palomar* and ultimately establish that Hernandez's unique treatment of gender is inextricably connected to his unique depiction of Latino culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LANGUAGE OF COMICS

An explanation of the terminology involved in writing about comics is undoubtedly in order, as scholarship about the field remains comparatively scarce,<sup>3</sup> and misconceptions abound regarding the definitions of certain terms. To prevent such confusion, if only for the duration of this paper, I will briefly attempt to define--and explain the differences between--"comics," "comic strips," "comic books," and "graphic novels." In his 1993 book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines "comics" as:

A noun, plural in form, used with a singular verb.

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. (9)

In other words, "comics" consists of a series of images, often (but not always) interspersed with words, placed in a specific order to create a narrative. McCloud also identifies the crucial task of separating form from content: "comics" refers to the medium itself, as opposed to terms such as "comic book" and "comic strip," which refer to specific manifestations

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<sup>3</sup> In a September 2004 *Seattle Times* newspaper article, reporter Mark Rahner noted that while "comics are enjoying more mainstream acceptance and exposure than ever," the field still suffers from a lack of "serious criticism" (K1).

of that medium (4).<sup>4</sup> The medium of comics can, of course, be expressed in comic book form--but doesn't have to be. Just as film encompasses short films, feature-length movies, documentaries, and television shows, and the written word comprises novels, poems, non-fiction works, short stories, and plays, comics are also expressed as comic strips, graphic novels, or non-fiction books told in comics form.<sup>5</sup>

The comic strip, perhaps the most ubiquitous form of comics, is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a group of cartoons<sup>6</sup> in narrative sequence"--a rather unsatisfactory summation, given that it also applies to any other vehicle for the comics medium. I will take the liberty of narrowing that scope. Comic strips are best differentiated from other forms of comics by their length; they are short, rarely consisting of more than a dozen

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<sup>4</sup> McCloud also identifies the term "sequential art," coined by Will Eisner, as essentially interchangeable with "comics." For simplicity's sake, I will employ the latter, but the former has a growing number of proponents, and is almost as likely to be utilized as "comics" when referring to the medium.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize that "non-fiction books told in comics form" is an awkward term, but works such as McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics* and Ilan Stavans's *Latino USA: A Cartoon History*, to name a few, are still so rare that no term has yet been assigned to them, and none of the existing terms seem to fit--"comic book" for reasons that I will explain later, and "graphic novel" because "novel" implies a work of fiction--*Understanding Comics* is no more a novel than is *A Brief History of Time*.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that a cartoon--a single image, which is usually, but not always, juxtaposed with words--does not itself fall under the umbrella of "comics" as defined by McCloud. Comics consist of multiple cartoons placed in deliberate sequence--a sequence that cannot exist with just one cartoon. Therefore, while Bil Keane's *Family Circus* or Tom Wilson's *Ziggy* may appear on the "comics" page of the newspaper, they are not, technically, comics, "any more than [a] still of Humphrey Bogart is film" (McCloud 20-21).

panels. A more specific definition of a comic strip, then, could be "A short group of cartoons in narrative sequence." That definition, though, is still too broad, as it would apply to any random page plucked from a comic book, which itself would hardly qualify as a comic strip. To narrow our focus even further, we could note comic strips' self-sufficiency; they are stand-alone pieces, created and disseminated one at a time. For our final definition, we have: "An autonomous, short group of cartoons in narrative sequence."

Comic books share similar origins to comic strips; indeed, the first publications to be called "comic books," such as Apeles Mestres's 1880 work *Granizada*, were collections of individual comic strips (Martin 141). Since approximately the 1930s, though, "the two forms have taken extremely divergent paths, the comic strip becoming more and more constricted by the restraints of the newspaper medium, while comic books, through gradual periods of fits and starts, have exploited the medium's tremendous potential for flexibility" (Holman 5). The comic book evolved into its current incarnation: a medium-length (typically 30 to 40 pages) story told in comics form, usually a disposable paperback that is part of an ongoing series.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> A scattered few comic books will buck these trends; some, known as "one-shots," are not part of a series, while very few are printed in hardcover. The majority of comic books produced today, though, fit the aforementioned definition.

phrase "comic book" can also be used to refer to the series as a whole, as can "comic," but the two terms are not entirely interchangeable; the former usually signifies individual issues, while the latter usually refers to a series. Issue 1 of *Love and Rockets* is a comic book. The series *Love and Rockets* is a comic.

The past twenty years have seen a relatively new term--"graphic novel"--come into vogue. While the origin, and originator, of the phrase are unknown, we do know that comics pioneer Will Eisner used it to describe his 1978 work *A Contract with God*, and that publisher Richard Kyle mentioned it as early as 1964. Still, the term never truly entered the lexicon of comics until 1986-87, when three graphic novels--Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*--each achieved commercial success and heretofore-unseen critical acclaim. *Watchmen*, a deconstructionist take on a team of superheroes in a dystopian Manhattan governed by five-term president Richard Nixon, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, a cynical, violent look at the popular hero Batman in a futuristic Gotham City, are widely credited with nothing less than changing the face of superhero comic books. After these two works, the industry virtually abandoned the

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campy, cartoonish attributes that had previously been staples of comic books (exemplified by the Adam West-starring 1966 *Batman* television series) in favor of a grittier, more "realistic" approach that still resonates today.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike its two noted contemporaries, *Maus* is not a bleak superhero yarn; it is, rather, an emotionally affecting account of Art Spiegelman's father's experience during the Holocaust. While *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* sent shockwaves through the superhero comic book community, Spiegelman's book made inroads into the wider literary community, which had generally shunned comics as juvenile pop-culture effluvia. *Maus*, and its sequel *Maus Two*, published in 1991, won a number of literary awards, among them a 1992 Pulitzer Prize. It is worth noting here that while *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* are all considered "graphic novels" that came out in 1986-87, each work was at least partially published as, or in, a series of comic books, some debuting years earlier. *Dark Knight* was a four-issue miniseries that ran from March to June 1986, *Watchmen* was a twelve-issue miniseries that ran from early 1986 to early 1987, and passages

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<sup>8</sup> That shift occurred much to the chagrin of Moore himself, who by the early 1990s "had become particularly sick of the postmodern comics that followed in [Watchmen's] wake...I could see stylistic elements that had been taken from my own work, and used mainly as an excuse for more prurient sex and graphic violence. ...Now everywhere I turn there's these psychotic vigilantes dealing out death mercilessly! With none of the irony that I hoped I had brought to my characters" (170).



from what would eventually become *Maus* first appeared in Spiegelman's own *RAW* comic book in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At what point, then, did these works cease to be "comic books" and begin life as "graphic novels"? What, essentially, is the *difference* between comic books and graphic novels? Is one simply a fancy name for the other, as critics such as Mila Bongco imply?<sup>9</sup> Are graphic novels differentiated by their mature content, as other critics, such as Ed. S. Tan, who claims that "children read comic [books] and adults graphic novels" (31), believe?

First, the individual comic books never cease to be comic books, even after collected into a graphic novel. If a novelist publishes a short story and later uses that same story as a passage in a novel, one could hardly hold up the initial publication and claim that it is no longer a short story--its second incarnation does not negate the first. It exists simultaneously as a short story and a passage in a novel; the term we use to refer to it depends on the format in which we perceive it. Similarly, while each individual issue of *Watchmen*

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<sup>9</sup> On page 24 of *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, Bongco dismissively mentions the "re-naming of comicbooks to graphic novels." He is not alone in his rejection of the phrase—St. Louis Post-Dispatch reviewer Stephen Bolhafner, Joe Sacco (who won the 1996 American Book Award for his non-fiction comics work *Palestine*), and Art Spiegelman, among others, have all expressed doubts about, and in some cases outright disdain for, the term.

is a comic book, the bound collection of all twelve issues is a graphic novel--though this categorization does not usually apply to bound collections, as we shall see.



Fig. 1. At left, cover art for the comic book *Love and Rockets*, issue 6. At right, cover art for the graphic novel *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*. Images © Gilbert Hernandez and Fantagraphics Books, as is all art taken from *Palomar*.

To further enunciate the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel, we return to Los Bros Hernandez. With *Palomar*, the recently released graphic novel containing every *Heartbreak Soup* story, Gilbert takes some liberties with the order in which the vignettes are presented, opting not to organize them strictly by publication date. For example, after

the introduction and the first narrative, 1983's "Sopa de Gran Pena,"<sup>10</sup> he inserts the short 1985 piece *A Little Story* and the even shorter 2002 piece "Toco" before continuing with 1983's "Act of Contrition." The end result of the reordering is a book told in more or less chronological order (save for stories which are explicitly told in flashback)--each tale contributes to *Palomar's* overall story, with that story taking precedence over original publication dates. Hernandez is attempting to fine-tune a comprehensive narrative, to produce an actual graphic novel.

As previously implied, that term is often (and usually improperly) applied to any collection of comic books in hardcover or trade paperback form. In an interview conducted in October of 2000, Alan Moore opined that:

You could just about call *Maus* a novel, you could probably just about call *Watchmen* a novel, in terms of density, structure, size, scale, seriousness of theme, stuff like that. The problem is that 'graphic novel' just came to mean 'expensive comic book' and so what you'd get is people like DC Comics or Marvel comics - because 'graphic novels' were getting some attention, they'd stick six issues of whatever worthless piece of crap they happened

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<sup>10</sup> Translated into English as "Heartbreak Soup," an umbrella label later applied to all of the *Palomar* stories.

to be publishing lately under a glossy cover and call it *The She-Hulk Graphic Novel*.

Moore is right to differentiate a legitimate graphic novel from a random cluster of comic books, but he failed to mention perhaps the single most important criterion which separates *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *Palomar* from *Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 9: Issues #515-518*--a comprehensive plot.

From elementary school through college, students are indoctrinated with the notion, most famously presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*, that a plot necessarily encompasses "a beginning, a middle, and an end." Monthly comic books occupy an awkward position--even though they may contain individual story arcs spanning multiple issues, the true beginning is back in Issue #1,<sup>11</sup> and a definitive ending, one that meets Aristotle's requirements and "has nothing following it," is rarely in sight. The plot in *Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 9: Issues #515-518* continues the events of *Amazing Spider-Man #514*, and functions as a setup for *Amazing Spider-Man #519*. The only books which seem truly to work as "graphic novels" despite being collections of individual comic books are those that are able to include the entire story--the graphic novels of *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*, for example,

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<sup>11</sup> Possibly even earlier--several prominent comic book characters, such as Spider-Man, Batman, and Superman, debuted in other series (*Amazing Fantasy*, *Detective Comics*, and *Action Comics*, respectively).

each contain an entire miniseries, while Jeff Smith's *Bone: One Volume Edition* (published in 2004) collects the 13-year run of that comic in one massive, 1332-page tome. Indeed, as was implied earlier, few graphic novels exist that were *not* initially serialized. *Palomar* may have originally been part of *Love and Rockets*, but for the 2003 collection, Hernandez ordered and included every storyline from the comic. The collection begins with the first Palomar story and ends with the last, leaving out nothing in between--there is a clearly defined beginning and end, with no "Coming next issue!" undermining the narrative's conclusion.

Graphic novels, then, are clearly not just "re-named" comic books any more than feature films are just particularly long episodes of TV shows. Nor is a graphic novel's content necessarily more "mature" than a comic book's--a single issue of *Love and Rockets* is far more adult-oriented than a graphic novel featuring Pokémon or Yu-Gi-Oh!<sup>12</sup>. A graphic novel is, simply, a full-length story told in comics form that is not just a fragment of an ongoing series. This definition seems satisfactory--it precludes incomplete bound collections of monthly serial comics and "one-shot" comic books that may not be

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<sup>12</sup> I use these two examples because graphic novels targeted at juvenile audiences are still surprisingly rare in the United States despite being quite popular in Japan and parts of Europe.

part of an ongoing series, but are nowhere near long enough to be considered graphic novels.<sup>13</sup> This series of definitions is by no means perfect (*Maus*, for example, is essentially a biography, and since biographies are seldom referred to as "novels," one could argue that the label "graphic novel" does not apply to Spiegelman's work), but I hope it at least mitigates any confusion regarding the terms that will be utilized in the following analysis of *Palomar*.

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<sup>13</sup> Incorporating length into the definition of "graphic novel" is admittedly tricky—how long must a story be to qualify as "full-length"? One hundred pages? Two hundred? I can only offer in my defense the fact that the same dilemma applies to prose fiction—the distinctions between "short story," "novella," and "novel" seem every bit as arbitrary.

## CHAPTER 3

### GENDER ROLES IN *PALOMAR*

As previously noted, the comic book industry in the early 1980s was, essentially, a boys' club. Most characters were male. Most writers and artists were male. Most readers were male. Compounding their underrepresentation, women working on the creative end were subject to a barrage of harassment from editors and coworkers--artist Colleen Doran once reported that

...the way they treat women in this business--and children, for that matter--is appalling...In my entire career, I've only met one woman who has said she has never had any problems. Only one! But every other female professional I know has had problems. From being chased around the office desk, to being grabbed and being groped. And molested. You name it. It's just awful. (234-237)

Female readers were, and are, in the minority as well--a recent survey estimated comic books' readership at 92% male (*The Great Women* 166). A decade earlier, this disparity was even more pronounced; in 1985, comic book historian Mike Benton reported that male readers outnumbered female readers twenty to one (2). Several theories have been advanced as to why this is the case,

from genetics (men<sup>14</sup> are hardwired to enjoy the action and combat found in a typical comic book) to social conditioning (it is more socially acceptable for men to read comic books than women) to the most probable: a reaction against the misogyny that seemed to permeate the industry. Author Neil Gaiman, who claims that his series *Sandman* attracts approximately as many women as men,<sup>15</sup> supports the latter view, once positing that the series' cross-gender appeal exists because "the women in *Sandman* were there neither for decoration nor to appeal to the glandular needs of pubertal readers; they didn't get tied to chairs wearing nothing but their lingerie." Likewise, artist/writer Trina Robbins decried the comic books that featured "improbably breasted women attired in little besides thong bikinis and spike-heeled, thigh-high boots" (*From Girls* 7), and Alan Moore quipped in 1982, "If I were a female comic character, I think I'd be inclined to dress up warm, wear three pullovers at once and never go anywhere without a pair of scissors" (qtd. in Gaiman). Far too many comic books lived up to the stereotype of

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<sup>14</sup> Benton's findings indicated that the traditional stereotype of the comic book reader was outdated with regard to age—the average reader was not an adolescent boy, but a 25-40 year old *man*.

<sup>15</sup> Gaiman arrived at this conclusion on admittedly unscientific grounds, basing it on "readers' letters and the genders of people turning up for signings."



"male power fantasy," and as a result, males in need of power fantasies were their only readers.

Nor was this pattern limited to mainstream superhero comic books. Reacting against the Comics Code Authority, which was formed in 1954 to monitor and censor comic books, a new wave of countercultural writers and artists opted out of "the system" entirely in the late 1960s, self-publishing their work or creating independent publishing houses that refused to conform to the standards imposed by the CCA (Wiater and Bisette xv). These "comix," as their creators dubbed them, usually featured explicit language, sexual content, and/or extreme violence, often in the service of social criticism--while the "big guns" of Marvel and DC Comics remained predominantly apolitical, the underground comix scene produced works attacking (or celebrating) the US government, the Vietnam War, and the drug culture of the 1960s and '70s, among others (McAllister et al 8). In at least one respect, though, the underground comix were no more progressive than their mainstream counterparts: most were every bit as misogynistic, if not more so.

Terry Zwigoff's 1994 documentary *Crumb* examines the life and work of Robert Crumb (better known as R. Crumb), perhaps the most celebrated artist to emerge from the underground comix scene. In the film, various critics and intellectuals examine

some of Crumb's more disturbing comics, one of which features a woman whose head has been effectively removed, leaving a headless sex toy that the other, male, characters view as a marked improvement. When confronted on-camera by journalist Peggy Orenstein with the allegation that such grotesque images had temporarily made her afraid to join the adult world, Crumb pleads no contest: "I have hostilities toward women, I admit it...It ruthlessly forces itself out of me on the paper."



Fig. 2. An illustration by R. Crumb for a series of articles in the *Guardian* (London).

As the highest-profile underground comix creator, Crumb may attract more than his fair share of criticism--I say that not to

excuse his work, but to make the point that he was hardly alone in his misogyny. Denis Kitchen, whose *Ingrid the Bitch* starred a five-year old nymphomaniac and her equally lustful dog, and S. Clay Wilson, who injected *The Checkered Demon* and *Ruby the Dyke* with as much violence and torture as he could cram into the panels, are but two examples of a group that lashed out not only at the government and the Vietnam War, but at the burgeoning women's liberation movement. As Trina Robbins puts it, "Most of the male underground cartoonists understood as little about the new women's movement as the newspapers did, and reacted to what they perceived as a threat by drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed mostly at women" (*From Girls* 85). Robbins and other women countered with a spate of all-female comics, such as *Pandora's Box* and *Wimmen's Comix*, which addressed social issues and lampooned depictions of women found in both mainstream and underground comics. By the 1980s, feminist comic books had carved out a niche in the comics industry, but conventional wisdom held that a gender divide still existed: men bought comics by men about men, and women bought comics by women about women.

*Love and Rockets*, then, was an anomaly even for an underground comic. Its creators were both men, but its central protagonists were women, as were most of the supporting

characters. Furthermore, despite its occasional sexual content—both Jaime and Gilbert incorporated scantily-clad (and, eventually, nude) women into their storylines—the comic attracted, by all accounts, a substantial female audience. As with Neil Gaiman’s claim that *Sandman*’s readership was evenly split between women and men, no hard data charting the demographics of *Love and Rockets*’s readership exists. Still, most critics and reviewers assert, or imply, that *Love and Rockets* was “one of the few comic books with a large and loyal female readership” (Bolhafner), or that it “ha[d] nearly as many female readers as male” (Bender 117). Writer Carla Sinclair credits it with reintroducing her to the world of comics. Elaborating on that assertion, though, Sinclair makes some interesting comments: when listing the characters that initially attracted her, she describes “grrrl rock musicians, a female championship wrestler, and young women with realistic postadolescent lives” (*From Girls* 4). While the latter description could apply to certain characters in *Palomar*, here it almost assuredly refers to Maggie and Hopey, the young, female protagonists of Jaime’s *Locas*, who live in the United States and thus lead lives that would seem, if not more realistic to American readers, at least more familiar. Each entry in Sinclair’s list, in fact, refers to *Locas*—Hopey is a

rock musician, as are a few supporting characters; and Maggie's aunt, who makes occasional appearances, is a female championship wrestler. A comparison of *Locas* to *Palomar*, in fact, reveals that *Locas* is far more female-centered; the two primary characters and most of their friends are women, while the men generally function as, at best, temporary love interests. *Palomar* is more of an ensemble work, shifting narrators and points of view between, and occasionally within, stories. Several female characters, such as Luba, Pipo, and Chelo, receive a considerable amount of face time, but male characters like Heraclio and Jesús are by no means marginalized.

One could argue, then, that *Love and Rockets's* reputation as a female-centered comic results primarily from Jaime's contributions. Still, the fact that Jaime focuses on women more often than Gilbert does not negate the fact that in devoting nearly equivalent attention to male and female characters, Gilbert still depicted female protagonists far more often than virtually any of his male contemporaries.

Even so, his reputation as a master craftsman of female characters merits examination, if only because at first glance it is so *unlikely*. Hernandez is a Latino<sup>16</sup> man working in an

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<sup>16</sup> I'll address this topic in more detail later on, but for now, suffice it to say that Latino men are not traditionally known for their progressive stance on feminist issues.

industry renowned for its misogyny, producing a series which frequently includes nudity and whose primary protagonist is a sexually voracious woman with exaggeratedly large breasts. Andrew D. Arnold of *Time* magazine admiringly commented that *Love and Rockets* possesses "the randy exuberance of a soft-core porn video" a comparison that one imagines few avowedly feminist authors would appreciate, let alone trumpet on their dust jacket. Granted, Arnold also compliments *Palomar's* "passion for female characters," but the same could perhaps be said of several recent "chixploitation"<sup>17</sup> comic books, such as Brian Pulido's *Lady Death* and Don Mcgregor's *Zorro* spin-off *Lady Rawhide*. Such works are often attacked due to their "hypersexualized women with large breasts and little clothing" (Robbins 1999: 113); how, then, has Hernandez largely managed to escape such criticism?

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<sup>17</sup> Industry term for a genre of comic books which became popular in the 1990s, generally targeted at adolescent males, whose scantily-clad female protagonists function as little more than eye candy. Also known as "bad girl" comics.



Fig. 3. Lady Death, perhaps the most famous--or infamous--chixploitation heroine, strikes a pose. Cover art for *Lady Death: Tribulation*, issue 2. Art by David Michael Beck. Image © David Michael Beck and Chaos! Comics.

There is, first of all, a difference between a passion for writing female characters and a passion for simply *looking* at female characters. Chixploitation comics are famous for horrendous dialogue, inconsistent characterization, and ridiculous plot twists; establishing an interesting, dynamic heroine is less important than displaying that heroine in progressively skimpier outfits. Both Hernandez brothers admit that they initially used comics as an excuse to draw women, but their artistic goals quickly matured, as Jaime noted during a Salon.com interview:

We decided that, 'Well, I can have my cake and eat it too if I make them interesting characters, because we certainly ain't getting it from anyone else...I like drawing Maggie's big butt. But I'm not happy unless her personality is well-rounded.

In that respect, Gilbert succeeds where most of his peers fail (when they even try at all)--most recurring characters in *Palomar*, both female and male, are multifaceted and dynamic. Luba, the central female protagonist, evolves from a sexually-charged diva into a harried middle-aged woman trying (not always successfully) to balance her dating life with her role as mother to her ever-increasing brood, finally settling into a role as mayor, and de facto matriarch, to the entire town. Pipo moves from young tomboy to teenage ingénue to unsatisfied housewife to successful businesswoman. Tonantzín, initially an attention-hungry sexpot, gradually becomes a political radical, ultimately going so far as to martyr herself in an act of self-immolation at a protest. Compare this to standard chixploitation comics, in which the heroines are rarely depicted as anything but gleefully violent dominatrices. In 1977, Robin Wood identified four archetypal gender roles found in classic Hollywood cinema, one of which is "the erotic but treacherous bitch-goddess" (Levinson 139)--the *femme fatale* of traditional film noir.



Chixploitation writers simply turn out variations on that stereotype, but Hernandez prevents most of his recurring characters from becoming caricatures.

Some of the more tertiary characters, though, do not receive such authorial care. The first published<sup>18</sup> *Palomar* story, "Sopa de Gran Pena," opens with a two-page spread of a beautiful woman casually thrashing a would-be suitor, who can do nothing but reiterate his love and plead for mercy. That woman, we find out, is named Zomba--and her violent rejection of a lovestruck Tipín Tipín proves to be her last personal appearance in the book. We do find out, though, that Zomba essentially becomes an urban legend: in the storyline "Boys will be Boys," an adult, married Heraclio (who was a young teenager during "Sopa de Gran Pena") regales a single friend with a description of "the queen of women":

Zomba would destroy you, Anacleto. She's turned the strongest men into quivering heaps of flesh. Crushed like gnats! \*kreesh kreesh\* Men are but food to her. She must devour a man in order to live! Zomba knows a man's weaknesses, guy, be they intellectual or physical. There

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<sup>18</sup> *Chelo's Burden*, the prologue to *Sopa de Gran Pena*, was actually written for the 1986 trade paperback collection of *Love and Rockets* issues 3 and 4. Zomba, therefore, was the first inhabitant of Palomar ever depicted.

isn't a man alive who can resist her monstrous love!

Palomar's full of her wretched victims. (208)

Despite Heraclio's ominous wordplay, Hernandez avoids showing Zomba in the scene; perhaps the sight of her would undermine the myth. Whatever the reason, she remains absent, and is neither seen nor mentioned throughout the remainder of the book.

Considering the relatively complex portrayal of the other inhabitants of Palomar, the presence of such a one-dimensional character is a bit jarring. Furthermore, each time Zomba appears, her presence reveals more about a recurring male character than about herself--first Tipín Tipín's unquenchable romanticism, and then Heraclio's playful and imaginative personality. This, however, seems motivated less by some sort of gender bias than a tendency to use transient characters to advance the characterization of the more permanent cast--Chango and Bruno, for example, primarily exist to provide the reader with information about Ofelia and Casimira, respectively.

Even if Zomba does embody the *femme fatale* stereotype, it would still be a mistake to view her as comparable to those embodiments found in chixploitation comics. Zomba, while attractive, is fully clothed, and the image of a bleeding, terrified Tipín Tipín mitigates any sex appeal she might exude--she is there not to ogle, but to fear.



Fig. 4. Zomba forcefully rejects Tipín Tipín's romantic overtures.

Heroines such as Lady Death and Lady Rawhide, though, are depicted as sexy even when they're engaged in battle--their skimpy outfits and gorgeous faces make it almost impossible for them to be anything but, at least to a libidinous adolescent male. And make no mistake about it--libidinous adolescent males are the target audience. As noted above, these comics suffer from famously poor writing and ridiculous plots; sex appeal is their only draw. The heroines may be physically strong or otherwise powerful, but the manner in which they are drawn (as much skin showing as possible, and usually with clearly erect nipples) exposes their true purpose. The women of *Palomar* are not as brazenly objectified, though it would be disingenuous to pretend, as some critics and reviewers appear to have done, that

objectification is not present in the text. Trina Robbins, for example, describes Luba as "large-breasted but never a 'babe'" (Robbins 1999: 108), when Luba, along with recurring characters such as Tonantzín and Carmen, are frequently depicted as "babes." Perhaps the relative depth of these characters (to say nothing of what appears to be an industry-wide respect for *Love and Rockets*--as previously noted, I have yet to read a review, interview, or article about the comic that speaks of it in anything less than glowing terms) has inhibited examination of *Palomar's* more controversial aspects. Analysis, though, reveals that even when presenting women as "babes," as objects of male desire, Hernandez still toys with the traditional male-centered comic book paradigm.

Laura Mulvey's oft-cited work on male spectatorship and gaze theory, though normally applied to film,<sup>19</sup> can be just as useful when discussing comics. As with film, the medium of comics relies on a visual narrative, a succession of images which often resembles the storyboards used to establish camera angles and transitions for film.<sup>20</sup> Characters, then, can be

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<sup>19</sup> As Mary Deveraux notes, "Film is a natural choice for such a study [of gendered vision] because it is a medium so fundamentally built around the act of looking" (339).

<sup>20</sup> The distinction between the two can grow quite fuzzy indeed; Robert Rodriguez's recently-released *Sin City*, for example, recreates Frank Miller's comic books almost line-for-line and shot-for-shot, effectively using the comics as a storyboard. Similarly, comic book adaptations of films often

displayed for the visual pleasure of the reader (or of other characters) as easily in comics as in film. This phenomenon, coined by Mulvey as "scopophilia"--"pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (18)--is clearly on display in chixploitation comics, as noted above. *Palomar* also contains several examples of scopophilia, with characters functioning as erotic objects for other characters and, potentially, the reader--though not necessarily.

Mulvey asserts that cultural factors have shaped scopophilia into a uniquely masculine act:

Mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order...In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (16, 19)

Under this theory, *Palomar* becomes problematic. While its author is male, an estimated half of its readers are female;

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consist of what amounts to illustrated frames lifted directly from the films, as though they took the storyboards and simply polished up the art.

unlike the scribe of *Lady Death*, Hernandez cannot assume that all, or even most, of his readers will derive pleasure from projections of male fantasies. Mulvey has, in fact, drawn criticism for "leaving no constructive space for the female viewer," and implying that women are reduced to "masochistically identifying with a passive, objectified subject-to-be-looked at" (Chanter). Furthermore, she alleges that "according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (20). While I cannot dispute the fact that male nudity is infrequent and often ill-received in the comic book industry, with *Palomar*, Hernandez defies this trend.

The first image in the book that would not have received approval from the Comics Code Authority comes on page 39: Miguel's naked buttocks, seen from the back, and penis, seen from the side. Though several women sport low-cut or otherwise revealing outfits throughout the series, or appear nude in silhouette, Hernandez does not show any explicit post-pubescent female nudity until page 140, when a young Guadalupe stumbles upon an anonymous teenage couple "playing doctor" on the beach. No recurring female characters appear naked until page 221, when Tonantzín shows up in one of Jesús's prison-induced fantasies--

and by that point, we have seen male nudes on page 41 (Tipín Tipín, seen from the rear), page 177 (wrestler El Clavo, in full frontal), and page 221 (Jesús appears in the panel with Tonantzín, naked and literally jumping for joy). After this point, Hernandez peppers the rest of the book with both male and female nudity--men such as Israel, Miguel, Humberto and Borro show skin alongside Luba, Carmen, Pipo and Chelo. Female nudity is more frequent than male, certainly, but Hernandez nevertheless provides several "exhibitionist likes," some of whom are openly sexually objectified. When Israel attends a strip club, on page 293, the opening panel shows a pair of high-heeled boots dancing atop a stage, with both men and women shown in the background leering at the dancer--who is revealed two panels later to be a man, naked except for those boots.



Fig. 5. Israel and several other club patrons ogle a male stripper.

Near the end of the book, when Pipo poses for one of Humberto's sculptures, she stares across the room at a statue of a man with

an uncommonly large penis and quips, "I'm sorry I wasn't here the day *he* posed" (508). Mulvey's claim that men are unable to position themselves--or their male creations--as sex objects certainly rings true for most comic books, whether mainstream or independent; in these, nude men are extremely rare, and even shirtless or otherwise partially-exposed men are anomalies. With *Palomar*, though, Hernandez displays a willingness to flaunt this convention--and even finds a way to present female nudity in a slyly subversive manner.

*Palomar* contains several instances of male characters staring at nude or nearly-nude female characters, or of those female characters obviously presented from the vantage point of a male character. Each would initially seem to dovetail with Mulvey's theory, but for the quirks that Hernandez occasionally adds. As noted above, the first nudity by a recurring female character occurs on page 221, when Tonantzín appears in Jesús's fantasy. Jesús himself is in the background of the panel, naked, staring at Tonantzín with a thrilled look on his face and his body contorted into an odd-looking dance move. On page 267, Chelo appears nude, and once again, a nude male character leers at her from the background--in this case, her lover/inmate Miguel. Luba appears topless (with a strategically placed arm covering her breasts) on page 324--in the next panel, Archie



stares at her, naked, from the background. On page 508, a statue of a nude Heraclio is positioned so that if the reader follows his gaze, it leads to a nude statue of Diana in the foreground.



Fig. 6. At left, a nude Miguel gazes at a topless Chelo; at right, a nude Archie gazes at Luba.

While not a comprehensive list of nudity in the book, these examples do reveal an intriguing pattern--when a nude female is shown in the foreground, stared at by a male character, that character often is, or soon will be, exposed. As the locus of attention in the panel(s), the female character will almost undoubtedly draw a reader's focus before he or she examines the male character; her position in the foreground and role as "gaze object" contribute to this phenomenon. Should a male reader engage in scopophilia as he stares at the woman, the subsequent

sight of a naked man will be, to say the least, jarring.<sup>21</sup> While I disagree with Mulvey's assertion that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification," my contention is only with the finality of the statement. When she qualifies her claim by noting that "man is **reluctant** to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (emphasis mine), though, I must agree.

Furthermore, these nude male characters are bearers, as well as objects, of the gaze--each is a male reader's voyeuristic like as well as exhibitionist like. This can only create further dissonance for the reader, who, with the addition of a leering male character, must then engage in identification with the male, or narcissistic scopophilia. Mulvey differentiates between the pleasure a man gains from gazing at a woman and that gleaned from gazing at another man:

The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as the object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with

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<sup>21</sup> The presence of a man at *all* may be at least a little jarring, particularly for American readers. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger notes that "in the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man" (54). Tellingly, though, this restriction applies only in the European tradition--nudity operates differently "in Indian art, Persian art, African art, Pre-Columbian art" (53). By juxtaposing nude men with nude women, then, Hernandez may be toying with racial conventions as well as gender, defying the expectations of not just male readers, but *white* male readers (I interpret his perceived audience as primarily white, for reasons I will explain later).

the image seen...identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. (18)

The male voyeurs in these panels, then, are stand-ins for *Palomar's* male readership; they mimic the readers' actions by staring at the naked women in front of them, and several of them--Jesús, Miguel, and Archie, specifically--occupy fantasy roles for the reader, as they have just had sex, or are about to have sex, with their respective lust objects. The reader identifies with them as voyeurs, but in doing so, he must also identify with them as exhibitionists--an unfamiliar, and likely uncomfortable, position.

A character's status as voyeur is, in *Palomar*, rarely something that a reader could proudly identify with. Instead of a suave Humphrey Bogart or James Bond gazing approvingly at his next conquest, Hernandez's male oglers are often depicted in a less-than-flattering manner. In the aforementioned panel on page 221 with a nude Jesús and Tonantzín, Jesús sports unrealistically large eyes, a massive grin, and curving, seemingly boneless arms. As every character in that story thus far, including Jesús, has been rendered in a relatively realistic manner, in this panel he looks particularly artificial, almost cartoonish. On page 252, Carmen appears

nude, or close to nude--her sheer nightgown leaves little to the imagination. As in the previous panel, a male character leers at her from the background--in this case, her newlywed husband, Heraclio, who narrates that he "began to feel a little guilty for wanting her so bad, like some drooling, slobbering john." Drawn with huge, cartoonish eyes, he certainly looks the part.



Fig. 7. At left, an unnaturally bendy Jesús leers at Tonantzín; at right, a wide-eyed Heraclio stares at Carmen.

Further examples of voyeurism occur on page 187, when pockmarked teenager Augustín and his equally immature friends peek in on Tonantzín as she poses in a mirror, and on page 343 and 346, when the young artist Humberto attempts to draw other townspeople, such as Luba, without being noticed. While a negative image of Jesús and Heraclio can be gleaned from their

visual depictions, Augustín and Humberto are drawn normally, but written as an obnoxious juvenile delinquent and an introverted weirdo, respectively. None of these voyeuristic males are ideal figures to identify with--indeed, their portrayals may be subtle jabs from Hernandez at the stereotypical comic book reader.

Three of the previous examples were originally published in or before 1985, and the fourth, Humberto's voyeurism, was published in 1987, at which point *Love and Rockets* was only in its fifth year of publication. One could reasonably assume that it took the comic a little while to build up a substantial female readership; since most underground comix in the early 1980s were marketed to, and purchased by, men, female readers were likely drawn by word of mouth. As with most word-of-mouth phenomena, the development of a female audience undoubtedly took some time. One could also reasonably assume that, once formed, it took a while for the female readership to become apparent--if the Hernandez brothers estimated their audience's demographics based on "readers' letters and the genders of people turning up for signings," as Neil Gaiman did with *Sandman*, it was probably years before anyone had enough data to conclude that *Love and Rockets* was attracting nearly as many women as men. Therefore, during the comic's earlier years, Gilbert may well have taken for granted that *Love and Rockets*,

like almost every other male-penned underground comic at that time, was drawing an audience composed primarily of teenage and adult males. Presenting crudely drawn--or just plain crude--voyeurs as avatars with whom the comic's readers could identify, then, may have been a way to preemptively mock both the misogynistic underground comix that were in vogue and the type of reader that those comix traditionally had--the type of reader that Hernandez assumed *he* had.

It's not much of a stretch to infer that Hernandez may have initially harbored some misgivings about his perceived audience; on page 87, an unnamed character at a nightclub inexplicably breaks the fourth wall, glaring at the reader and shouting, "You're all a bunch of dirty, stinkin', wanking voyeurs, that's what you are! Yeah, you!" Later, Tonantzín concludes a story with an address to the reader, which ends in "What do you mean *is that it?* What do you want? *Blood* every time?" (239). Both stories were published during or before 1985, and while the characters' outbursts can be read as nothing more than wry metafictional humor on the part of Hernandez, if we interpret them as even remotely serious, they expose an unflattering concept of his assumed readership, as well as a willingness to provoke those readers, however subtly.

In addition to meddling with gender stereotypes regarding his readers, Hernandez frequently allows his characters to engage in what van Oostrum labels "gender crossing" (25)--the questioning and subversion of stereotypically gendered behavior and characteristics. According to a 1972 study by Corinne Hutt on differences between the sexes,

the male is physically stronger but less resilient, he is more independent, adventurous and aggressive, he is more ambitious and competitive...The female at the outset possesses those sensory capacities which facilitate interpersonal communion; physically and psychologically she matures more rapidly, her verbal skills are precocious and proficient, she is more nurturant, affiliative, more consistent. (qtd. in Kiberd 215)

Hernandez, though, repeatedly flaunts these conventions. At the beginning of *Palomar*, the physically strongest character, male or female, is Chelo; after she weakens with age and the muscular Israel leaves town, the athletically inclined Diana takes up bodybuilding, becoming even more muscular than Chelo ever was.



Fig. 8. At left, Chelo boasts of her strength; at right, Diana flaunts her own.

The political-minded Tonantzín may be the most independent character in the book, and the young Casimira's hunt for the bird that plucked out her friend's eye is almost certainly *Palomar's* most adventurous passage. While characters of both sexes can be quite aggressive, nearly every man who acts out his aggression, especially those engaging in the oh-so-masculine act of punching another man to "defend a woman's honor," is immediately chastised or punished (Israel [159], Heraclio [248], Sergio [444]) by those they were attempting to defend; aggression in men is present, but clearly not desirable. Heraclio, the literate university-trained accordion teacher, possesses the most proficient verbal skills, and as for consistency, one need only look at Luba, whose complex character



arc has previously been detailed. While during "Human Diastrophism" she is an abusive harridan, she does ultimately develop into a "nurturant" woman--along with her husband Khamo, who himself evolves from a promiscuous, self-centered young man into a devoted and affectionate father. In short, few gender stereotypes remain unchallenged--nor are traditional gender roles left alone, as the male sheriff and mayor of Palomar are replaced, over the course of the series, by Chelo and Luba.

Despite his willingness to toy with gender norms, and the fact that several, if not most, of the main characters in *Palomar* are female, Hernandez utilizes a female narrator, or privileges a female point of view, surprisingly rarely. While he often highlights different characters' points of view from page to page, or even from panel to panel, each story generally has a single character who grounds the narrative--occasionally two or three--and in most of *Palomar's* longer pieces, those grounding characters are male. In the opening tale, "Sopa de Gran Pena," it is Heraclio. "Act of Contrition" begins as Luba's story, but privileges Archie's point of view by the conclusion. "The Laughing Sun" is a series of flashbacks by Jesús's male friends, with Heraclio again providing the final word. "Ecce Homo" is enough of an ensemble piece to make it impossible to pin down a focus, either male or female; "An

American in Palomar" is most frequently told from the point of view of the titular American, Howard Miller; and "Holidays in the Sun" belongs to Jesús. "Duck Feet," which begins on page 259, is the first extended story told primarily from female points of view--in this case, Chelo, Tonantzín, and Guadalupe share the duty. The 104-page "Human Diastrophism," by far the longest narrative in *Palomar*, uses nearly every character as a lens at some point--Luba most of all, with Humberto, Diana, and Heraclio backing her up. After "Farewell, my Palomar," another story centered on Jesús, the book ends with "Luba Conquers the World" and "Chelo's Burden"--two stories that, like "Human Diastrophism," are nearly ensemble pieces, but have Luba as the closest thing to a central point of view.

Not until halfway through *Palomar*, then, is there a long piece with a female narrator. Even then, women's points of view are displayed only slightly more than men's, as opposed to "Sopa de Gran Pena," "Holidays in the Sun," and "Farewell, my Palomar," each of which sticks with its male narrator throughout, or constantly returns to him. Even though women--Luba in particular, but also Tonantzín, Pipo, Chelo, and others--are often among the most important characters in storylines, those stories are seldom told from their perspectives. Hernandez exhibits undeniable skill at creating female

characters and drawing female characters and writing dialogue for female characters, but those characters are usually viewed through male lenses.

If we examine Hernandez's upbringing, this perhaps makes sense. When asked in a Salon.com interview where he and his brother acquired their ear for female dialogue, he responded:

We grew up with women. Our mother and grandmother raised us, because our dad died when we were pretty young...and my mother's sisters also lived in town. I watched how the women interacted in our home, and then I went into the outside world to watch what women do. It just became a normal thing to do. I don't know what the psychological reasons for it may have been. Sometimes, I was just one of the fellas. I was thin and small, but I wasn't the wimpy guy. (Hernandez)

Even as he credits his familiarity with female behavior--the source, one could argue, of most of his success--to his matriarchal household, Hernandez notes that his cross-gender familiarity primarily developed not through osmosis, but through extensive, if unintentional, research--he had to watch, and learn, how women interacted. He then affirms his masculinity; despite his abundant female influences, he was still "one of the fellas," and not "the wimpy guy." He does qualify his statement

not long after, noting that he "would back off" when "male aggression reared its ugly head," and that he "didn't go for male bonding rituals," indicating that he subscribes to the notion of a continuum of masculinity/femininity as opposed to a strict male/female binary. Even so, he ultimately positions himself closer to the masculine end of the continuum--while he *studied* women, he was a man. Hernandez may consider himself familiar--more so than the average male, at least--with the dialogue and behavior of women, but his own perspective is that of a particularly observant man--and it is that perspective which is most frequently imparted to his characters.

While the comic book industry in the early 1980s was inhospitable for women, it was virtually uninhabited by Latinos--according to Jaime, "When we got into the comic world, it was almost zero Latin. We were in this world with almost all white people. In the beginning, people were afraid of us, because they thought we were hoods" (Salon.com interview). Book reviewer Charles Solomon notes that the lack of diversity encompassed characters as well as authors:

When Jaime and Gilbert ("Los Bros.") Hernandez created the first "Love and Rockets" comic with their older brother Mario in 1982, there were virtually no Latino characters in comic books. Superheroes were white or green or silver,

but not brown. Only WASPs lived in Archie Andrews' Riverdale, and even Carl Barks' Duckburg had a white-bread feel to it. When they ended "Love and Rockets" almost 20 years later, Latino characters were still rarities in comic books. (Solomon)

*Love and Rockets*, then, was as much of a comic book anomaly in incorporating Latinos as it was in incorporating women, if not more so. In fact, while Gilbert never claims to have consciously chosen to focus on female characters, accounting for that fact by citing his own matriarchal family, his focus on Latino characters does seem politically motivated. In a 1995 *The Comics Journal* interview, he reported, "With *Heartbreak Soup* I had an agenda of sorts. I'm trying to get non-Latinos, for lack of a better word, to identify with Latinos as human beings. Simple as that. I think I've felt that since I was a kid."

Indeed, Hernandez seems to be writing for a primarily non-Latino audience; throughout the book, he provides a brief pronunciation guide for characters' names, as well as definitions for various Spanish words. These asides appear as small, unobtrusive footnotes; perhaps so he can be informative without coming off like a schoolteacher. Whatever the case, their presence is indicative of another trend in the comics industry: a lack of Latino readers. Just as the previously-

mentioned direct addresses to the reader imply a perception on Hernandez's part of a primarily male audience, the fact that he assumed from the outset that his readers would need help defining words such as "bruja" and properly pronouncing "Manuel" reveals that his perceived audience was primarily non-Latino. While I was unable to locate evidence indicating the accuracy of this assumption, if we apply the logic that we used regarding female readers,<sup>22</sup> it appears to be not without merit.

Nor is this necessarily a bad thing, from Hernandez's viewpoint; remember, he writes about women because that is what he knows, but he writes about Latinos because that is what he wants to *inform* people about. As a result, though *Palomar* questions and undermines stereotypical gender roles, Hernandez seems more concerned with sabotaging stereotypes regarding Latino cultures and attitudes, as he implied in 1993:

I try to avoid a lot of the cliches, like the machismo in men, the heavy religious imagery that's in a lot of Hispanic culture. Not that it's not there, but that's basically just what people think about when they think of that. And I've sort of sidestepped that, and I dealt with the characters' lives more. (qtd. in Bolhafner)

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<sup>22</sup> Namely, that the relatively low level of female readership was exacerbated by a lack of female characters and writers. We already know that Latinos were similarly underrepresented in both of those areas; it stands to reason, then, that Latino readership would show a corresponding decline.

*Palomar* is indeed predominantly character-driven, and Hernandez regularly focuses on family dynamics, examining marriages (Heraclio and Carmen), siblings (Tonantzín and Diana), and maternal relationships (Pipo and Sergio)--and, of course, Luba's family, which encompasses all three categories. In this, though, he seems to play out another stereotype; family, as Sara E. Cooper notes, "has been a recurring theme in Hispanic film and literature since its inception and throughout every literary movement in Spain and Latin America" (2). Nonetheless, Hernandez's take on the subject is decidedly atypical; for one thing, there are virtually no patriarchs in all of *Palomar*. This could be seen as an extension of what Ray Gonzalez calls "the cult of silence, where many Latino fathers are silent as they leave parenting to the mother" (xiv), but patriarchs in *Palomar* are not just silent; they are *absent*. Some, like Pipo's father, have already died; some, like Gato's grandfather and Manuel, die during the book. Some, like Heraclio, Khamo, and Gato, are not even aware they are fathers for years, and some, like Chelo's father and Jesús, are so horrible at parenting that they are never allowed near their children. Satch, the only male character with a stereotypically sprawling Latino household, is virtually written out of the book, and Heraclio's

role in the comic is greatly reduced after he and Carmen have children.



## CHAPTER 4

### LATINO CULTURE IN *PALOMAR*

Palomar is therefore presented as a matriarchal community, with women doing virtually all of the parenting--and also holding most listed jobs. Despite the fact that "Latin American societies continue to uphold the idea that a respectable woman's place is in the home" (Oboler 115), Chelo is the sheriff, Luba runs the bath house and the movie theater (and, eventually, the city), Tonantzín is "the babosa lady," selling fried slugs (which are clearly considered a delicacy), and Pipo starts a successful business in America. Compare this to Palomar's men, of whom only Heraclio maintains a steady career--Vicente loses his job, Gato ends up begging Pipo to take him on as a business partner, and it is unclear whether Jesús ever finds work after being released from prison. Both the domestic and the economic spheres of Palomar are dominated by women, in sharp contrast to the conventional American view of Latin American societies. Several recent (twentieth-century) Latino rights movements and leaders, including the leadership of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, advocated positions that, as Karen Christian puts it, promote[d] a static view of culture and uncritical affirmation of family and gender roles. Although the Movement achieved the important goals of giving a unified

voice to an oppressed minority and bringing attention to Chicano culture and experience, Chicanas frequently found themselves excluded from the decision-making processes.

(25)

This fact, combined with the increasing attention paid to Latino culture during the civil rights movement, helped perpetuate the stereotype of the society being driven by "machismo"--a concept that the dictionary defines as "an exaggerated sense of masculinity stressing such attributes as courage, virility, and domination" (qtd. in "The Latin Phallus" 149), but which Omar S. Castaneda notes is generally interpreted by Americans as "self-aggrandizing male behavior that flirts with physical harm to be sexual, like some rutting for the right to pass on genes" (qtd. in Gonzalez xiii). This particularly aggressive version of masculinity has become inextricably linked with Latino culture--as Hernandez himself implied, it is among the most widely recognized Latino clichés. Its notoriety makes the relative dearth of machismo in *Palomar* all the more noticeable--not only is the town politically dominated by women, but when its male inhabitants do exhibit the more aggressive aspects of machismo, they are met with rebuke and punishment. Violence against women results in imprisonment for Jesús (119) and Chester (457), and as previously noted, men are sharply discouraged from battling

amongst themselves over--or because of--women. Machismo in Palomar is not unheard of--but it is openly rejected by the characters. Even when it does get past Hernandez's self-imposed restriction on clichés, then, it is depicted as an uncommon and unwelcome aspect of life in Palomar, and is thereby used in an atypical manner.

Interestingly enough, Israel, the character who most consistently exhibits the qualities associated with machismo--among them physical strength, an aggressive personality, and a tendency to make "crude remarks about women in general" (248)--is a homosexual, and thus may be the most unconventional character in the book. For one thing, gay characters were, in the early 1980s, rarities in comic books; they never appeared in a Marvel or DC title until 1988 (Franklin 224), and were seldom seen in independent publications prior to that. Before 1980, in fact, even the underground comics world was peopled entirely with heterosexuals (Franklin 248). It was noteworthy, then, for Hernandez to include a gay character in 1986, or a possibly gay character three years earlier.

Israel's homosexuality is implied as early as 1983's "Sopa de Gran Pena," in which he is a limp-wristed and feminine adolescent. When he reappears in 1984's "The Laughing Sun" and "Ecce Homo," however, his posture and personality have been

radically altered; he is now a heavily muscled, short-tempered jock. 1986's "The Reticent Heart" functions as a sort of bridge between the two seemingly disparate personas, showing, in flashback, a teenaged Israel engaged in some sort of manual labor--and fantasizing about being hit on by both a man and a woman. Hernandez finally outs him in 1986's "Bullnecks and Bracelets," which depicts the now-grown Israel as an unfulfilled omnisexual gigolo, moving from one affair to the next, haunted by the memory of his vanished twin sister.



Fig. 9. A young Israel (second from right) and his friends.

One of the first stories in comic books to center around a gay protagonist, "Bullnecks and Bracelets" is all the more revolutionary considering that Latino culture has historically been unsympathetic--and often openly hostile--toward

homosexuality. Sociologist Tomas Almaguer claims that many Latin American societies "do not recognize such a construction: there is no cultural equivalent to the modern 'gay man'" (qtd. in Christian 27). Those societies that do acknowledge the existence of homosexuality often treat it as a disease; Puerto Rican political activist Pablo Guzman writes that "from the time you were a kid your folks told you that the worst thing you could be was gay," and that if he had "turned out gay," he would have been "disinherited, beat up, kicked out--and my father was *big*, you know, and fear...kept me from being gay" (qtd. in Oboler 55). Novelist Ilan Stavans notes that "among Hispanics, homosexuals are the target of nigh-well insurmountable animosity" (Stavans 1996: 154).

Where, then, is the homophobia in *Palomar*? Other than a few brief flare-ups--a passing vandal throws a bottle at Israel and Marcos on page 294, and Gato calls people "faggot" throughout the book--most of the characters seem to be quietly accepting of homosexuality, without being ignorant of it. Heraclio refers to young Israel as "fey" (245)--a cognate for "gay" in both sound and meaning--implying awareness, but not condemnation, of Israel's proclivities. After the climax of "Sopa de Gran Pena," in which Manuel and Soledad are revealed to have once been homosexual lovers, a townspeople fumes about

"Soledad and Pipo--Manuel and Pipo--Manuel and Soledad--it's like they were asking to go to hell" (55). The comment is directed at all three points of that particular love triangle, though; the speaker is no less disgusted with Pipo than with either of the men--he is denouncing promiscuity, not homosexuality. And when Gato makes a crack about the homosexual Alphonso, Jesús (who himself engaged in gay sex while in jail) offers a speedy rebuttal: "I knew a lot of queers in prison, Gato. Alphonso and all other queers are as normal as anyone" (486).

The relative dearth of homophobia in *Palomar* might be explained by looking at the factors that contribute to its prevalence in Latin American society. GLAAD<sup>23</sup> representative Monica Taher warns that "assumptions that everyone that was raised in Latin America or has a Latin American background follows Roman Catholic beliefs are false," but acknowledges that "deeply rooted connection to machismo and religious traditions... often cause issues of homophobia unique to the Latino/a community." An overwhelming majority of Latin Americans identify as Catholic,<sup>24</sup> with a zeal unmatched in most other parts of the world--as Mary Sanchez notes, Catholicism is "deeply

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<sup>23</sup> Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

<sup>24</sup> The inverse of that statement may soon be true as well; a much-quoted statistic during the recent papal election holds that Latin America is home to nearly half the world's Catholics (Vara, Harman, Sanchez, among others).

embedded into the psyche of the people; making the church the literal binding on historical chapters of Latin countries." Such devotion to the Church, however, means strict adherence to the Church's teachings, among them a ban on homosexual acts. Machismo is undoubtedly a major factor as well, as homosexuality is a flagrant violation of the hypermasculine norm; Stavans reports that during his childhood, "homosexuals...were considered oversensitive, vulnerable, unproved in the art of daily survival" (Stavans 1996: 155)--a far cry from the "courage, virility, and domination" which characterize the *macho*. So while religion and machismo are not the only sources of Latin American homophobia, they are significant contributors.

As those two elements are "basically just what people think about when they think of" Latino culture, Hernandez consciously avoids writing them into *Palomar* with any frequency. Of the characters who consistently exhibit machismo--Gato, Satch, and Israel--Gato is too much of an ill-tempered, unlikeable schemer to ever be considered a protagonist, Satch is a peripheral character who only makes a few brief appearances after reaching adulthood and becoming a patriarch, and Israel's machismo probably derives from his homosexuality. The gay Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas argued that there are five classes of homosexuals within Latin society, among them the *macho*, "whose

cocksure bravado is intended to fend off questions about his sexual identity" (Stavans 154). Israel never expresses shame over his sexuality, nor indicates that he feels it necessary to hide it from his friends. Still, his actions while in Palomar--sexually harassing young women during his teenage years, and seducing them as an adult, as well as constantly picking fights with other men--seem designed, perhaps subconsciously, to present himself as manly and confident in a probable case of overcompensation.

With Israel, as well as the lothario (and murder victim) Manuel, Gilbert also toys with another stereotype--that of the suave and sex-hungry Latino male. Sherrie McIntosh and others note that "for many decades, the television and film industries perpetuated...Hispanic-Americans"--particularly men--"as being either bandits or Latin Lovers" (40); mainstream comics, which tended to reflected the sentiment of the times as surely as those two industries, followed suit. While *Palomar* is rife with sexual activity, and the men often appear to "make their decisions with their--er, *thingies*" (210), as a female townspeople puts it, only Israel and Manuel appear to truly fit the stereotype--Israel because of the various "conquests" he has scattered around town, and Manuel because of his renowned success with women. A true Don Juan, Manuel is "in and out of



lovers' bedrooms" (6) as early as thirteen--as he is twenty-six during "Sopa de Gran Pena," one can surmise that he has compiled an equally impressive list of conquests during the latter half of his life. Manuel embodies an alternate, less aggressive form of machismo--fittingly enough, his rival for Pipo's affection during that storyline is Gato, a perpetually angry brute whom I named above as one of the few examples of sustained machismo. In this clash of machismo styles, charm appears to win out over strength (Gato hardly merits Pipo's *attention*, let alone affection)--but Hernandez throws a curve at the story's end, when Manuel is revealed to have once been the homosexual lover of his best friend Soledad. This revelation is particularly notable because of its position in the book; concluding the first major narrative in *Palomar*, it primes the reader to anticipate the unconventional treatment of sexual and cultural attitudes that Hernandez will prove to demonstrate throughout the text.

If straightforward machismo is uncommon in Palomar (particularly among the primary characters), religion is downright rare. Characters are never shown attending church, and rarely shown praying; the most religious character in the book, in fact, is the convict and political radical Geraldo Mejia, who turns to Christ while in prison (but still displays a

poster bearing a mushroom cloud and the words "¿Dónde está Dios?"--"Where is God?"--on his wall). Ofelia has a picture of Christ hanging on her wall, but it is seldom referenced or prayed to. Israel mocks Jesús and his fiancée for being Catholic (and therefore unable to get an abortion) on page 132, and Heraclio refers to that same restriction on page 253, noting that "It's a rare occurrence in our part of the country when a woman has an abortion. It's considered a moral crime comparable to killing one's own parents! Or one's own children." Aside from those two examples, though, Catholicism is not shown to have much sway in the town. The Church's lack of influence in Palomar is justified on page 370, when a priest explains that "when Sheriff Chelo and El Alcalde Bernal were elected, they took over Palomar like a couple of gangsters. El Alcalde was a closet atheist, God rest his soul, *firmly* believing in the separation of law and religious affiliation. Then, Chelo..." Pre-Columbian belief systems, in fact, seem to be as abundant in Palomar as is Catholicism; the witch doctor Xiohmara runs an apparently successful practice, and enormous statues and temples are as numerous--and after a while, as inconspicuous--as the small crosses found in several homes.

The relatively low level of overt homophobia, then, can be at least partially attributed to the fact that both religion and

machismo hold relatively little clout in Palomar. Granted, it would be a mistake to view the town as too progressive; the fact that Israel adopts the macho persona in order to compensate for his homosexuality, for example, implies a perception on his part that his sexuality is something that needs to be covered up. Still, the stereotypical gay-bashing Latino is scarce--in no small part because the stereotypes that give rise to gay-bashing are scarce as well.

In addition to combating well-known cultural stereotypes, the progression of the comic book offers evidence of a quieter struggle against a different form of stereotyping--one directed not at the attributes of the characters, but at the style of the author. Amy Benfer notes in a Salon.com article that "When people talk about the Hernandez brothers, they mention how much their work is like that of Gabriel García Márquez in comic book form." She could, if she chose to, phrase her statement more forcefully; every *single* review of or article about *Palomar*, it seems, draws that comparison. Furthermore, Gilbert appears to be one of several of García Márquez's literary descendents; several other Latino-penned texts are dubbed "García Márquez - like" by critics or publishers, occasionally with no basis for the comparison other than the ethnicity of the author. In 1992,

Martha Frase-Blunt, assistant editor of *Hispanic* magazine, protested that

"magic realism" seems to have become a catch-all in the literary world to describe a "Latin American" style of fiction in which real action is tinged with dreamlike surrealism...critics are inclined to use a broad brush to apply the term to any contemporary U.S. Hispanic writer who delves into the emotion side of life." (32)

Gilbert, for his part, publicly claims not to mind the association; in a 2003 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, he commented, "I understand [the comparison] now. It helps people grasp what it's like, and they get the background."

Nonetheless, an examination of *Palomar* reveals that though the comparison may have initially been valid, the book becomes *less* "magical realist" over time--Hernandez, it seems, opts out of the literary stereotype.

I should note, first of all, that Hernandez did not consciously position himself as a magical realist; when he began writing *Palomar*, he had not even read García Márquez. Alan Moore enjoys telling a story about the first time he met Hernandez: "I said, 'so you really like Gabriel García Márquez?' And he said, 'never read it' and I said, 'you haven't read One Hundred Years of Solitude?' and he said, 'no' and then later he

read it, and was completely knocked out by the similarities" (*The Idler* interview). Hernandez corroborates Moore's tale, admitting to *Publishers Weekly*, "I hadn't read [García Márquez's] work until I had been doing Heartbreak Soup for years, and I was surprised." The two works do, in fact, share some similarities, with each following the inhabitants of a small, fictional Latin American town and occasionally exhibiting what Luis Leal calls "the mysterious within empirical reality" (qtd. in Christian 123). The ghost of Pintor, who appears sitting on a bench to a select few inhabitants of Palomar, is reminiscent of the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, who haunts the home of José Arcadio Buendía in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The mysterious sickness the *bruja* inflicts upon Palomar during the "Duck Feet" storyline resembles the amnesiac insomnia that sweeps through Macondo. Also, even if Hernandez had not initially read García Márquez, he had clearly rectified that by 1985's "Love Bites" storyline, when Heraclio and a coworker debate *One Hundred Years of Solitude's* literary merit. At this point, Hernandez seems to be paying homage to his predecessor-- interestingly enough, though, he includes fewer "magical realist" moments in *Palomar* from this point on. Prior to "Love Bites," the book features the disappearance of Israel's sister during an eclipse in "Chelo's Burden," ghosts in "Sopa de Gran

Pena," a mysterious force pushing Pipo off a statue in "A Little Story," and strange, precognitive voices in "An American in Palomar." The sickness in "Duck Feet" comes after the García Márquez reference, and a ghost briefly resurfaces after Tonantzín's death, but overall, *Palomar* includes more "magical realism" in the three years before "Love Bites" than in the eleven subsequent years.

It seems plausible, then, that after Hernandez read García Márquez and noticed the similarities to his own work, he attempted to take his writing in an alternate direction--not simply to avoid charges of cannibalizing another author's style, but to avoid falling into a stereotype which was already being applied to several Latino writers. Karen Christian notes that

As early as 1970, the Boom novels were already being viewed as a literary corpus...In spite of the diversity of contemporary Latin American literature, Boom fiction continues to be viewed as the quintessential Latin American writing. [John S.] Brushwood claims that García Márquez's narrative style, along with Borges's stories, have become the prevailing stereotypes of Latin American fiction. (124) <sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Christian uses the term "Boom writers" to describe the likes of García Márquez, Jorge Luís Borges, and Julio Cortazar--Latin American novelists who achieved international prominence in the 1960s and 70s with works incorporating, among other elements, magical realism.

Latin American magical realism may not be as ubiquitous a stereotype as machismo or religion, but that only amplifies the likelihood of an author unwittingly living up to it. If Hernandez found out, after two or three years, that his work resonated with Gabriel García Márquez, it makes sense for him to have acknowledged that connection, as he did in "Love Bites." If in his mind that connection situated his work in the realm of "cliché," though, he may well have opted to use magical realism sparingly in the future, avoiding that stereotype as skillfully as he did the others.

The comparison to García Márquez does present an interesting contrast between Hernandez and his literary antecedent: García Márquez's major works are set in his home country—or at least his home continent—while Palomar lies somewhere south of Hernandez's native United States. The town's exact location is undefined; nearby cities (Felix, San Fideo) are fictional as well, and no identifying currency is ever mentioned. For their part, critics seem unable to reach a consensus; Loren Kruger and José David Saldívar refer to Palomar as Central American, while Carter Scholz (who write the introduction to the first bound *Love and Rockets* collection) and an interviewer for *The Pulse* label it Mexican. With no reference points, either claim is specious; Palomar could be

Central American, Mexican, or even South American. The only thing we can be sure of is that the town lies south of the US border, and therefore south of the author's home country. This fact alone is significant, though; if Hernandez's masculinity renders him less than qualified to write from a female perspective, how can we reconcile his status as an American with the fact that virtually all of *Palomar* is written from the perspectives of non-Americans?

For one thing, Latinos in America frequently form or join subcultures that resist full American assimilation; often just one or two generations removed from their ancestral countries, they may create insular communities in which they can speak Spanish frequently (and in some cases, exclusively) and observe their traditional holidays and customs. This is particularly common in areas with large Latino populations, such as the Southwest and southern California (Hernandez's hometown of Oxnard lies about sixty miles west of Los Angeles). Such communities straddle the past and the present, unwilling to abandon their traditional culture, yet unable to resist a gradual Americanization. In many ways, *Palomar* is the Latin American equivalent of these communities; it contains elements of the ancient and modern worlds without fully belonging to either. Pre-Columbian statues and temples dot the landscape



around the town, but they are only curiosities; not places of worship. The presence of indigenous people in the surrounding areas (such as the island village Heraclio visits for detoxification on page 250) positions Palomar as relatively contemporary--when Heraclio and Israel interact with those people, in fact, Israel emphasizes his own--and by extension his community's--modernity by dismissing the natives as "dumb savages" and mocking their "damn fool gibberish" (see Fig. 10). Yet by the standards of the surrounding metropolitan areas, the town is positively backwater; Heraclio's coworker Gloria comments admiringly on his "exotic neighborhood" (231), and the American photojournalist Howard Miller marvels that "the last world news these folks got wind of was the Dionne quintuplets"<sup>26</sup> (192).

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<sup>26</sup> The Dionne quintuplets were born in Ontario in 1934.



Fig. 10. Israel and Heraclio's encounter with a group of indigenous people.

Palomar doesn't even have a telephone until Chelo and Luba obtain one after the events of "Human Diastrophism," and at the series' end, when several of the town's residents have moved either to a larger city or the United States, the witch doctor Xiohmara is still the local medical authority.

Palomar, then, is a transitional community, retaining elements of its old culture but adopting aspects of a newer civilization. In that respect, the town is a microcosm of many Latino communities in the United States, where residents wear Nikes to one another's *quinceaneras* and visit Disneyland a week after celebrating Cinco de Mayo. Hernandez chooses not to incorporate Latino stereotypes into *Palomar* because Palomar, like the larger Latino community, cannot be defined by those stereotypes. It is more than just machismo and religion; it is a dynamic entity, moving inexorably towards modernization but maintaining a sense of history. One particular passage is particularly illuminating: after the events of "Human Diastrophism," when the young artist Humberto fails to immediately reveal the identity of the serial killer because he wants to disclose it in his art, he is forbidden by Chelo from ever drawing or painting again. Humberto channels his artistic energy into a series of life-sized sculptures of Palomar's residents, created without Chelo's knowledge, weighted down, and

sunk to the bottom of a nearby stream. He explains, "One day this stream will be gone and the statues will be exposed...reaching ever upward toward God--the sun--like eternal flowers and I will be forgiven my sins..." (517). The sculptures that will only be revealed years later are contemporary equivalents of the ancient statues around the town. Just as those statues serve as reminders of the people who occupied that space long before, the sculptures will eventually be artifacts for future generations; they are reminders of the town's cultural past and harbingers of an inevitable future. The community presented in *Palomar* is conflicted and secluded, but ultimately progressive--and is thus a subtly accurate representation of contemporary Latino-American culture.

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## Appendix A: List of Characters

Luba: *Bañadora* ("she who bathes others") and eventual mayor of Palomar. The novel begins with her appearance in the town, and ends when she leaves. Cousin of Ofelia. Mother of Maricela, Guadalupe, Doralis, Casimira, Socorro, Joselito, and Concepcion. Ex-girlfriend of Archie. Wife of Khamo.

Heraclio: Mild-mannered accordion teacher whose point of view is frequently privileged. Husband of Carmen. Father of Guadalupe (from an adolescent tryst with an adult Luba). Childhood friend of Satch, Israel, Jesús, and Vicente.

Israel: Twin brother of Aurora, who disappeared during an eclipse when they were both children. Evolves from fey adolescent to muscular bisexual gigolo to successful businessman. Childhood friend of Heraclio, Satch, Jesús, and Vicente.

Jesús: Childhood friend of Heraclio, Satch, Jesús, and Vicente. During a fight with his wife Laura, Jesús nearly injures their baby; Laura takes the child and leaves him and Jesús is sent to prison. Former lover of Tonantzín. Former lover of Marcos.

Pipo: One-third (with Manuel and Soledad) of the love triangle in "Sopa de Gran Pena." Moves to America and founds a successful line of clothing and a television show. Sister of Carmen and Agustín. Mother of Sergio (with Manuel). Ex-wife of Gato. Lover (briefly) of Khamo.

Manuel: One-third (with Pipo and Soledad) of the love triangle in "Sopa de Gran Pena." A vivacious young Casanova, Manuel engages in flings with both Pipo and Luba before being shot dead by Soledad, his best friend and former lover.

Soledad: One-third (with Pipo and Manuel) of the love triangle in "Sopa de Gran Pena." A quiet young man who had a brief affair with Pipo when she was thirteen. Best friend and former lover of Manuel. Fatally shoots Manuel upon discovering that his two ex-lovers are now together.

Chelo: The physically imposing sheriff and matriarch of Palomar. Lover of Miguel.

Tonantzín: Initially the town vamp, Tonantzín becomes increasingly political-minded as the series progresses, ultimately dying from self-immolation at a protest. Sister of Diana. Best friend of Carmen. Former lover of Jesús. Pen pal of Geraldo Mejia.

Carmen: Wife of Heraclio. Brother of Pipo and Augustín. Best friend of Tonantzín.

Diana: Sister of Tonantzín. Extremely athletic, Diana's passion changes from running to bodybuilding over time.

Khamo: Husband of Luba, father of Doralis, Casimira, Joselito, and Concepcion. Lover (briefly) of Pipo. Once an extremely attractive man, Khamo is horribly scarred when he attempts to save Tonantzín from immolation. Following this incident, he marries Luba and fathers Joselito and Concepcion.

Gato: Ex-husband of Pipo. Eventual husband of Guadalupe, and father, with her, of Jaime. Overridingly bad-tempered and sexist for the duration of the book.

Guadalupe: Daughter of Luba and Heraclio. Mother of Jaime. Wife of Gato.

Maricela: Daughter of Luba and Antonino, a soldier who appears only briefly in *Palomar*. Luba's eldest, she bears the brunt of her mother's frustration, which prompts her to run away to America with her lover Riri and never return to Palomar.

Doralis: Permanently chipper daughter of Luba and Khamo. Ex-wife of Chester. Backup dancer with a very loyal fanbase on Pipo's American television show.

Casimira: Daughter of Luba and Khamo. As a child, her arm is accidentally shot off by Chelo, prompting her to carry around a worn prosthetic.

Socorro: Daughter of Luba and Tomaso Marin.

Humberto: Friend of Augustín. A skilled young artist, Humberto is forbidden by Chelo to draw anything after he fails to reveal the identity of the serial killer during "Human Diastrophism." He secretly channels his artistic energy into life-sized sculptures of the inhabitants of Palomar, which he and Augustín weight down and drop into the river.

Tomaso Marin: The serial killer who clandestinely terrorizes Palomar in "Human Diastrophism." Unknowing father of Socorro after a tryst with Luba.

Marcos: Cross-dressing lover of Jesus while in prison. Later, bears an undisclosed relationship to Israel--lover? Friend? Business partner? It's never quite clear.

Sergio: Son of Pipo and Manuel. Professional soccer player.

Ofelia: The older cousin of Luba, Ofelia is as involved in the children's upbringing as their mother.

Vicente: Childhood friend of Heraclio, Israel, Satch, and Jesus. Disfigured on one side of his face and body from birth.

Satch: Childhood friend of Heraclio, Israel, Satch, and Jesus. Moves to the city, gets married, and has many, many children, virtually none of whom are ever seen by the reader. During his brief appearances in *Palomar* as an adult, Satch is often shown shouting at his wife or daughter.

Augustín: Brother of Carmen and Pipo. Friend of Humberto.

Joselito: Son of Luba and Khamo.

Concepcion: Daughter of Luba and Khamo.

Archie: Mortician, ex-boyfriend of Luba. Not a resident of Palomar.

Tipin Tipin: Permanently lovelorn resident of Palomar.

Miguel: Once a prisoner in Palomar's jail, Miguel returns to the town during "Human Diastrophism" after falling for Chelo.

Borro: Aggressive, piggish former sheriff of Palomar.

Geraldo Mejia: Politically-minded criminal who returns to Palomar after Chelo kills his murderous cousin Roberto. After being sent to jail, he strikes up a correspondence with Tonantzin, inspiring her ultimately fatal radicalism, and then becomes deeply immersed in Christianity.

Chango: Not a resident of Palomar. Lover of Ofelia during "Human Diastrophism," when construction work brings him to town.

Bruno: Young boy whose eye is plucked out by a mysterious trained crow, prompting Casimira to track the bird down to exact revenge and retrieve the eye.

El Alcalde Bernal: The seldom-seen sheriff of Palomar. Killed by Tomaso Marin during "Human Diastrophism," providing Luba the opportunity to assume his post.

Zomba: *Femme fatale* who makes a brief appearance in the book.

Howard Miller: American photojournalist who publishes a book of photographs from his visit to Palomar.

Xiohmara: The town witch doctor.

Pintor: A dead young man whose ghost occasionally appears, sitting on a bench, to his old friends--and, mysteriously, to Heraclio.

Chester: Timid ex-husband of Doralis, whose inability to govern his wife eventually leads first to a domestic brawl that briefly lands him in jail, and eventually prompts him to leave altogether.

The *Bruja*: Spanish for "witch," the *bruja*, who stops in Palomar to have her feet attended to, seemingly afflicts the town with a mysterious illness after a treasured possession goes missing.

Riri: Former lover of Maricela.

Gloria: Heraclio's coworker, who engages him in a debate over the literary merit of Gabriel García Márquez.

Jaime: Young son of Guadalupe and Gato.

Toco: Younger brother of Jesus. Stricken with a coughing sickness, he dies during "Sopa de Gran Pena."