THE COMICS GRID
Journal of comics scholarship

Discursive (Re)Contruction of Mexican American Identity in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*

RESEARCH

ANNA MARTA MARINI

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

Open Library of Humanities

Part of the Ubiquity Partner Network

ABSTRACT

Written and illustrated entirely by artist Jason Gonzalez, *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* (2011–2019; collected edition 2021) is a 6-issue comic book series revolving around the resurgence of its eponymous protagonist, a *luchador* previously stripped of his mask. La Mano struggles to make his comeback abiding by his own ethos and focusing on reclaiming the place usurped by his antagonists, facing choices and shadows from the past that will make him self-doubt and falter. Playing with symbolism, careful detailing, and defined artistic choices, the Chicano author delves into his own passion for both lucha libre and Silver Age comics; he also tackles matters related with the quest for identity, as well as the imposed subject positions intrinsic to the belonging to a minority group in the United States. Building a fantastic world in which the clash between *técnicos* and *rudos* embodies the conflicts peculiar to modern life, Jason Gonzalez's vision is markedly personal and hybrid, channeling a powerful Mexican American voice that goes beyond Chicanx paradigms. From a critical discourse analysis standpoint, the article proposes a study of the power relations depicted by Gonzalez, interpreting the comic as an allegory for the struggles of the subordinate subject, both in the Mexican and the Mexican American context.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Anna Marta Marini
Instituto Franklin–UAH, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain
annamarta.marini@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:
CDA; Chicanx comics; cultural heritage; Lucha libre; wrestling

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Marini, A M 2021 Discursive (Re)Contruction of Mexican American Identity in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 11(1): 1, pp. 1–14. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.211*

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

Jason Gonzalez—better known artistically as J. Gonzo—is a Chicano artist, illustrator, graphic designer, as well as creative director and comic book artist. His independent comic work is marked by a distinctive visual style and oriented toward narratives connected to the definition of Mexican American identity. In particular, Gonzalez has channeled his own personal identity struggles and explorations through his 6-issue mini-series *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* (2011–2019; collected edition 2021). In recent years, the scholarship on Latinx comics has been growing in diversity and scope, including studies on Latinx perspectives on national identity (see among many, Fernández L'Hoeste and Poblete 2009) and the representation of Latinx communities (Fernández L'Hoeste 2017), as well as on the representation of Latinx female characters in comics (Tullis 2014; García 2018).

Extended attention has been given to the groundbreaking work of Los Bros. Hernandez from different perspectives (Merino 2009; García 2017; Tullis 2018) and, more in general, to the devices and strategies characterizing Latinx comic book creation (Aldama 2009; Aldama and Gonzalez 2016). Nonetheless, the analysis of the Latinx creative expressions from a critical discourse analysis perspective is still lacking, despite the strict connection between the creators' focus on identity and intrinsic reflections on their sociocultural and political position in the US society. Analyzing *La Mano del Destino*'s collected edition—composed of 6 parts and a section of extra content—it is possible to trace Gonzalez's reflection on the struggle between identity and destiny, as well as his reinterpretation of the Mexican lucha libre's fundamental elements. Furthermore, the role of context is fundamental for the understanding of the functions and configurations of discourse within a given social system (among many, see van Dijk 2008). Thus, a basic understanding of the history, ethos, and imaginary of this sports entertainment is necessary to appreciate the references present in the comic book and to analyze the discourse underlying its luchaverse. Critical discourse analysis will be applied to the representation of lucha and the individual power struggle protagonized by La Mano, considering the luchaverse as a structured social system, respecting the kayfabe—a suspension of disbelief quintessential to Mexican lucha—the author himself respects. In *La Mano del Destino*, the reality is constituted by a heterotopic construction peculiar to *cine de luchadores* films, in which lucha is represented as a component of everyday reality. Analyzing the power relations within the luchaverse, the protagonist's subject role and its connections with the real-life social relations the lucha enacts will be highlighted. From such a study, it will emerge how La Mano's struggles—characterized by the tortuous, exacting rise to more desirable positions and subsequent fall imposed by superordinate powers—represent a cogent allegory for the existing subordination of minority heritage to US dominant culture, as well as the social dynamics and configurations rooted in the history of Mexican society.

LA LUCHA AND THE CONNECTION WITH MEXICAN HERITAGE

Within the diverse expressions of Mexican American identity and heritage, most of the related cultural production has been characterized by the quest for and rediscovery of themes and tropes connected with a perceived Mexican authenticity. As Villoro has pointed out (2011), the (re)construction of Mexicanness north of the border is often the blend of different, even opposite, processes. On the one hand, the impulse toward globalization and cosmopolitism facilitates the diffusion of selected elements of the Mexican culture, which has been quintessentially present in the Southwest since the US annexation of Mexican territories in 1848. Such selection and oversimplification often lead to commodification, as well as to cultural relativism and—in the worst case—mock Mexican Spanish and culture. On the other hand, the mechanisms related with cultural resistance to assimilation and the definition of a Mexican American identity have brought forth a variety of reinterpretations of Mexican tropes, fostered by a search for elements to identify with and ways to dissociate from imposed identity paradigms. The quest intertwines with a wishful return to assumed cultural roots and imaginaries, necessary to build an inevitably hybrid otherness to face the US national monoglossic dominant culture. This often entails a tension toward pre-Hispanic Mexican traditions, myths, and iconographies (among many, see Rodríguez 1998: 191–222), albeit mediated by the transformations they have gone through since the establishment of the Spanish colony. Nevertheless, the dominant Mexican national identity constructed in post-revolutionary times—as a means to unify a vast, diverse, and restless country under a regime marked by a renovated, apparently inclusive form of nationalism—has been fueled by new popular culture imaginaries; among them, it is worth

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

mentioning the now-archetypic mariachi visual configuration, the diegetic paradigms of the *Época de Oro* cinema (1936–59), and the classic Mexican lucha libre canons. The quest for identity roots could be thus extended to a few, more contemporary themes, whose alleged authenticity was configured explicitly for popular culture and mass audience. In the case of lucha libre, the sport itself has led to a prolific and varied production of movies, photo novels, and comics since the late 40s and on both sides of the border.

Based on the practice of Greco-Roman wrestling imported in North America by European migrants, in the second half of the 19th century a Mexican version of it began to develop as spectator sport and, later on, it was occasionally adapted and performed by theater companies in the borderlands. Inspired by wrestling shows he attended there, entrepreneur Salvador Lutteroth saw the potential of such an entertainment; in 1933, he established the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre—today known as the Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre—becoming the first pro wrestling promoter in Mexico (Monroy Olvera and Reducindo Saldivar 2017). Characterized by spectacular flying moves and well-rounded performers, lucha libre quickly consolidated as one of the most popular sports entertainment industries in the country, appealing to a heterogeneous mass audience and reaching its peak in versatility and popularity in the 60s. The use of masks was introduced in the beginning as a way to give wrestlers a new identity, especially when they were already known to the public or previously defeated; nonetheless, it became distinctive of Mexican wrestling in the 50s with the emergence of the most successful luchadores—such as El Santo, Blue Demon, Rayo de Jalisco—who built defined characters around the mask itself and its intrinsic mysterious allure.

One of the most legendary lucha protagonists—as well as Gonzalez's main source of inspiration (Gonzalez 2020)—is El Santo (Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta, 1917–84), a popular role model both in and out of the ring. El Santo's fruitful career spanned across media and his pervasive popularity fostered the production of over fifty motion pictures between 1958 and 1982. His filmic performances contributed to the construction of his heroic character (Fernández Reyes, 2004; Hegarty 2013), as he often engaged in fights only to protect innocent people and to fulfill his role as well-meaning benefactor. In such way, El Santo managed to insert himself in fictional social contexts which provided a realistic base to his fantastic adventures, usually verging on campy horror and sci-fi subgenres (Priego 2012). Aside from movies protagonized by famous luchadores, the apogee of lucha libre was characterized by a pervasiveness of the theme and its tropes in film production. Any plot which could benefit from the presence of some kind of hero usually intertwined with wrestling themes, fostering the development of a variety of subgenres falling under the umbrella of the *cine de luchadores* transversal macrogenre.

It is necessary to stress that in Mexican lucha libre kayfabe (see Fontaine 2017)—the suspension of disbelief mechanism, pivotal to the construction of professional wrestling narratives—is fundamental and is the most relevant feature of *cine de luchadores*. Staged events are presented to the audience as genuine and not predetermined, creating a fictional reality fueled by the audience's interaction during matches. The wrestler should not break character at any moment of the show and maintain attitudes coherent with its construction. The mask is a central element to maintain kayfabe, as luchadores appear in public invariably in character for their whole life, regardless of the context. Once the hero is defined and established, the unmasked identity is obliterated in the eyes of the audience and it is exclusively their character performing across different media and environments. The "mask" is embodied by the consolidated character constructed by the wrestler and the hiding of their legal identity; however, a majority of luchadores chooses to create their character by also wearing an actual mask, concealing their facial features since their first appearance. The vast and heterogeneous fandom feeding the legend of El Santo—since his prime and up to the present—engages in believing that the hero construction corresponded to the man's own ethos; his legal name and facial features—of which he gave a hint on TV toward the end of his life—are details irrelevant to the admiration and perpetuation of his fame.

The opposition between good-natured *técnicos* and their malicious antagonists *rudos* is pivotal to the constructions supporting the development of lucha diegetic dynamics; it helps build necessary feuds, legitimize victories or give rise to indignation for unmerited triumphs, strengthening each luchador's purported moral values or lack thereof. Such dynamics structure as well the luchaverse system, as the established characters and the power relations among them depend on the category they belong to. The victory of a charismatic *rudo*—through traps and tricks—can be acclaimed by the public, hailing outstanding wrestling performances, power,

and even malice which would be considered unethical to support in real life. *Rudos* can bear admirable features, turning into antiheroes, reversing imposed, morally correct conventions, inducing complicity and eliciting sympathy in the spectator. The public's moral judgement is bound to evoke emotion (Carroll 2010), just as the perception of power and fascination are bound to the spectacular, changing dynamics intrinsic to lucha libre. Notwithstanding *rudo* success, the wrestlers who have gained major fame throughout their career are usually *técnicos*. It is worth noting that the category is not immutable, as a luchador can switch category as a turning point in their career—such as El Santo did after a start as *rudo*.

LA MANO DEL DESTINO: DESTINY VS IDENTITY

In 2011, the first issue of the 6-part mini-series was released, introducing La Mano del Destino as a defeated wrestler, a luchador who lost his mask in a match prior to the book's main storyline. Gonzalez's comic reprises the apogee of Mexican lucha libre, drawing heavily on its fundamental elements, as well as stylizations which marked that specific, flourishing moment in its history. The artist purposely blends the mid-century lucha libre comic book—an eclectic blend of photo novel and comic, reprising some of the luchadores' most exciting fights—and US Silver Age-inspired visual stylizations, reinterpreting both traditions and delivering a unique product. The verbal element is marked by occasional code-switching between Spanish and English and Gonzalez plays with punctuation as well, using inverted question and exclamation marks despite the predominant use of English. Reprised in an equally playful manner, Mexican iconography is disseminated throughout the book; from *papel picado* patterns (Gonzalez 2021: 6) to a masked virgin of Guadalupe (20) and a masked officiating priest (132). Mixed iconographies give *La Mano del Destino* a distinctive character, transcending purity in favor of the expression of hybrid transnational identity. The artist also provides some accurate views of Mexico City relocating them within the luchaverse, either with lucha-related banners or masking renowned statues (51).

Unfolding the flashback sequences scattered throughout the comic book, it is possible to reconstruct a concise biography of the protagonist, whose familiar nickname is Petey. After a series of events which will be detailed further on in the analysis, the young man built a successful career in lucha libre due to his talent, under the stage name of Ernesto el General; nonetheless, he was defeated and unmasked for refusing to comply with a match arrangement to abide by his integrity. In consequent desperation, Petey—committed to his choice and yet shocked by the industry turning against him—accepts a deal with a mysterious promoter, blinded by the wish to reclaim his place in the luchaverse he lives in. Supported by the promoter he comes back with a new wrestling identity, La Mano del Destino [the hand of destiny]. Reversing his destiny seems to be, indeed, La Mano's one and only aim, and to do so he must face a long series of *rudos* under the command of his archenemy Jefe. Evidently, the luchador's chosen name is directly connected with the meaning of his new mask design: the hand with the eye in its palm is a "cross-cultural representation of enlightenment" (Gonzalez 2020) and thus provides a composite sign of enlightened action. Eventually, the protagonist discovers the true identity of the promoter—a brother he thought long-dead—as well as the occult dynamics behind the development of his new career.

Gonzalez's comic starts off in Tulancingo, Hidalgo, Mexico, El Santo's hometown, in a reference presupposing the readers' lucha libre knowledge. In the very first page most of *La Mano del Destino*'s fundamental stylistic elements are introduced. According to his purposeful choice to render homage to comics contemporary to the lucha libre apogee (Gonzalez 2021), Gonzalez exploits what could be described—borrowing Cohn's words (2013: chapter 7)—a Kirbyan style of American comic visual language. As Cohn underlined, the visual language employed in many US mainstream comics—and chiefly superhero narratives—has been historically influenced by the work of artist Jack Kirby, in particular in the depiction of bodies in action. In fact, in the extra material added to the collected edition, Gonzalez openly identifies the art of Jack Kirby as a main source of inspiration to recreate a Silver Age comic book feel and the dynamic quality of lucha action (2021: 177, 186). Such a choice evidently contributes to the underlying notion that Mexican American minority identity is both Mexican and American at the same time; in this case, the artist merges two mainstream popular culture traditions respectively, constructing a Mexican luchaverse by means of a markedly American style of visual language.

Among the many devices Gonzalez recurs to, the employment of recognizable hand schemas for emphasis and specific connotation is worth highlighting; for example, in ***Figure 1*** three

The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship
DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

schemas very common in superhero comics can be observed. In the central breakout panel, a wrestler tries to escape his fate reaching toward the reader, whereas the focus on hand gestures in the following panels serves as a concise representation of the consequent action. A second breakout panel seems to bring the fight to a close when the opponent lowers—as the motion lines tell—his overpowering fist, only to be stopped in a clash of hands by an off-panel character—La Mano himself. As the reader will realize further on, fuchsia is one of the main colors in the protagonist's scheme, accompanied by chartreuse and cerulean. Gonzalez selected a limited palette for his hero, giving him a "chromatic signature within the story" (Gonzalez 2021: 192), while the remaining colors composing the equally reduced overall palette are warm, natural hues he combined to create contextual elements; the chosen hues and their complementarity build impactful visuals throughout the book. Furthermore, Gonzalez maximizes his limited color range by adding textured backgrounds and Ben-Day patterns, avoiding gradients and using teal to provide harmonious color shadows. The physicality of the luchadores' bodies is central, rendering lucha sequences with motion and burst lines, motion blurs, sound effects, emanata conveying shock and surprise during the fight. The construction of these sequences was inspired by Silver Age stylizations and yet, at the same time, is imbued with the essence itself of the dramatization distinctive of lucha libre. In fact, the exploitation of such devices to describe the action allows the artist to fill the gap between the comic page and the engaging audiovisual experience intrinsic to actually watching a match. In reality, the luchadores' physical performance comprises both the actual wrestling moves and the

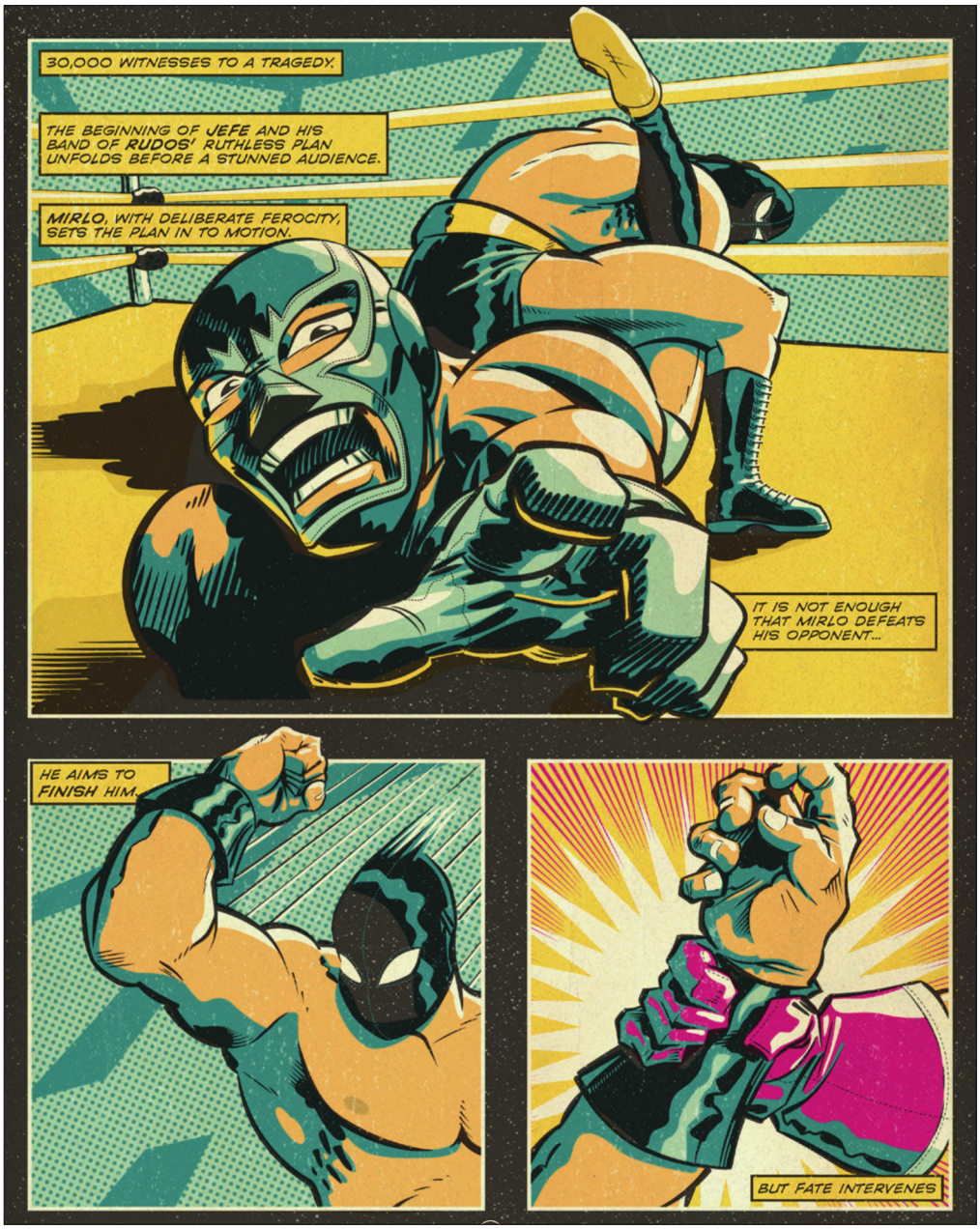

Figure 1 Hand schemas in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 1. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

pantomime supporting the act, thus facilitating the spectator's interpretation of the match narrative (Barthes 1957: 10). Conversely, in the comic the clues useful to interpretation are necessarily conveyed by means of recognizable schemas of representation.

The mediated fictionality of lucha libre—albeit maintained within the kayfabe construction of the luchaverse—is rendered by a neatly different drawing style infused with UPA (United Productions of America) mannerism.

As shown in ***Figure 2***, Gonzalez creates a fictional televised recap of La Mano's resurgence using UPA inspired stylization for the TV images (Gonzalez 2021: 103–107). The animation produced by the United Productions of America studio in the 50s marked a turning point in the evolution of the audiovisual language of animation (Bottini, 2018; Bashara 2019), bringing forth innovative aesthetics and symbolic stylization. Aside from a fitting mid-century modernist vibe, the stylization allows Gonzalez to skip through his protagonist's wrestling successes and, at the same time, remind the reader that lucha has had a strong relationship with television as

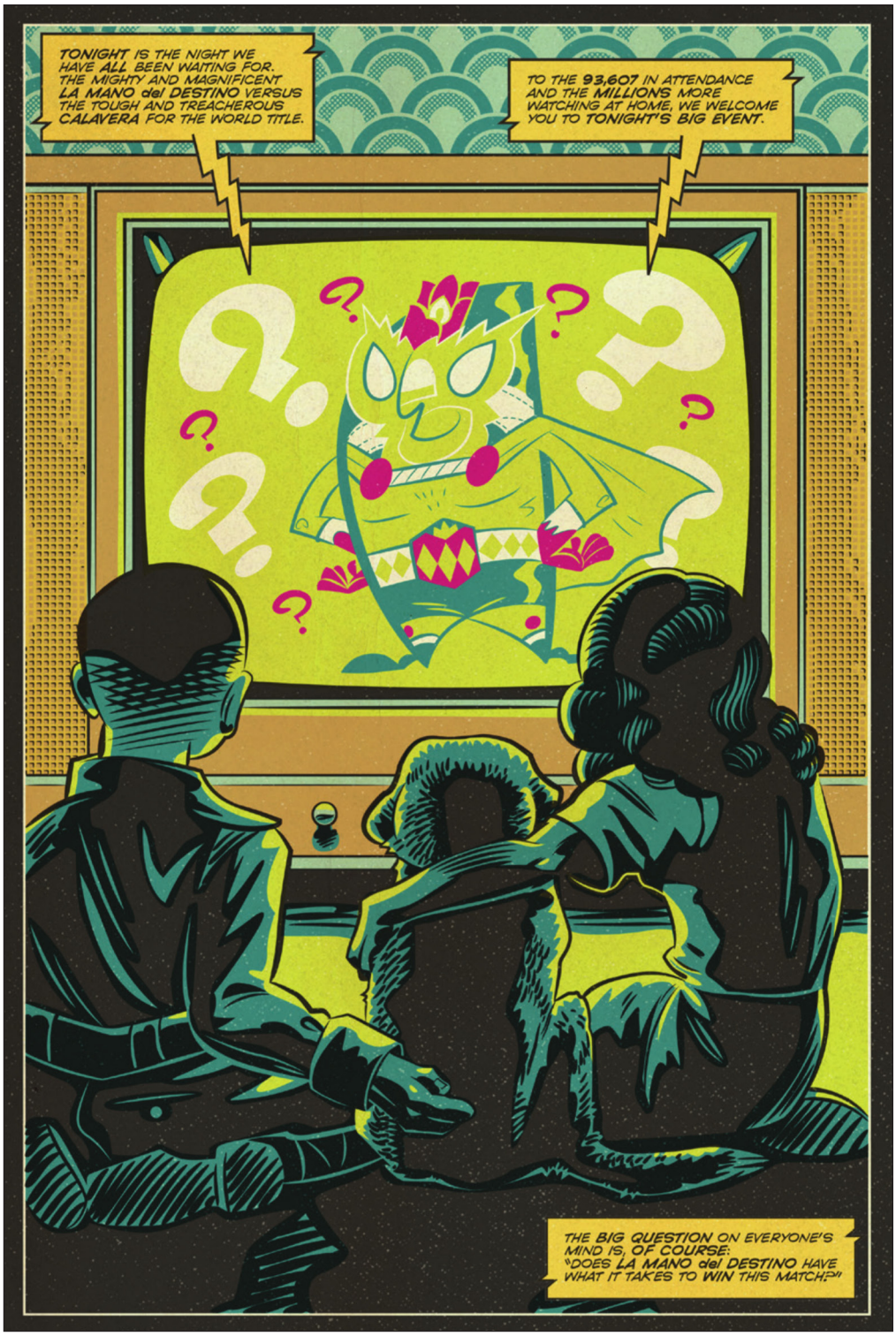

Figure 2 UPA stylization in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 106. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

well. Like many others growing up in a Mexican American environment (see Greene 2005), as a child the artist himself watched classic lucha libre films thanks to Los Angeles independent stations broadcasting Mexican content (Gonzalez 2020). Once again, the comic book merges the Mexican lucha tradition with an inherently American visual style transposing the author's own identity experience, in which heterogeneous elements synergistically mix shaping a hybrid heritage—and consequently a hybrid visual representation.

As far as the direct connections with the *cine de luchadores* quintessential features, first and foremost Gonzalez reprises the mask-wearing habit of the most renowned luchadores. Once La Mano's wrestling career starts, the reader can only catch glimpses of the wrestler's face in two occasions: when his first mask is pulled off and in one of the rare moments of intimacy shown in the comic (Gonzalez 2021: 7, 11).

The panels in ***Figure 3*** are an interesting addition, as the sequence somehow bares the man behind the mask for a moment and, at the same time, provides a touch of credibility within the kayfabe. Clearly, La Mano needs to take his mask off to shower, yet it is the first thing he—off-panel—puts on himself even before reaching for the towel.

Figure 3 The only moment in which the protagonist is shown without wearing his mask in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 11. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

La Mano's resurgence and relation with destiny are also inextricably related to an underlying supernatural dimension. Rather than altering the traditional lucha libre system of representation, the supernatural twist actually strengthens the configuration of a dimension in which realistic credibility is secondary to excitement and amazement. After all, in most of El Santo's films the heroic luchador deals with supernatural contexts and classic horror archetypes (Cotter 2005). Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that in his reinterpretation of the *cine de luchadores*'s luchaverse, Gonzalez mostly neglects the intrinsic humor of the genre. In classic lucha movies, underlying humor served as a tool configuring the kayfabe, as it is often both self-reflexive and defusing the social conflicts characterizing Mexican society (see Monsiváis 1996; Hegarty 2013; Trapanese 2017). Being a rather popular form of entertainment, lucha libre in all its iterations could be seen as an enjoyable escape valve for the social tension intrinsic to the post-revolutionary Mexican state. The defeated monsters represented the wishful, metaphorical possibility to overcome social struggles, at least in the fictional reality of the luchaverse. In *La Mano del Destino*, this intrinsic humorous element is almost absent; the focus of the protagonist's ideological struggle lies in his own overcoming and the maintenance of an absolute kayfabe, obliterating hints to any reality external to the one represented.

THE DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE OF A MEXICAN AMERICAN LUCHADOR

The events that led the protagonist to become a wrestler are told in part 2 as a long flashback (Gonzalez 2021: 27–46) in which La Mano recounts his past, starting in the 40s when he and his brother Ramón "Monchi" were little boys. Due to their mother's premature death, they were reared by their father until his own premature death. Bound to live with the local powerful landowner called the General, the brothers soon discovered the multifaceted reality of servitude characterizing Mexican society, notwithstanding the advent of the post-revolutionary government. The brothers' destinies turned out to be different: the protagonist Petey was employed as a servant in the General's manor, whereas Monchi would work in the fields, enduring a far more rustic life.

In the final part of the comic book, the reader discovers that the reason behind such differential treatment might lie in the fact that Petey is allegedly the General's illegitimate son, which opens yet another parenthesis on the power relations existing between the working class and the elite. As a domestic worker for the landowner, the boys' mother might have been forced to have sexual relations with her employer, which made her the object of harsh judgement in her community (Gonzalez 2021: 134) and delegitimated even further the boys' social position. During a farmers' attempted uprising against the landowner, Petey stood by the latter directly confronting—and wounding—his own brother, who was consequently detained. The two became estranged and Petey kept on living a more privileged life until, a few years later, he received notice of his brother's alleged death. Impacted by the news, he decided to take up Monchi's work position, seemingly in an attempt to make amend for the hardship his late brother endured upon his detention. Petey's stint at the quarry, though, was only temporary: he soon moved back to his hometown and caught the opportunity to become a wrestler, under the stage name of Ernesto el General. The sequence ends with Ernesto el General's rise to fame, reconnecting the narrative with the opening of the book, in which the reader learned that La Mano del Destino is the new mask of a previously defeated luchador.

Ideologies can be defined as significations of reality built into the dimensions of discursive practices and contributing to "the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination" (Fairclough 1992: 87). The frame of this flashback sequence is ideological, as it corresponds to a defined construct related with social struggle and a consequent revindication of power, which the protagonist realizes through his first career in lucha libre and then, again, through his resurgence and consequent second career.

In ***Figure 4*** it is possible to trace the protagonist's role in the clash. The point of view suggested to the reader is Petey's, who dominates the situation and retains power exclusively thanks to the weapon he points and the side he chooses to stand up for. His character stands in the light,

Figure 4 The confrontation during the insurgence in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 38. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

whereas the insurgents are characterized by projecting stark black shadows. Petey will realize too late that the General would retaliate unjustly, coming across as naïve and blinded by the apparent privilege he's been allowed. Furthermore, he will ambiguously choose the General's name for his first lucha identity as if the word itself could infuse him with power. Throughout the series, La Mano embodies a subordinate subject also within his familiar environment. His resurgence has been facilitated by an anonymous promoter who eventually reveals himself as his long-lost brother, strategically supporting La Mano's comeback to exert power upon him as the General did when Monchi tried to lead the peons' insurrection.

Gonzalez sets his hero's values clear from the start, yet La Mano is characterized by a distinct degree of discursive ambivalence. Following the story of his youth, the reader cannot help feeling for his brother's fate, enslaved by an unequal and oppressive social system tyrannically ruled by a local *hacendado*. As a servant working in the manor, Petey himself is part of the subordinate strata but in much better life conditions than his brother's; thus, his acquired loyalty to the General might come across as biased and influenced by the relative privilege he is granted. Such privilege leads Petey to fail his own brother, making his sense of justice not always shareable by the reader. Likewise, Monchi's character seems to be built to elicit mixed feelings despite his initial appearance as a bully; aside from coping with harsher life conditions, in the moment of confrontation he tries to make his brother see reason, only to be shot at. Petey's compliant attitude represents a problematic issue in the analysis of Mexican structural violence, which is often perpetuated by repressed social strata on whom domination is exerted through both coercion and the manufacturing of consent and acquiescence.

The moral and social ambivalence intrinsic to La Mano's character is intersectional, as it emerges again in relation to gender and ableness. The discourses structuring female subjects and their position in the luchaverse are depicted in particular in part 3, when the protagonist is confronted by a trio of treacherous female wrestlers catching him by surprise and overpowering him with apparently unfair methods (Gonzalez 2021: 63–72). La Mano is caught between his goal to win at all costs and the necessity to unleash "a brand of brutality these women have no defense for" to do so, which would turn him into a type of man he does not know himself to be; thus, he opts for losing with honor rather than break his purported codes of conduct. A group of female supporters will come to his rescue—once again providing several panels focused on hand schemas—reminding the reader of the fundamental role the audience has in lucha dynamics. La Mano's claim to the alleged defenselessness of the female wrestlers is articulated according to a patronizing discursive construction: he purposely restrains his "strength and skill" to avoid hurting his female adversaries, who are implicitly weaker and less prepared as wrestlers.

The depiction of such reflection in ***Figure 5*** shows a contrast between La Mano's words and a position of evident difficulty, to an extent reinforcing the bias intrinsic to his words. As he is physically entangled without chance of easy escape, his words could even be interpreted as a justification of his possible failure to reassert a winning position, exploiting the topic embodied by *técnico* values in a contradictory way. Rather than expressing a feminist stance, the fact that La Mano is rescued by his female fans—who, without any wrestling formation, can easily stop and defeat the luchadoras—strengthens the idea that these female wrestlers are not on par in terms of wrestling capability and thus they need to resort to unfair means. In a way, this kind of construction disregards the tradition of female lucha libre.

Figure 5 The protagonist defeated by three malicious luchadoras in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 67. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

Despite the informal exclusion of female participants in public wrestling matches during the apogee of lucha libre—as then regent of the Federal District (1952–66) Ernesto Uruchurtu undertook a crusade against public "indecency"—luchadoras have represented a strong segment in the industry, albeit given less visibility. Furthermore, their consolidated presence has been ground for feminist revindication (Santamaría Llerandi 2012; Cárdenas Pérez 2017; Márquez 2020). The fact that no female characters appear elsewhere throughout the whole narrative precludes the opportunity to structure female subjects any further and, in regard of lucha, a missed occasion to highlight the role of female wrestlers. Petey and Monchi's mother appears in the flashback sequence narrating the day in which they overheard the rumors about the General's paternity; her character, though, results absolutely nondescript. Such neglect somehow highlights the overall absence of female characters and the consequent male-centered discourse pervading the comic.

The protagonist's ethical ambivalence is also evident in his match with a one-armed *rudo* opponent (16–19), as he consciously takes advantage of the other's disability and yet, he still suggests that the glorification of such a move is well-deserved. In this sequence, the opponent prevails until the protagonist pulls off his arm prothesis by "dumb luck" (18) and defeats him by beating him up with the prosthetic limb. The protagonist's discourse overlaps and equals the prevarication—made possible by his ableness advantage only—to "a raw act of ferocity," which nonetheless deserves the "rousing and ratifying cheers for the victor" (19). Despite such episodes, it is evident that Petey is a subordinate subject within the luchaverse social system, and his prevarications are confined to the spatial and temporal space embodied by the match—and directed toward subjects constructed as his inferiors. Throughout the series it becomes clear that the protagonist only surmounts his social role on the ring—where he seems to be defeated only by supernatural *rudo* tricks—whereas off the ring he is subjected to the wrestling industry mechanisms.

THE LUCHAVERSE AND ITS STRUCTURING DISCOURSES

As highlighted, kayfabe is fundamental: spectators of lucha libre matches do not care to acknowledge the fact that the performance is staged, as the primary virtue of spectacle is what one can physically see and participate in, as well as the emotions it fosters (Barthes 1957: 10; Prieto 2009). The mask severs any connection with reality allowing the wrestlers to embody the spectacular, mythic dimension they represent, which nonetheless serves as a metaphorical ground where real life struggles can be disputed. Lucha can be approached as a resemiotization of the contradictions characterizing everyday life through spectacular dramatization (Prieto 2009; Trapanese 2017), a means of resistance to and communication of the alienating hardship inherent to modern life. The ring becomes a stage where the struggle is aestheticized and rendered through the metaphors of wrestling, reproducing reality in a dimension in which codes exist to be infringed and provoke a conflict—between established canons and their transgression—embodied by the fight between "good" and "bad" luchadores. The structure of the luchaverse establishes power relations that are not supposed to be broken, lest the community of participants—both internal and external, as the audience itself belongs to the kayfabe during the match—condemns behaviors non-compliant with the system's rules. The apparent transgression exercised by the *rudos* is transgressive only in relation to the *técnicos*' expected behavior and is constructed within the luchaverse rules.

It is worth considering this luchaverse as a structured social system of its own, in order to analyze its peculiar discourses in the perspective of kayfabe. Suspending the awareness of the implicit staging, it is possible to approach its "reality" coherently with the premises of *La Mano del Destino*, as for Gonzalez's characters there is no world external nor more real than the luchaverse depicted. Within this system, the characters are subjected to structures of power that allegorize the reality experienced by both Mexican citizens belonging to the lower classes and Mexican Americans resisting the hegemony of the US dominant culture. La Mano and his struggles allegorize both quintessential sides of the Chicanx identity, which is Mexican and American at the same time.

As extradiegetic producer of the text, the author inevitably constructed it as an interpretation of the world—or of the selected "facets of the world which are then in focus" (Fairclough 1989: 80)—surging from his own position as social subject belonging to the Mexican American

DOI: 10.16995/cg.211

minority. What can be interpreted as so-called overwording—or repetition of specific topics, in this case both through dialogues and multimodal discourse—reveals a preoccupation with some specific aspects of reality that represent the focus of the author's own ideological struggle. In fact, Gonzalez's work insists on the dilemmas derived by the imposition of a life path predetermined by one's own initial position within society. By resorting to the Mexican setting and its historical configurations, as well as to a luchaverse articulated accordingly, the social structures governing La Mano's life reproduce those imposed by the monoglossic American state on the members of ethnic minorities.

The allegory intrinsic to the comic book is based on the representation of constraining power relations which imply constant negotiations in real life: if in the Mexican context the struggle is for social mobility, in the US the struggle lies between necessary assimilation and revindication of one's own cultural identity. In *La Mano del Destino*'s reality, its members are clearly aware of the mechanisms regulating its establishment, power relations, and systems of knowledge and belief its participants share. Extending—according to a critical discourse analysis perspective—the Foucauldian notion of objects of knowledge (1969), these represent entities recognized in ordinary life and thus, objects constitutive of the luchaverse reality. The role-descriptive function of the mask, the polarization between *rudo* and *técnico*, the relationship between promoter and luchador, and so on, are all elements establishing relations that are both social and discursive. Social space in the luchaverse is structured—as real-life social space is—by sets of situations, recognized positions, and discourse types. Only through being occupied—and thus reproduced—these positions continue to be part of the structure.

Petey does not initially belong to the lucha establishment: he reaches a position of relative power due to his wrestling talent, but he needs to constantly act in order to hold it. His actions must address both the wrestling enactment and the workings of the industry, but he fails at responding to the latter. Once defeated, he can reassert his position once again thanks to his wrestling capability, but he remains subjected to the mechanisms and occult power structures intrinsic to the industry. As a participant in this peculiar social system, Petey shares a definite set of beliefs—the ideological structures of the (kayfabe) reality—and, in particular, values related to the *técnico* category; such values are strengthened by the existence of an opposing set of *rudo* values, in a mutual supportive construction governing the luchaverse dynamics.

Another fundamental set of subject positions is constituted by the promoter and the luchador, and it is clear that the latter alone cannot engage in wrestling activity without the existence and support of the former. La Mano's mysterious promoter is represented as lingering in the dark and yet, his speech is very articulate and his presence imposing. When the promoter's identity is revealed, La Mano's brother Monchi becomes a rather well-rounded, truth-disclosing character, as he lucidly describes the structure governing the power relations within the luchaverse. The construction of Monchi is characterized by intrinsic disenchantment, sarcasm, and an awareness of the social system they live in much deeper than Petey's. His expressiveness is also detailed and accurately supports the construction of his character.

In his clash with La Mano, he even undermines his brother's only source of power entitlement: he claims that he was the one punished by the landowner for being his illegitimate son (***Figure 6***), as Petey misinterpreted overheard information and appropriated the role. Monchi evidently retains a power and discursive position of dominance in relation to Petey, who doesn't seem to be able to oppose structured arguments besides his personal mission.

The luchadores involved in *máscara contra máscara* matches bet their mask on winning, so that the defeated will have to publicly remove theirs or be forcedly unmasked; however, losing one's mask does not necessarily imply the end of their wrestling career. Some keep on wrestling without wearing any, whereas others make a comeback with a new mask—and, consequently, a whole new character. Nonetheless, reappearing under a new identity—and even worse, reappropriating one's lost mask—represents a questionable encroachment of the lucha canon and its intrinsic deontological values. Breaking the conventions of the luchaverse is the only way Petey as a subordinate subject can reassert his position as a legitimate participant in the struggle for power. In fact, wearing a mask again grants him the access to the symbolic dimension of the match, the only space where he can reclaim visibility; a dimension where what counts is each instant of the spectacle and his fate could change in any moment. His new mask hides his legal and past identity, and at the same time it allows him to create the identity

Figure 6 Monchi's confrontation in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino* Collected Edition by Jason Gonzalez, 2021: 139. © 2021 J. Gonzo Designs, LLC.

he feels fitting to serve his struggle. He is, once again, part of the (kayfabe) social system structured around the dichotomic definition of its fundamental categories: the participants are either *técnicos* or *rudos*, luchador or promoter, and their belonging to one or the other group determines their role and engagement in congruent power dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Albeit inspired by the imaginary existing around El Santo, the artist creates a character whose moral boundaries blur on several occasions and whose—almost obsessive—aim of achieving personal affirmation leads him to take ethically questionable decisions. When asked to show his ultimate adversary mercy, he refuses, stating that "[his] mission and [his opponent's] dignity cannot coexist!" (123), implying that the only dignity worth defending is his own. The construction of La Mano's fight to achieve a stable power position often seems reduced to personal accomplishment, embodied by material success, fame, and visibility. Nonetheless, the analysis of La Mano's position as subordinate subject—engaging in a struggle for social mobility within the luchaverse—allows us to identify an underlying discourse that is collective, shared by a social stratum whose freedom of development and transformation is hindered by a dominant stratum. The protagonist's only tool of counter-power and effective agency lies in his wrestling capability. His wrestling career parallels to an extent his past life, in which his episodes of agency depended on superordinate subjects and the position they assigned to him. As multimodal text, the comic book allegorically reproduces the way power abuse and control can be exercised and enacted by the members of the dominant group in a specific situation (van Dijk 2008: 65).

During the final fight and toward the final plot twist, the breadth of La Mano's peculiar discourse changes as the author connects the lucha libre and the subordinate struggle to a sociohistorical theme of resistance. Again, the UPA-inspired stylization provides a parenthesis (Gonzalez 2021: 154–157) in the storyline, introducing a brief mythohistorical review of Mesoamerican god

Quetzalcóatl and connecting historical events—such as the colonization and the formation of the Mexican state—to the wrestler's resurgence. The parallel suggests that La Mano's path to (kayfabe) power embodies the struggle for identity of the colonized peoples of America and their inherent resistance against oppression and forced assimilation. Reinforcing the allegorical build of the comic book, this passage relies on the synecdochic construction that the struggle of one man to reassert his position transcends the mere fight he is individually engaged in. Rather, the resolution of the conflict between a destiny imposed by circumstances and individual identity seems to lie, at least partially, in the words of the feathered serpent god: the struggle one chooses and carries on is in itself the definition of one's own identity.

Despite the artist's own admitted identity struggle, *La Mano del Destino* succeeds in conveying the notion of the possibility to follow one's own instinctive ethos, breaking away from the boundaries imposed by the society and its status quo. Other comic authors have recreated the luchaverse in diverse ways—it is inevitable to mention at least Rafael Navarro's *Sonámbulo* (1996–present), Casali and Camuncoli's *Quebrada* (1998–present), Frissen's *Lucha Libre* (2006–2010). Within this thematic realm, Gonzalez's vision comes across as markedly personal, as its hybridity is infused with a Mexican American voice that blends elements the author himself deeply enjoys. The discursive constructions within his luchaverse can be interpreted as a tentative reproduction of the power relations intrinsic to the reality lived by ethnic minority members, whose subject position in society is often object of specific discriminatory constraints. Throughout the series, the kayfabe experienced by La Mano revolves around the transcendental belief that it is possible to assert control over one's own life path regardless one's ethnicity or social position, and to overcome conventions imposed by the status quo by realizing that "[their] value is a construct that [we are] free to negate" (Gonzalez 2020).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author and copyright holder Jason Gonzalez (owner of J. Gonzo Designs, LLC) gave his permission for the use of copyright material under educational fair use/dealing for the purpose and criticism and review, and full attribution and copyright information has been provided in the captions.

The collected edition published in 2021 comprises both the original issues in English and their translation to Spanish in a flipbook format. The present analysis refers to the original English version, contained in the bilingual flipbook and corresponding to the original 6-issue publication. The title of the comic is in Spanish and capitalized in both language versions. Throughout the article, the spelling of La Mano del Destino is italicized when referring to any version of the publication *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*, whereas it is not when referring to the protagonist's masked identity.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION


Anna Marta Marini *orcid.org/0000-0001-8268-2516*
Instituto Franklin–UAH, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain

REFERENCES

Aldama, F L 2009 *Your Brain on Latino Comics*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Aldama, F L and **Gonzalez, C** (eds.) 2016 *Graphic Borders: Latino Comic Books Past, Present, and Future*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bashara, D 2019 *Cartoon Vision: UPA Animation and Postwar Aesthetics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvfxv8pj*

Bottini, C 2018 *Redesigning Animation: United Productions of America*. New York: Routledge. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1201/9781351209595*

Cárdenas Pérez, R 2017 Representaciones y roles femeninos en el cine mexicano de luchadoras. *Balajú*, 4(7): 37–59. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.25009/blj.2017.7.2542*

Carroll, N 2010 Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34(1): 1–19. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2010.00197.x*

Cohn, N 2013 *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. London: Bloomsbury.

Cotter, R M 2005 *The Mexican Masked Wrestler and Monster Filmography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Fairclough, N 1989 *Discourse and Power*. New York: Longman.

Fairclough, N 1992 *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell.

Fernández L'Hoeste, H and **Poblete, J** (eds.) 2009 *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*. Berlin: Springer.

Fernández L'Hoeste, H 2017 *Lalo Alcaraz: Political Cartooning in the Latino Community*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496811370.001.0001*

Fernández Reyes, Á 2004 *Santo el Enmascarado de Plata. Mito y Realidad de un Héroe Mexicano Moderno*. Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán/Conaculta.

Fontaine, J 2017 Illusion, Kayfabe, and Identity Performance in Box Brown and Brandon Easton's Andre the Giant Graphic Biographies. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 7: 17. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.96*

Foucault, M 1969 *L'Archéologie du Savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.

García, E 2017 *The Hernandez Brothers: Love, Rockets, and Alternative Comics*. University of Pittsburgh Press. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rfzxw1*

García, E 2018 Latina Superheroine: Protecting the Reader from the Comic Book Industry's Racial, Gender, Ethnic, and Nationalist Biases. In: Aldama, FL (ed.) *Comics Studies Here and Now*. London: Routledge, chapter 11. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351015271-12*

Gonzalez, J 2011–2019 *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*. 6 issues. USA: Castle&Key Publications.

Gonzalez, J 2020 La Mano del Destino: a Lucha Libre Struggle Between Identity and Destiny. Interview with Anna Marta Marini. *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published May 18, 2020. *https://popmec.hypotheses.org/2496*.

Gonzalez, J 2021 *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*. Collected Edition, bilingual flipbook. USA: Castle&Key Publications.

Greene, D 2005 *Mexploitation Cinema: A Critical History of Mexican Vampire, Wrestler, Ape-Man and Similar Films: 1957–1977*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Hegarty, K T 2013 From Superhero to National Hero: The Populist Myth of El Santo. *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 31: 3–27. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.7560/SLAPC3102*

Márquez, E 2020 El Campeonato de Tessa, una Carta del Feminismo a la Lucha Libre. *+Lucha*. Published online on March, 9.

Merino, A 2009 The Bros. Hernandez: A Latin Presence in Alternative U.S. Comics. In: Fernández L'Hoeste, H and Poblete, J (eds.) *Redrawing the Nation. New Directions in Latino American Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 251–269. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230103184_14*

Monroy Olvera, H and **Reducindo Saldivar, M** 2017 *Lucha Libre 85 Años*. México: Am Editores.

Monsiváis, C 1996 La hora de la máscara protagónica. El Santo contra los escépticos en materia de mitos. In: Monsiváis, C (ed.) *Los rituales del caos*. Mexico: Ediciones Era, pp. 125–133.

Priego, E 2012 "¡Santo!". The Stuff of Legend. In: Priego, E (ed.) *The Comics Grid. Journal of Comics Scholarship. Year One*. London: The Comics Grid Digital First Editions, pp. 98–101. DOI: *http://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.928096*

Prieto, A 2009 Lucha libre. Actuaciones de Teatralidad y Performance. In: Adame, D (ed.) *Actualidad de las artes escénicas: perspectiva latinoamericana*. Mexico: UV, pp. 116–143.

Rodríguez, M 1998 *Mito, identidad y rito: mexicanos y chicanos en California*. Mexico: CIESAS.

Santamaría Llerandi, A C 2012 De violentos y violentados: la lucha libre mexicana. *Mirada Antropológica*, 11(11): 83–88.

Tullis, B 2014 Constructions of Femininity in Latin/o American Comics: Redefining Womanhood Via the Male-Authored Comic. PhD thesis, University of Iowa.

Tullis, B 2018 Transnationality and Textual Mestizaje in Love and Rockets. In: Aldama, FL (ed.) *Comics Studies Here and Now*. London: Routledge, chapter 17. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351015271-18*

Van Dijk, T A 2008 *Discourse and Power*. New York: Palmgrave MacMillan. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-07299-3*

Villoro, J 2011 Identidades fronterizas. In: García Canclini, N (ed.) *Conflictos interculturales*. Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Marini, A M 2021 Discursive (Re)Contruction of Mexican American Identity in *J. Gonzo's La Mano del Destino*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 11(1): 1, pp. 1–14. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.211*

Published: 24 February 2021