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Comics and the American West: An Interview with Dr. Christopher Conway

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Dr. Christopher Conway, Professor of Spanish in the Department of Modern Languages, was interviewed by *Global Insight* Assistant Editor, Sean Woodard. Sean asked Dr. Conway about his research on Westerns and his recent donation of Mexican and Spanish comics to Special Collections at UT Arlington's Libraries.

Sean Woodard: Dr. Conway, can you share a little bit about your research in the past few years? How did your scholarship influence your decision to donate "The John and Magdalena Conway Comics Collection" to the UTA Libraries' Special Collections?

Christopher Conway: I originally started collecting Mexican comics as a hobby, for pleasure. It wasn't until a few years into that hobby that I realized there were interesting questions to explore about Mexican comics. And so for a few years, I worked on a book, which became *Heroes of the Borderlands: The Western in Mexican Film, Comics, and Music*, which was published by the University of New Mexico Press in December 2019.

After completing that book, I realized that I had said most of what I wanted to say about Mexican comics, and that I would probably soon be ready to offer these comics to Special Collections at UT Arlington Libraries. I already had a longstanding relationship with Special Collections. In the spring of 2015, Special Collections did an exhibit of my comics called "Viva Mexico: The Comic Book History of Mexico." That experience planted the seed in my mind about donating the collection to Special Collections.

SW: How did those initial conversations start?

CC: In fall of 2022 I started talking to the former Dean of Libraries Rebecca Bichel, who expressed interest. I was lucky enough to also have the support of Sam Haynes, director of the Center for Greater Southwestern Studies here on campus, who also lobbied the library to accept my collection. I delivered the donation in May of 2023.

SW: What are your hopes for the collection?

CC: Well, my hope is that professors on campus across the disciplines—including Political Science, History, English, Sociology, Anthropology, and Modern Languages—have occasion to use those comics when they bring students to special collections to do activities for their courses. The material is really vivid. It really pops. It's very provocative.

Another hope of mine is that graduate students at UTA and researchers in general will use the collection. There's a lot of potential there for someone who wants to do cutting edge work. For example, while my book *Heroes of the Borderlands* talks a little bit about immigration and Mexican comics, the collection is a great resource for developing new projects. I am confident others will be able to make different arguments that will be really appealing to multiple fields.

SW: I brought my literature students to Special Collections to view the collection, alongside other exhibits of historical writings and correspondence relating to the American West. At one large table were Western novels from my collection arranged alongside valuable texts from Special Collections—including a 1906 edition of *Moon-Face and Other Stories* by Jack London and a first edition of *Roughing It* by Mark Twain with original illustrations. The exhibit also included secondary sources paired with an array of Mexican comics from your donated collection. My students were very interested in the comics because that perspective is often overlooked or hardly covered when you think of the literary canon, or at least in terms of Western Literature of America.

CC: I'm lucky enough to have found a subject that people had not really mined in a significant way before I did. I stumbled onto it, even though Westerns are ubiquitous in Mexican culture and hiding in plain sight. Mexican Westerns have often been viewed as knockoffs of U.S. cultural products, causing many intellectuals, scholars, and cultural commentators to avoid valuing them. The argument of *Heroes of the Borderlands* is that Mexican Westerns really matter.

But I should also clarify that half of the donated collection is composed of Spanish materials—Spanish Westerns, in particular pulp fiction, dime novels, and comics. I would argue that that material is really exciting as well. There's one example of the relevance of the Spanish collection to Texas, which is that there's a vital Spanish tradition of pulp novels and paperbacks set in the American West. The most famous author of that cohort is a guy called Marcial Lafuente Estefanía, who wrote over 2500 Western novelettes from the 1940s to the early 1980s. Those novels have been published and republished continuously not only in Spain, but throughout the Spanish-speaking world—to the point that in the early 2000s, you could go to a Mexican supermarket or a Mexican bakery in North Texas and find novels by Marcial Lafuente Estefanía published fifty years earlier. The same thing can be said about Mexico. Estefanía's novels were sold everywhere from flea markets to street kiosks, as well as in South America and in the Caribbean. If you think about the cultural ecology of the reading experience in the Americas, this Spanish writer who never came to the United States was writing thousands of novels that were being read throughout North and South America.

SW: In a way, it reminds me of the cultural influence Karl May's Westerns had in his native Germany and around the world.

CC: Estefanía was certainly influenced by Karl May, in addition to James Fenimore Cooper and other American authors. But May was different from Estefanía. May was writing American Westerns with a very conspicuous German focus, whereas Estefanía was writing pastiche Westerns, where all the characters are Anglo-American. This is a very strong tradition—not only in Spanish Westerns, but also Mexican ones—where the Western does not necessarily have a conspicuous Mexican or Spanish character, they often have none. The books read as if they were American Westerns, but in a different language. In my scholarship, I've argued that such Westerns are always about the local; that is, even in a Western that is striving to be a pastiche Western, it is responding to its immediate historical and cultural environment. But we need different tools to tease out the meanings.

SW: Have you seen a recent shift regarding the reception of comics as a topic of interest and importance in academic scholarship, whereas in the past there might have been gatekeeping measures in place comparable to the contentious division between genre fiction and so-called "literary fiction"?

CC: I'm ambivalent. On the one hand, I think there's more acceptance. On the other hand, it seems that, up until very recently, the old prejudices against all comics and graphic fiction have been reinscribed within Comics Studies against works in the genre of comics that are not graphic novels. For example, the late 1990s and the early 2000s saw this tremendous shift toward the study of graphic fiction. I use the word "graphic" or the label "graphic fiction" intentionally because scholars were

using it to bracket it off from Archie Comics, superhero comics, Westerns, and other things that were considered to be, on some level, devoid of meaningful content. It wasn't until recently where we've begun to see some pushback against this idea that the only kinds of comics that have value are serious-minded graphic novels for adults or underground comics. Some are now arguing that we should be talking about Archie Comics, superhero comics, and things of that nature. I agree completely.

Superhero comics should be considered as their own category. This is because a lot of the scholarship that we still see in Comics Studies about superheroes is closely connected to fan service—fan service, in the sense that the scholarship is predicated on a scholar's identification with the material and their long-standing relationship to it as a fan. That is something I honestly don't practice myself. To me, comics are cultural artifacts of great historical and sociological value. This is material I approach the same way I would approach any other historical artifact—as strange or foreign to me as any other rare and vintage archival item.

SW: I like how you mentioned earlier the importance of region-specific meaning that is produced by these comics. That historical and local resonance reminds me of how musicologists might view the folk song tradition as a kind of living testament to the people who lived in that era or region, or even how that tradition continues to thrive, be rearranged, or speaks to new generations.

CC: Exactly. I think that's true. One of the things I found surprising about working on comics is how it's taught me how to work on other kinds of popular literature. So there are certain problems or challenges that you face when you work on comics that you inevitably have to deal with when you work with pulp fiction or serialized films. Those problems are, for example, corporate authorship, or anonymous authorship.

Oftentimes, when you work on the history of comics, in Latin America or Europe, you're dealing with material that does not have an identifiable author. As literary critics or people who are trained in in the discipline of English or Latin American literature, we are used to the figure of the author as a principle that confers meaning onto the text and which helps us frame the text.

Second is the issue of volume. As literary critics, we're not used to dealing with texts that have hundreds of thousands or millions of pages. To work on a comic series that has run for 30 years and that has thousands of issues can really be an impediment to your ability to command the material.

Third, there's the issue of formula. I think as literary and film critics we use an auteurist approach to the study of comics, graphic fiction, or graphic novels. But when you're dealing with formula in popular culture, you need to use a different approach, one based on market imperatives, precedents, and transmediality. So I think these three challenges—authorship, volume, and formula—are very salient when you work on comics. I've realized that I can use those same problematics to think through other kinds of popular culture.

SW: Do you think there is a tendency to reductively view these comics and novels as either solely perpetuating the myth of the American frontier—as John Ford and others arguably have done—or, instead, approaching Westerns in a revisionist manner?

CC: There are two things that bother me about how commentators sometimes talk about Westerns. The first is the idea that all Westerns are the same and they all mean the same thing. I find that frustrating. I think anyone who has studied Westerns or even just watched a few Westerns will realize that they are not all the same. There's still a prejudice against Westerns among scholars who are new to the study of Westerns, stemming from the assumption that all Westerns prior to the year 2015 are nationalistic, racist, patriarchal, juvenile, or retrograde. If you look at the history of Westerns from their inception as dime novels through to the so-called Golden Age of film and television in the 1950s and '60s, you're going to see an amazing diversity of Westerns, and also Westerns that are, in many ways, contradictory in terms of what they have to say. For example, I think a movie like *The Searchers* is definitely very mythical. But it's also iconoclastic and self-aware. We need to be able to

hold more than one idea in our heads at the same time when we think about a film like *The Searchers*, or a Western comic or novel.

SW: UTA Special Collections recently held a reception to showcase your donation. How do you think the exhibit was received?

CC: I really liked the event because it was basically a show-and-tell designed to promote awareness of the collection.

SW: Is there a particular work that is a favorite of yours in the collection?

CC: I'm tempted to use a quote that I recently learned from Ben Huseman, cartographic archivist at Special Collections: It's whichever comic I am holding in my hand when you ask me.