

[BLOG: The Latin American Comics Archive Digital Collection](#) by Felipe Gómez

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After a brief hiatus, I am happy to return to publishing *Research Corner*. If you would like to continue having this resource, I need your help! I am in need of new drafts. If you have recently used an archive, library, or digital repository, or work at one, I would love to hear about it! Do you have advice about the research process in general? Ideas include how to do transnational research, how to get publication permissions for images, or how to balance an active research agenda with other professional and personal obligations. Send your ideas to this [Google Form](#) and queries to Gretchen Pierce at gkpierce@ship.edu.

Felipe Gómez is a Teaching Professor of Hispanic Studies (HS) in the Modern Languages Department at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), Pittsburgh, USA. He holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in Spanish Language and Literatures from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA, and a B.A. in Literature from Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. His research interests relate to the cycles of political violence and impunity in 20th century Latin American history, especially as presented in Argentine, Colombian, and Mexican literatures and popular cultures. He has co-edited critical volumes examining the literary production of Colombian writers Andrés Caicedo and Evelio Rosero and has authored articles and chapters on recent and contemporary Latin American comics, literatures, and films. Gómez's recent publications include "Displacement, Space, and Questions of Belonging: Untranslated Graphic Novels of the German- and Spanish-Speaking Worlds in Dialogue" (with Gabriele Maier, forthcoming), and "[Will it be possible? Apocalypse and Resistance in Latin American Graphic Novels](#)," *Paradoxa* (2021), awarded this year's Martin Schüwer Prize for outstanding comics research. His current research project examines resilience in Spanish-language apocalyptic comics, analyzing underlying issues of race, gender, and sexuality in community responses and survival strategies employed by their protagonists.

Gómez is also Creator, Curator, and Principal Investigator (P.I.) for the Latin American Comics Archive (LACA), which originated from a 2016 Mellon seed grant at CMU. In his professional trajectory, LACA is part of a broader effort of innovating humanities courses by offering platforms through which students can use analogic and digital tools such as blogs, radio and audio podcasts, and visuals to improve their cultural and linguistic skills and communicate with audiences beyond the classroom. Internationally, LACA was awarded "Best Formative Initiative Developed in 2018" by the Hispanic Digital Humanities organization.

The Latin American Comics Archive Digital Collection

The [Latin American Comics Archive](#) at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) is a modest but growing collection of Spanish-language comic books, strips, cartoons, excerpts, and graphic works by creators from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries, notably Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. The collection reflects the research interests and experience of its P.I. and founder, who has traveled on professional and research trips to Latin America for over twenty years, developing working and

personal relationships with many relevant intellectuals, academics, artists, writers, and filmmakers in Latin America. The project was designed to combine capabilities for Spanish language and culture teaching, research in the Humanities, and digital technologies as a tool for expanding the access and analysis opportunities in Latin American comics for both scholars and students. The P.I. and a small team of Digital Humanists drew inspiration from existing digital archives such as Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México's specialized online resource [Pepines](#), Asociación Cultural Tebeosfera's [website](#), [Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comics and Popular Culture archive](#), and the [Grand Comics Database](#). Thanks to a 2016 Mellon Digital Humanities Seed Grant, they put together what is to our knowledge the only repository of Spanish-language comics in the United States.

Using previously-acquired materials, the P.I. curated, digitized, coded, and requested copyright permissions for an initial batch of about fifteen works over the 2016-2017 academic year. While some of the creators and intellectual property owners graciously granted explicit permission for the availability of their works, others unfortunately never responded to multiple requests. Works of foreign origin are governed by the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (United States, 1988) and the Universal Copyright Convention (Library of Congress, 1977), rather than just U.S. copyright; in theory there would be an allowance for their fair use for educational purposes.¹ However, because of the very nature of some of the materials in the collection, other types of factors complicate things. In many cases, small independent presses that may not exist anymore published the comics. In other cases, their authors have passed away. Hypothetically, these works default to protected status and cannot be displayed publicly. Some works may also be orphaned—the rights may have changed hands, but the current legal status is uncertain because the original owners have died and no records of ownership or transfer have been recovered. This has made it an ongoing project in itself to track the copyright ownership and be able to contact the appropriate people. In spite of the challenges, LACA opened to the public in the Fall of 2017.

The website's curation has focused on selecting at least one representative vicennial sample, making this collection compelling for an audience interested in comics of any language or the cultural production from Latin American countries. However, anybody working more generally on the fields of literature, history, social and political economy, visual, cultural, and digital studies from the early 20th century until the present in Latin America will also find these sources interesting.

Researchers will find some unique and rarely consulted sources, as well as some popular and well-known ones, since LACA primarily houses comics not owned by massive media conglomerates. For the time being, about half of them, including the didactic comic [Deuda](#), originally published in book form by the Argentine Museo de la Deuda (Debt Museum), and the sarcastic silent (or wordless) comic "[Vamos campeón](#)" by Colombian artist Truchafrita are accessible through the [LACA digital collection](#) repository online (see Figure 1). There, the source PDFs, as well as TIFF image files and annotated TEI-XML transcriptions for these comics are available for viewing. The project has concentrated on making public on the web only materials for which permissions have been secured, as well as older comic book publications that either already are in the public domain or may be entering it in coming decades because copyright was not renewed. Efforts to include Spanish-language materials found in lists like those created by The Next Issue Project which identify public domain titles could be used further for this purpose. Currently, other digitized and coded materials are available privately for classroom use and awaiting copyright permission to be displayed publicly.

[1-laca.png](#)

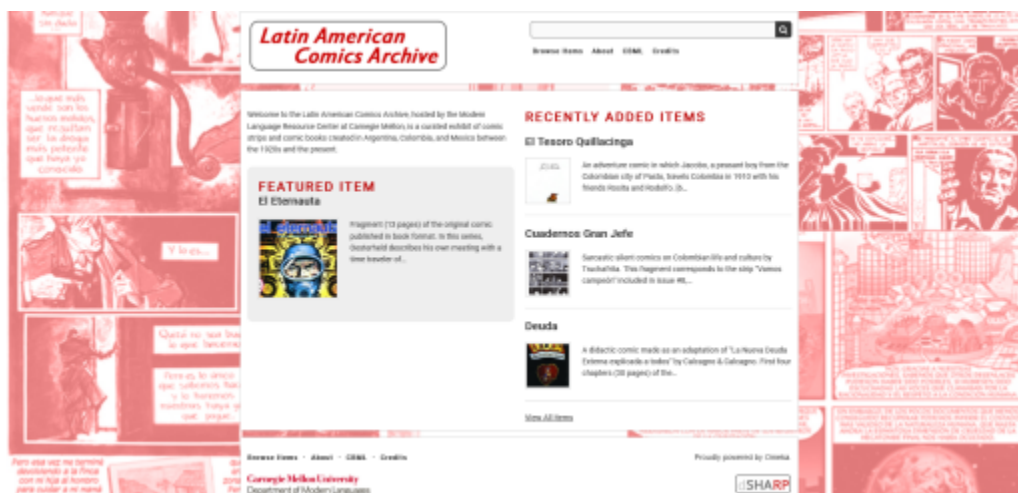


Figure 1: Screenshot of the Omeka platform hosting the Latin American Comics Archive. Captured July 2022. [<http://mlrcdev.hss.cmu.edu/omeka/>].

The archive is organized by creators and titles. By clicking on the title, followed by the “view full text” button on each respective source, users can browse the pages on the left and read transcriptions of text and annotated descriptions of images on the right (see Figures 2 and 3). In order to search by author, you can type a first or last name in the search box on the top right page. Another option is to click on “browse items,” followed by “search items,” and then go to “narrow by specific fields,” where you can select “creator” and choose among multiple options including “contains,” “is exactly,” “starts with,” etc. Searching for “Creator contains ‘Clément,’” for instance, will produce the listing for the Mexican graphic novel *Operación Bolívar* by Edgar Clément. It is also possible to filter the search results specifying a keyword, country, date range, or other metadata identifiers.

[2-laca-pageview.png](#)



Figure 3: Detail of page view for *El Eternauta* focusing on image descriptions and transcriptions. Downloaded May 24, 2022.

[<http://mlrcdev.hss.cmu.edu/TEI-Boilerplate-master/dist/content/el-eternauta.xml>].

As an example of the available public materials, I would like to highlight *Operación Bolívar* (see Figure 4), widely regarded as the first Mexican graphic novel, and one of the greatest Latin American comics; “a noir graphic novel where politics, drug trafficking, and corruption intersect to shape a plot that overrides frontiers. [...] a harrowing journey into a spectral and violent Mexico.”² Courtesy of its creator, LACA holds the digitized, coded, and annotated first part (76 of 160 pages) of the original comic published in book format by Taller del Perro & Ediciones del Castor in 1999.

4-laca-itembrowsing.png



Figure 4: Screenshot of item browsing on the Omeka platform. Available graphic novel, *Operación Bolívar*, by Edgar Clément. Captured May 2022.

[<http://mlrcdev.hss.cmu.edu/omeka/items/show/8>]

Professors or teachers of History, Latin American Studies, and Art History will find *Operación Bolívar* to be a useful pedagogical tool that reinforces many themes discussed in their courses. For instance, Clément discusses in the graphic novel topics related to the coloniality and postcoloniality of Mexico and Latin America by drawing connections among events from the Spanish imperial conquest of the Americas, their push for, and the local indigenous resistance to, Catholic religious expansion, and late 20th century issues such as the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the struggles for logistic and technological control of hemispheric and global illegal drug markets. Frequently alluded to also amidst the plot are the corrupt intertwining of local police and criminal organizations, particular issues related to the Mexico-US border, quotations and references to Spanish art history masterpieces, and Mexican political history. For example, a notable fragment of the graphic novel is a massacre masterminded by a powerful team of antagonists. For this sequence, Clément creates versions of masterpieces like Goya's *3 de mayo en Madrid*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and a collage involving photographs of the infamous Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico to emphasize the machinations and consequences of political violence. *Operación Bolívar* is undoubtedly one of the most touching graphic works in the collection and provides a rare, ambitious glimpse into the ways this independent comics artist engaged with economic, social, political, and cultural threads of the Mexican and Latin American transition into the 21st century.

Many of the documents in the repository are in the public domain or used with permission by the copyright owners, and as such are freely available for good faith scholarly and related uses without a need to apply for their use, consistent with the [mission of the archive](#). Locally at CMU, LACA sources have already been used a few times to pilot courses for third- and fourth-year Hispanic Studies majors and minors, focusing on the use of Digital Humanities tools and methods to analyze

issues of race, gender, and sexuality in these comics. This has included teaching students some basic CBML coding, keeping in mind that “The end goal of markup is not and should not always be publication of a digital surrogate,” and that “The encoding of a text may be a rigorous intellectual activity that has great value as process, not just as product” (Walsh 2012).

A pervasive issue in the history of comics industries has been the exclusion and invisibility of non-male/non-white creators and characters. This predominance is reflected in LACA’s original batch of digitized comics, which focused on curating representative samples, thus giving very little room to non-male voices and other historically marginalized groups. As a result of reflections guided by the focus on race, gender, and sexuality, and on the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, LACA has made a conscious effort in recent years toward digitizing and making publicly available comics created by non-male and minority authors, as well as those not written in Spanish. Work toward a more inclusive, hemispheric idea of Latin America that encompasses indigenous, afro-Latinx, and US Latinx voices, among others, has begun in part through invitations for female and non-binary authors and critics who have given guest lectures and held conversations with students. This has guided an initial identification and analysis of materials that can be used to expand the corpus in this chosen direction. Simultaneous efforts by the P.I. and the LACA team have been focused on applying for national and international grants that may help cover the digitization, copyright, and coding of these materials, as well as the creation of a website for the project that will be able to host both the expanded LACA archive and multimedia materials such as recordings of the aforementioned guest lectures, student projects, etc.

The digital repository is an ongoing project, with new comics being added constantly. Make sure to access our [Digitized Comics Database](#) for a full list of the contents and check it periodically to see what’s new! Requests for inclusion of additional comics is subject to the approval of the Archive and should be accompanied by photographic quality images and permission to reproduce them online. For further information, email fgomez@andrew.cmu.edu

¹ All of Central and South America are signatories to the Berne Convention, which grants 50 years of copyright protection to printed works.

² https://books.google.com/books?id=ohnSJAAACAAJ&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&hl=en.

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