

Reading Jaime Hernandez's Comics as Speculative Fiction

Shelley Streeby

When Los Bros Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* first appeared in the early 1980s, one of its most eye-catching elements was the comic's play with the icons and codes of science fiction and fantasy (SFF). A striking example is the third issue. Gilbert's front cover features a masked female superhero holding a baby, from whose eyes stream rays of green light bisecting the darkness of the nighttime cityscape, while on the back cover Jaime's dystopian, near-future, bad-ass punk girl with a "Mi Vida Loca" tattoo fights a giant killer robot in a post-apocalyptic war-world (fig. 1). Jaime's most famous character, Maggie, who started out fixing robots and rockets all over the globe, is depicted on several covers in full sci-fi glory. In issue no. 5, she glamorously pilots her own ship while two other rocket ships hover in the background, sharing the puffy white clouds (see the illustration on page 126). Issue no. 7 finds her in the arms of a giant golden robot, wrenches hanging off her belt, amid a crowd of strange smaller robots and robot parts (fig. 2). Clearly these gorgeous SFF covers were a huge part of *Love and Rockets*' visual appeal to the readers who clamored for the comic.

Featuring stories written by Jaime, Gilbert, and occasionally Mario, *Love and Rockets* opened the door to a new wave of alternative comics that began to flourish in the wake of the Hernandez brothers' success. But I argue that it is also important to see the comic as part of a constellation of Latina/o speculative fiction and speculative arts, which significantly distorts, denaturalizes, and thereby reimagines racialized hierarchies of space, race, gender, and sexuality since the long 1970s (Rosenberg and Rusert 2014). Much of the best of the relatively scant scholarship on Jaime's stories in *Love and Rockets* has explored how they document and imaginatively respond to Southern California spaces and movements, such as the punk Latina

Figure 1. Back cover of *Love and Rockets*, no. 3 (Summer 1983). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.



Figure 2. Front cover of *Love and Rockets*, no. 7 (July 1, 1984). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.



SHELLEY STREEBY is a professor of ethnic studies and literature at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence, and Visual Culture* (2013) and *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002). She is also the co-editor (with Jesse Alemán) of *Empire and the Literature of Sensation: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (2007). Since 2010 she has directed the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop and is currently working on a new book on science fiction archives and imagining the future.

world of late-twentieth-century Southern California. In *Loca Motion*, for instance, Michelle Habell-Pallán situates *Love and Rockets* in relation to the emergence in the late 1970s and early 1980s of “a punk ‘Do It Yourself’ Chicana grass-roots feminist cultural production” (2005, 149) that was a significant source of feminist theory. A few years later, Jessica Jones analyzed the 2005 anthology of Jaime’s Maggie and Hopey stories to support her argument that they dramatize “the production of bodies in space” and thereby help to “reimagine the barrio as a queer world” (2009, 42, 44). In what follows, I build on this work but also insist that the genres of science fiction and fantasy are not extraneous nor an obstacle to the more serious project of imagining nonnormative worlds, bodies, and ways of living that unsettle and transform hierarchies of gender, sexuality, class, and race in Southern California spaces. Instead, I argue, the codes of SFF have always been and continue to be central to Jaime Hernandez’s speculative fictions of alternate Chicano worlds, histories, and futures.

World Building in Chicana/o Speculative Fiction

Here I deliberately choose the term *speculative fiction*, an umbrella category that draws genre boundaries expansively to encompass heterogeneous forms and genres of writing, notably including science fiction and fantasy, as well as work by people of color. At the same time, however, I want to hold on to the genre terms *science fiction* and *fantasy* rather than abandoning them or replacing them with other terms that have enjoyed more literary prestige, such as *magical realism*. Science fiction and fantasy are subsets of speculative fiction and two of its main motors, but like comics they have been greatly underappreciated and often misunderstood when not maligned as hopelessly low forms of culture. In contrast, I suggest that in Jaime Hernandez’s comics, SFF has always provided crucial tools that shape the greatness of his art, and that it is precisely the juxtaposition and convergence of the codes of SFF and realism that makes possible the transformation of normative spaces and ways of living and the building of nonnormative worlds. As well, I argue that the codes of SFF interrupt sociological clichés about barrio life and working-class Latina/os that only reproduce damage, as Jaime speculates on the quotidian by distorting his present and thereby imagines other worlds and futures.

The great SFF writer Samuel Delany defines science fiction as, among other things, a genre that uses the future as a narrative convention to produce significant distortions of the present (2012, 26–27). Jaime Hernandez,

in the alternate comic worlds that he imagines, plays with SFF conventions to distort the present in multiple ways.¹ In what follows, I argue that reading Jaime's work as speculative fiction helps us see him as a major contributor to this genre, which has become increasingly important for writers and artists of color since the 1970s. It also helps make visible a longer history of Chicana/o science fiction and fantasy production that is almost always ignored by those telling the story of the SFF genres in the United States.

In thinking about how speculative fiction encompasses the genres of SFF and about how Jaime plays with those codes to imagine alternate worlds, it is useful to consider Delany's theory that science fiction is a reading practice involving particular protocols and codes formed around world building: "If we read in an SF story about a person who wakes up transformed into a bug, we are certainly concerned with how the person will react; but the underlying question that guides even that concern is this: *What in the world of the story* caused it to occur?" (Delany 2012, 136, emphasis in original). In other words, people and bugs may figure in a range of cultural forms, but the SF reader knows she must work from the start to figure out the rules of the story's world, which is not our world, though it should be a significant distortion of our present. Thus there is a certain imaginative world building required of the reader as well as the writer of SFF. Delany concludes that "*How would the world of the story have to be different from our world in order for this to occur?*" is the question around which the play of differences in the SF text is organized" (136, emphasis in original). That is, readers of SFF will expect the world of the story to swerve away from their own world even as it references that world in distorted form, and figuring out the play of differences is part of the pleasure and creative labor of reading science fiction.

Fantasy, on the other hand, is often what narrow definitions of science fiction are laboring to exclude. Fantasy as the Other of science fiction reinforces hierarchies of gender, race, and nation, partly because fantasy tends to be associated with women and science fiction with men, and also because Eurocentric ideas about what count as magic, science, and nature undergird most exclusionary definitions of science fiction. Therefore, in order to make visible the contributions of women, people of color, and those from outside Europe and the United States, it can be helpful to consider continuities between science fiction and fantasy, which the umbrella term *SFF* seeks to encourage. The related term *fantastic* is also salient in Mexican contexts, as Eduardo Jiménez Mayo, one of the editors of *Three Messages and a Warning: Contemporary Mexican Short Stories of the Fantastic* (2012), suggests in his opening remarks to that volume (xvii–xx). In the reading of

Jaime Hernandez's work that follows, we will need many terms that, in the scholarship on his comics, tend to be relatively devalued or disappeared in favor of realism. Science fiction, fantasy, and the fantastic, as well as the umbrella concept of speculative fiction, are all crucial building blocks of his Chicano alternate world building.²

Robots, Rockets, and Realism

Critics too often belittle or deem incidental or extraneous the science fiction, fantasy, and speculative elements of Jaime's comics, with some claiming that he experimented with SFF icons, codes, and genre conventions only to later transcend them in favor of a more complex and mature realism. Historically, both SFF and comics have been devalued within dominant cultural hierarchies, so it makes sense that those wanting to endow *Love and Rockets* with more cultural capital would fear SFF's degrading contamination and would suggest instead that Jaime's comics were like realist novels. But even though Jaime has said that for a while in the 1980s and 1990s he tried to take a "harder, grittier path" and "put reality in front of my readers as best I could" (Aldama 2009, 186), more recently he has added, "I'm really not worried about ruining the reality of it. Maybe because it's just something I grew up with in comics. That the real life and fantasy go together" (Champion 2012). In other words, instead of settling on a progress narrative in which a movement from SFF to realism is crucial to claiming greatness for his art, Jaime argues that the convergence of "real life" and "fantasy" is one of the distinctive aspects of comics, which inspires his own juxtapositions and combinations of SFF elements. He also reminds us that such convergences and juxtapositions are not exceptional but in fact are part of the long history and the grammar of comics.

The history of comics and the history of science fiction and fantasy are in many ways inseparable, since they emerged from the same world of sensational newspapers, dime novels, and pulp magazines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While female mechanics were relatively unfamiliar figures in popular culture at the time that Jaime's Maggie the Mechanic appeared, there is a long history of female adventure stories in which "female" is added as an adjective to an occupation (implicitly understood as normally male) in the title, such as *The Female Land Pirate*, *The Female Marine*, *The Female Criminal*, and so forth. By the turn of the twentieth century, the boy inventors and mechanics of dime novels and serialized story-paper fiction in newspapers, and, later, the engineers and

pilots of pulp science fiction and early comics, sometimes had “female” counterparts—tomboyish girls who challenge the rules of gender and sexuality by wanting to do what is usually reserved for boys, even as their beauty and appeal to men suggest that their tomboy status is a transitional stage, like a butterfly’s cocoon (Streeby 2002, 83–135).

Science fiction as a genre is deeply entangled with this history of cheap stories of invention, engineering, transport, and mechanics. Maggie’s persistent love for Hopey, along with Jaime’s many other changes to the usual story, fundamentally transforms the popular conventions of female adventure, which often pivot on the whiteness of the heroine. Yet Maggie’s character type—the plucky and gender-transgressive girl or woman who takes on a “male” occupation—is familiar from the subgenre of female adventure first popularized in dime novels, cheap newspapers, and pulp science fiction magazines. Jaime thus brings together the histories of female adventure, science fiction, and comics, juxtaposing dinosaurs with rocket ships as Maggie travels the world “to fix rockets and robots and have adventures” (Hernandez 1983c).

In *Love and Rockets*, the rockets and robots blast Maggie out of her usual space-time continuum, juxtaposing the realist details that make up her life at home with other worlds where things are dramatically different and where almost anything is possible, notably including revolution in the first stories. This female adventure story transports its heroine across the globe to help fix a rocket that crashed into the jungle years ago. Stuck in the mud next to the rocket is a giant dinosaur, a fantastic juxtaposition that is another example of Jaime’s imaginative mixing of different temporalities, another way he puts pressure on realist notions of time. While in Zymbodia, Maggie comes under the tutelage of Rena Titañon, a former superhero and female world wrestling champion from whom Maggie’s Aunt Vicki stole the title. Rena ostensibly came to Zymbodia to do research on why dinosaurs were still alive there and why ones from so many different times existed, but she was actually there to covertly help incite revolution, a project that ends up succeeding. When Rena “wasn’t in the ring she was trotting the globe fighting monsters and crooks, starting revolutions and all other types of heroics” (Hernandez 1983a, 13). At the end of this story, it turns out that “the people of Zymbodia planned to destroy their self-appointed leader” all along and had thus called in Rena, who “shows the people how to think free then moves on” (40). In these ways, Jaime’s strange juxtapositions and convergences open up the possibility that the scene of the static “real” can be reimagined and transformed, partly by playing with and unsettling realist notions of time and temporality.

Chicano SFF Speculations on the Quotidian

At the same time, the juxtaposition of the quotidian and mundane with the fantastic and the science fictional also makes us look differently at what gets reified as the real; it denaturalizes and changes our perspective on what we thought was familiar and forces us to look again. One of the most memorable aspects of *Love and Rockets* is Jaime's time-capsule capturing of key details of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century working-class life in Southern California, including its low-rise sprawl; architectural styles such as dingbats and stucco apartment complexes; the look of the streets from the perspective of those who walk as well as those who drive; neighborhood restaurants, thrift stores, and barber shops; the particularities of style and fashion, especially those of the punk world; lettering and icons on signs, posters, and billboards; the creative interior decoration in working-class apartments; the inside of clubs; party scenes; and so on. Because of these oft-remarked layers of detail, comics scholar Scott McCloud classifies Jaime as an artist who combines "very iconic characters with unusually realistic backgrounds," allowing readers to "mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (1993, 43). Jaime both embraces and swerves away from the mundane, however, by imagining sensually stimulating alternate worlds that do not reproduce static, sociological conceptions of barrio life. The codes of science fiction and fantasy are indispensable to this project.

Many *Love and Rockets* readers appreciated that the convergence of SFF and realism was one of the things that made the comic great. Thus Fantagraphics editor Gary Groth's periodic references to the demise of science fiction in the comic caused some readers to write in and argue that *Love and Rockets*' unusual take on science fiction was a big part of its appeal. In one of the first published letters from a female fan, which appeared in *Love and Rockets* 1, no. 9 (November 1984), the author, "Karen Weiss and her friends," wrote that she especially appreciated the combination of realism—the layers of details depicting the lives of these "amazing chicks"—and fantasy in Jaime's stories:

It's incredible that Jaime, by all accounts a male, should have such insights into female friendships, feelings, and fashions. The excellence of the plot and plight of these amazing chicks is rivaled only by the artwork involved in their depiction. Every weird angle, reverse negative, bizarre shadow, piece of graffiti, rip in the sleeper-sofa, visible panty-line, ace bandage all enrich this very real fantasy.

Although many artists have used detailed depictions of working-class neighborhoods to suggest that the lives of their inhabitants are fixed, static, and defined by loss and pain, Jaime's juxtaposition of realism and SFF, this fan suggests, interrupts these clichés that only reproduce damage. The comic not only sees beauty in what others' limited imaginations render as simply ugly and lacking but also speculates on the quotidian in light of the fantastic and science fictional, thereby putting pressure on dominant, static framings of the "real."

In the fourth issue, for instance, the narrator begins to characterize Maggie and Hopey by stringing together a list of stereotypical sociological details, but then the sentence takes a surprising turn: "They live in a small run-down apartment in a Mexican neighborhood, always without food, months behind on rent, and rumor has it that they're lesbians. How perfect can you get? The only thing she doesn't have is superpowers. But wait, she has a job" (Hernandez 1983c, 1). While the first four details sound like a predictable litany of working-class deprivation, Jaime humorously transforms lack into plenitude and abundance, deeming Maggie's and Hopey's arty, marginal, nonbourgeois, possibly lesbian life "perfect" rather than aberrant or insufficient. Revising the initial claim that the only thing Maggie lacks is "superpowers," Jaime suggests that Maggie manifests superpowers in her daily life, in her job as a mechanic, which cracks the deficit lens through which urban working-class worlds and queer lives and times are often viewed.

And these realist scenes of Maggie and Hopey in the neighborhood streets, in a car packed full of *locas*, in bed, at the barbershop, and so forth share space with other stories in which Maggie is transported to other worlds or in which she is a superhero, such as "Maggie v. Manniak." The superhero storylines in Jaime's comics are important from the beginning, especially in the narrative arc of Penny Century (Beatriz García), a character from back home who somehow turns up across the globe in Zymbodia. Beatriz is also an avid comic book reader who longs for superpowers, and it is her desire that provokes the telling of Maggie's own story about how she was a superhero once. Following a familiar pattern, Jaime explains the birth of superheroes and super-villains by telling a story about science run amok. While fixing a highly delicate mini-transporter as part of her first job as a pro-solar mechanic, Maggie plays with the machine and ends up inadvertently liberating Manniak, "voyager of the cosmic stream" and "possessor of the infinitesimal [*sic*] power of the universe," thereby enabling him to return to our world, which he plans to dominate and rule (Hernandez 1983b, 25).

To avert disaster, Maggie researches superhero comic history and finds an old Ultimax comic, which explains how Ultimax once defeated Manniak. Before Ultimax will agree to save the world, however, he requires Maggie to join him as a superhero sidekick in this endeavor. The alternate worlds that Maggie and Penny Century inhabit are connected because Jaime's characters appear in both, miraculously recognizable, as one reader commented, despite dramatic changes in setting and in how the characters look. This juxtaposition and convergence of the codes of realism and SFF transport and transform Jaime's characters, unsettling familiar stereotypes about barrio life to insist that other worlds are possible, both within and outside the everyday working-class spaces of greater Latino Los Angeles.

Another unusual story of transport and mobility that adapts SFF codes in the early issues features a young black woman, Rocky (short for Rocket), and her robot Fumble, who inhabit a near-future world. Jaime introduced Rocky and Fumble in the fourth issue, along with the story about Maggie's and Hopey's "perfect" life that's better than having superpowers; Rocky and Fumble also appear at the bottom of the front cover, juxtaposed to Jaime's *locas* and female figures from Gilbert's stories. The beautiful space scenes and the unusual characters are the most striking aspects of these stories, which are episodic and do not unfold in a linear progression. A later issue travels backward in time to provide Fumble's origin story: the garbage man, who had previously given Rocky wonderful unexpected presents like a copy of "Dennis the Menace in Mexico," gifts her with a cast-off robot which, with her dad's help, soon comes to life, making her the happiest little girl in the universe. (So *rasquache*!³ In Jaime's world, trash is something potentially valuable and generative.)

Rocky lives on a farm and longs for mobility and freedom. During a visit to her cousin in the big city, she finds a strange portal in the backyard that opens up onto the galaxies, which Rocky and Fumble decide to explore. The art is especially stunning in these sequences as Rocky climbs the backyard fence and stands looking at the universe, breathing in the smell of outer space; ascends into the stars, spinning around while holding the hand of her faithful robot; and balances on an asteroid with worlds behind her and Fumble on her shoulder. Such fantasies of transport and mobility, of not being fixed in place, interrupt the stereotypical, sociological "real" that black characters are more typically used to support. But the story ends abruptly and unexpectedly when the hole in space closes up while Fumble is away, and Rocky is forced to settle on the planet of Mako Mato, hoping that Fumble will return and that together they can find their way home.

Instead of remaining lost in space, however, Rocky later turns up in Hoppers as a friend of Danita Lincoln, one of Maggie's co-workers who briefly dates Ray, thereby further entangling realist and SFF worlds.⁴ And in a recent interview, Jaime says he initially imagined the Weeper, one of the female superheroes in his post-2006 *Ti-Girls* stories, as one of his "old characters"—namely Rocky—in a "different dimension" (Hernandez 2012a).

Despite Rocky's return, in different forms, to the realist and SFF worlds of Jaime's later comics, the closing up of the hole in space in this 1986 issue resonates with what has become a critical commonplace: that Jaime eventually turned away from SFF to embrace a deeper realism. But the more I studied Jaime's work, the more I became convinced that this transition never fully took place. Yes, there is a deepening of the gorgeous *rasquache* realism of the Hoppers world, but it is striking that even when there is an explicit and self-conscious statement that the comic is moving away from SFF, its codes and conventions are still quite evident. As early as the eighth issue, for instance, editor Groth claimed that the comic was starting to lean "more toward love than rockets." He added, however, that "the rockets are still there, of course—symbolically, at least, in Jaime's adroit mixture of realism and fantasy—but the emphasis is clearly on the drama and humor found among ordinary lives." And yet, despite this professed greater attention to ordinary lives, Maggie and Rena Titañon look far from ordinary on the cover of the very next issue, where they are shown trapped in a tunnel and thigh-deep in a weird, oozing black and yellow liquid after an explosion in a robot warehouse.

But midway through the 1980s, Jaime does shift the Maggie and Hopey stories toward a more finely elaborated vision of everyday life in Hoppers and its surround. As Jaime has suggested, this was partly a response to Gilbert, who continued to create science fiction and surreal stories but began to be bolder and more experimental in imagining the characters and complex worlds of Palomar, a fictional town located somewhere south of the US-Mexico border that soon became the main setting for Gilbert's comic world. Thus it is not surprising that Jaime, working closely with Gilbert, would feel challenged to be more ambitious and serious in imagining his own art and would produce stories such as "The Death of Speedy," a 1987 tragic tale of the demise of one of the male Hoppers characters, which has been acclaimed as a masterwork and as indicating a fundamental shift in Jaime's art.⁵

Jaime's interest in exploring more facets of Maggie's character, especially her aging and her struggles with weight, also led to the deepening

of his depiction of life in Hoppers. This is especially evident in the Ray Dominguez and Maggie storyline, introduced in 1987 and persisting through his latest work, which includes lush renderings of many details of their everyday lives. The June 1988 issue, for instance, features an opening full-page picture in which Maggie is curled, spoon-like, around Ray, whose penis is shown despite the usual ban on it in US popular culture. Other details, such as the records and album covers on the floor, the posters on the wall, the plaid and floral blankets, and the stripes on the rugs all add to what is in some ways a revitalized, deeper realism. But at the same time, what comics scholar Charles Hatfield characterizes as the achievement of “a startling degree of realism” (2005, 72), comparable to the “deep focus” (73) of photography and cinema, coexists with Jaime’s continuing interest in female superheroes and SFF codes.

Rena Titañon is just one member of the extensive multigenerational female superhero crew that Jaime has drawn so lovingly from the earliest days of the comic to the present. Penny Century/Beatriz García is another significant SFF character who inhabits the *Love and Rockets* mix from the beginning. Penny eventually marries billionaire H. R. Costigan, whose prominent horns are one sign of this character’s distance from a realist universe. During the five-year hiatus (1996–2001) between the two volumes of *Love and Rockets*, Jaime even made Penny the star of a new comic bearing her name. On the cover of the first issue in December 1997, she is resplendent in a superhero costume, complete with cape, boots, and tiny purse. Inside are stories that connect her superhero world to the many other worlds that Jaime imagines.

It is important to note that Penny moves back and forth between Maggie’s, Hopey’s, and Ray’s worlds. In other words, she is not isolated in her SFF world but brings SFF elements with her when she crosses over into the Hoppers world. For instance, in a one-page episode called “I Am From Earth,” sandwiched in between stories about Maggie and Hopey, caped superhero Penny walks the rocky terrain of an alien planet with two other female superheroes, telling them about the strange ways of Earth and about two of her friends who are hopelessly in love with each other but are constantly on the run from each other—an allusion to Maggie and Hopey that further entangles these converging universes (fig. 3). Jaime’s juxtaposition of a kind of quotidian working-class Latina/o Southern California realism with SFF thus continues in these late 1990s stories rather than being left behind by the great artist who, some suggested, had finally learned to use his gifts in the service of realism. And after 2000, in the second series of



Figure 3. "I Am From Earth," Penny Century, no. 5 (1999). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.

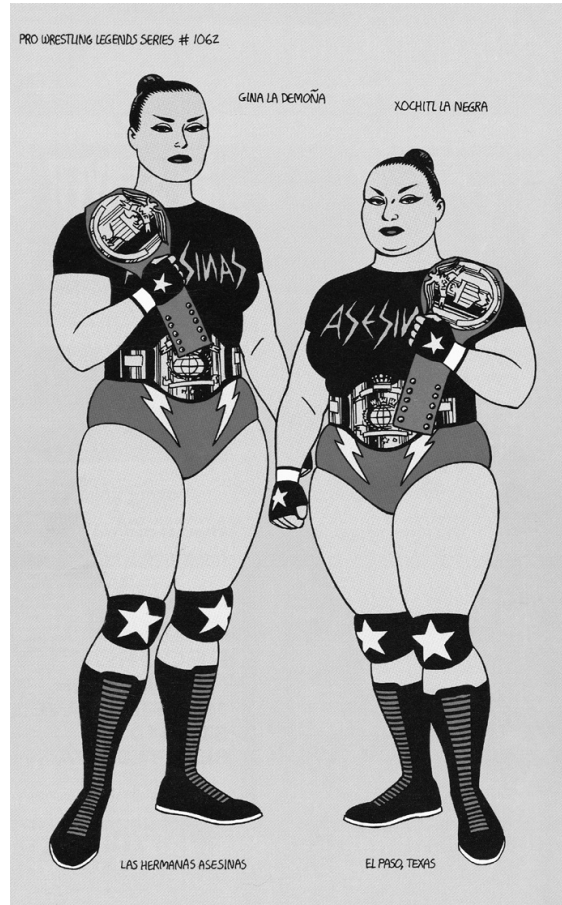
Love and Rockets and in the brothers' *New Stories*, published since 2008, the SFF elements become, if anything, more prominent than they were in the 1990s. In the conclusion, I suggest that when these SFF elements move to the foreground and collide with the Hoppers universe, Jaime's converging worlds open up new possibilities for displacing and transforming the usual "realist" chronologies of the aging female body's physical decline and irrelevance.

World-Changing Bodies Defying Space and Time: Superheroes and Wrestlers

During the 1990s, in the years before Jaime's post-2000 proliferation of non-normative female superhero stories, the world of wrestling, which overlaps in many ways with the superhero world, was Maggie's main connection, along with her relationship to Beatriz/Penny, to Jaime's more fantastic stories of female adventure. You may recall that Rena Titañon was introduced in the first issues as both a wrestler and a superhero and that Rena had the world wrestling title stolen from her by Maggie's Aunt Vicki. In his 1990s *Whoa Nellie!* comic, Jaime brings Maggie back into Vicki's world in a dramatic way. Among other things, Aunt Vicki teaches Maggie important lessons about their illustrious lineage as the offspring of Mexican wrestlers, including a female forebear who wrestled both women and men in Mexican sideshows: "I could feel it in my bones . . . you were the one," Vicki tells her niece, disappointed that Maggie is unwilling to step into the ring and alluding to her mighty untapped powers (Hernandez 1996, 11). Throughout *Love and Rockets* and its related texts, the wrestling world and the superhero world are connected in multiple ways. For one thing, "All superheroes from Mexico started out in the ring" (Hernandez 2012b, 27). For another, there are the costumes, which Jaime loves to draw. If you're just looking at the pictures and not reading the text, it can be difficult to decide whether a given drawing shows a wrestler or a superhero—the boots, belts, elaborate outfits, and dramatic poses are the same (fig. 4). Both the superhero and the wrestler do wondrous, heroic things with their bodies—and physical action is central to stories about both superheroes and wrestlers.

This is another process that connects Jaime's work to Chicana/o working-class culture and the world of Mexican wrestling: the working body, the body that mostly labors or suffers in realist representations, instead becomes superhuman, world-changing, invincible. These kinds of heroics around the physical body and the transformative possibilities of physical

Figure 4. "Pro Wrestling Legends Series, no. 1062." Whoa, Nellie! no. 2 (1996). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.



action are commonplace in stories about men but still relatively rare for female characters, let alone older female characters. But in Jaime's Maggie and Vicki stories, we encounter female wrestlers such as the Birmingham Lady bashers, the greatest female tag team of all time, who appear to be quite elderly and are "so awesome that they haven't changed their hairstyles since they won the belts in '72." Their advanced age meets with no derision and does not even provoke any commentary in Jaime's world, where it is not at all unusual to encounter middle-aged and elderly women whose bodies are capable of amazing things and who defy normative narratives of female aging.

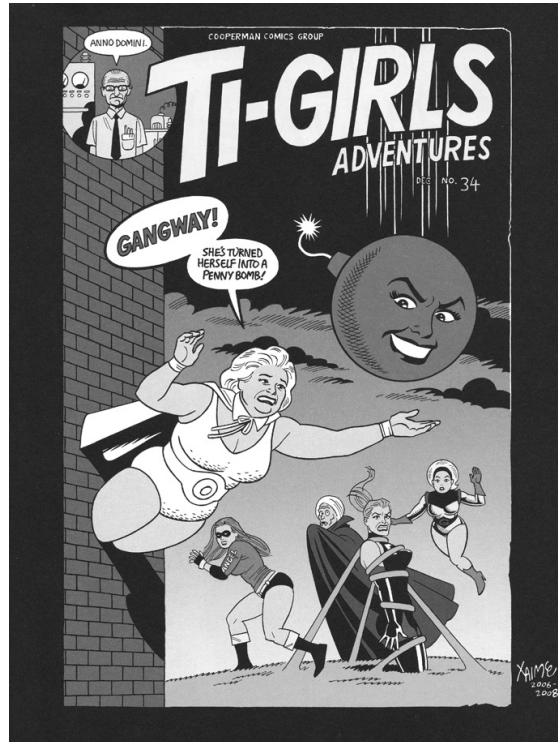
In the second volume of *Love and Rockets* that began in 2001, Jaime continues to play with the codes of SFF and to juxtapose them with realism, especially by focusing on the converging worlds of multigenerational superheroes and an aging Maggie. In doing so, he puts pressure on realist notions of time and also makes fun of and upends orthodoxies around age and aging. On the one hand, Jaime has devoted much thought and talent to representing Maggie as she ages. Twenty years ago, in a *Comics Journal* interview with Neil Gaiman, he said, "Maggie I can see growing old with"

(Hernandez 1995), and one of the main pleasures of reading Jaime's work through the years has been following the unpredictable and creative ways he imagines Maggie's aging. These representational methods refuse the usual timelines of female bodily decline and sexual irrelevance as well as conventional highlights of the normative female life such as childrearing. On the other hand, the realist project devoted to documenting Maggie's daily life over the decades, with its the artful accretion of telling details, is juxtaposed throughout the 2000s with SFF stories featuring Penny Century and Rena Titañon as well as female superheroes such as Space Queen and Cheetah Torpeda. These characters are straight out of the comics that Maggie reads obsessively after she stops fixing robots and rockets and instead uses her mechanical skills in her new job as a Valley apartment manager. Once again, SFF worlds and realist worlds are not separate worlds; instead they converge to create new possibilities.

These SFF comics play a significant role in Maggie's everyday life, which is only one of many ways that realist and SFF worlds continue to collide in Jaime's post-2000 work. These convergences are both imaginary and material: the comic world is an alternate world that gives Maggie strength, yet it is also a product of the imagination that does not stay in the realm of the imaginary but comes to life, affording opportunities for some characters, such as Maggie's friend Angel, to move back and forth between worlds. In a 2001 story, for instance, Maggie says the "lucky comics" that Hopey gave her when they "first started hanging out" got her through some of her "toughest bouts" of depression (Hernandez 2001, 10).

In the *New Stories* of 2008 to the present, Space Queen and Cheetah Torpeda figure in a new storyline, "The Ti-Girls Adventures" (fig. 5), which foregrounds the codes of SFF and disrupts normative narratives of the aging female body. This SFF storyline involves Penny Century, Maggie, and Angel, Maggie's new roommate and best friend, who joins the Ti-Girls after her mother reveals that she, too, used to have superpowers. "All women are born with it but most lose it at a really early age," Angel's mother tells her. She emphasizes, however, that women who access superpowers later in life make even more of an impact, since the most impressive powers tend to "blossom" when women are "much older." This account derails the usual heteronormative story in which females blossom when they're young, ripe for reproduction, and then begin their long decline. Here all females are born with superpowers: guys "gotta go out and have lab accidents and other stuff to get their cojones but we got it born right into us" (Hernandez 2012b, 82). Although many females lose these powers at an early age, perhaps

Figure 5. "Ti-Girls Adventures, no. 34." Mock cover. *Love and Rockets: New Stories*, no. 1 (2008). Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.



as a result of the disciplinary social process of “girling,” as Judith Butler (1993, xvii) calls it, superpowers tend to emerge in their strongest forms when embodied by older women. Thus in Jaime’s comic worlds, the aging woman’s body is the site of plenitude and the locus of amazing, generative powers rather than a phobic, diminished, sad object.

The series is strongly multigenerational, especially when the first generation of Ti-Girls comes out of retirement to help, which is another way Jaime reimagines and transforms the usual chronologies of the aging female body’s physical decline. Suddenly a bunch of senior citizen women are kicking serious ass, notably *Fuerza/Espectra* and the *Weeper*, the character Jaime originally based on Rocky, who wears a mask that “goes back to when her great great grandmother wore it to battle the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War” (Hernandez 2012b, 36). Although the clueless *Space Queen* thinks *Espectra* is “just a housekeeper,” she is actually the leader of the Ti-Girls, and she even has to help defeat her own evil double from the “dark depressing future” in one episode (fig. 6). There are extensive sequences of middle-aged and septuagenarian female physical action here that recall Jaime’s great female wrestling sequences featuring Vicki, Rena, the Birmingham Lady Bashers, and others. At the end of the story, the Ti-Girls head off to look at photos of the *Weeper*’s great-great-grandchild, thereby emphasizing their advanced age in a story that celebrates their



Figure 6. Love and Rockets: New Stories, no. 2 (2008). Excerpted strip from "Part 4: Mothers of Mercy," page 9. Reproduced by permission of Jaime Hernandez and Fantagraphics.

heroics and that must be seen as a kind of running SFF complement and counterpoint to the realist narrative of Maggie's aging.

When these serialized stories were collected under the title *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls* (Hernandez 2012b), Fantagraphics advertised it as a "rollickingly creative super-hero joyride featuring three separate super-teams and over two dozen characters" and ranging "from the other side of the universe to Maggie's shabby apartment." The excerpted strip

above also makes that connection, as scenes of Espectra kicking the ass of her double from the future are linked in the final frame to Maggie's and Angel's everyday lives in their Valley apartment. Angel hints that Maggie also may have the superhero "gift," and though Maggie replies, "Oh right, Angel," the reader can imagine all the ways in which it's true: Maggie is indeed a superhero, no matter what world she lives in. By bringing the other side of the universe into Maggie's apartment, Jaime and the Fantagraphics team called attention to a juxtaposition and convergence of SFF and realist worlds that has characterized Jaime's entire career. It is at the heart of his speculative brilliance, not only as one of the greatest cartoonists of all time but also as a major contributor to the Latina/o speculative arts and the SFF genres, which are key to imagining alternate worlds and futures today.

Notes

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1. Jaime's distorted present is inspired by Oxnard, California, the city north of Los Angeles where he and Gilbert were born. They were part of a large family of five brothers and one sister whose mother, Aurora, raised them alone after her husband, Santos, died before Jaime turned eight.

2. Other work on Los Bros includes Aldama (2006, 2009), Chang (2012), Creekmur (2013), Hatfield (2005), Merino (2009, 2010), Nericcio (2002), Saldívar (1991, 2011), Saxey (2006), Scott (1995), Tullis (2014), Vargas (2010), and Wolk (2007a, 2007b).

3. Building on the work of Mesa-Bains (1999) and Ybarra-Frausto (1990), Jason Bartles suggests that "a rasquache sensibility arises among those who live the reality of the 'down but not out' and who make use of everyday materials. Instead of throwing away 'trash,' they reuse and transform those materials to get by, but also to create and embellish" (2014, 108).

4. Another example of the convergence of fantastic and realist worlds is the case of Maggie's friend Izzy Reubens, whose world includes ghosts and strange dreams that Pepé Rojo has reminded me underline the significance of a Chicano version of the Mexican fantastic in Jaime's *locas* stories.

5. See Clough (2012), McDonald (2010), and González (2013).

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