

Frederick Luis Aldama Takes Comics Seriously

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Frederick Aldama, Eva Dale

E Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others. The college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

D David Staley 00:32


Frederick Luis Aldama is an Arts and Humanities Distinguished Professor in the Department of English, and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. He is founder and co-director of the Humanities and Cognitive Science High School Summer Institute at Ohio State. He has been honored with the 2016 American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education's Outstanding Latino Faculty in Higher Education Award. He joined the faculty of Ohio State in 2005. Welcome to Voices from Arts and Sciences, Dr. Aldama.

F Frederick Aldama 01:06

Thank you for having me.

D David Staley 01:08

So, I learned recently that you are a recipient of an Eisner Award. First of all, tell us what is an Eisner Award?



F Frederick Aldama 01:17

An Eisner Award in the world of comics is basically like getting an Oscar.

D David Staley 01:23

Oh, my goodness.

F Frederick Aldama 01:24

Yeah, it was.... what can I say? Definitely a big surprise, I had some stiff competition, including one of my colleagues here in the English department, Jared Gardner.

D David Staley 01:34

Oh, my goodness. Yes. And isn't that whatever Oscar nominee says something like, oh, it was such a such an honor to be nominated.

F Frederick Aldama 01:41

Yeah, big honor, big surprise.

D David Staley 01:43

So the award was for the Best Academic or Scholarly work, and it was for your work *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. Tell us about the book.

F Frederick Aldama 01:53

Okay, big long backstory, or just quick, long backstory: two years of going back into the archives to systematize what I'd kind of already known reading comics growing up, when we moved from Mexico City, I was, you know, little guy, first language was Spanish, and comics was my literacy device, actually, at the corner store where they had the spin racks and you could buy, pickup a comic for 25 cents. So the, say informal, research started, you know, when I was five years old, and then the formal research started a number of years ago, and it did take me about two years to go back, all the way back to the 1940s, and reconstruct that story that hadn't really been told. If you go to an encyclopedia for DC or Marvel, and you look up Latino, you don't see anything. So that was...that was the big part of it, telling that story that actually we have been around, we've been very significant part of that superhero comics history. And the other part of it, of course, is getting to the kind of cognitive stuff that I'm interested in. When you and I read comics, when our kids read comics, when our college kids are studying comics in our classrooms, it's more than just reading, of course, it's how the visuals are working to dynamically tell the story. How is it that a creator can distill and reconstruct the world visually as the dominant and tell a story through the visual means? So you know, where the alphabetic, the text part is very subordinate, and can complicate and layer but really, we're

after the visual. And so, a good part of the center of the book is about us as co-creators when we come to a great comic book story. So, not only in terms of representation of Latinxs, but also how the creators give shape to a story that's much more complicated, sophisticated, visually rich than another story. So it's not just what's in front of the camera, so to speak, but it's also how what's in front of the cameras given shape.

D David Staley 04:11

Tell us more about Latinx superheroes. What does that universe look like?

F Frederick Aldama 04:15

Yeah, so that was another kind of surprise. You think that it's going to be an easy teleology, say, you know, where it's gonna go from bad to better.

D David Staley 04:29

From no representation to something like the Black Panther?

F Frederick Aldama 04:32

Yeah, exactly. Right. And what you actually discover is that well, there is a trend in that direction, but there are ruptures that are really incredible at moments that would really surprise you. So, the 40s and 50s you had a lot of bandito characters, kind of unshaved, dark, kind of very slime ball-y, you know, the kind of Good, Bad and Ugly-styled, right, characters that you would see. Then you had the Zorro characters that were, you know, usually light skinned, they were landed gentry, and they were helping the hapless Latinos that were unable to help themselves. But then suddenly, out of nowhere, you'll get a really interesting character. White Tiger is a good example if we jumped forward a little bit. White Tiger, George Perez - amazing, amazing character. He's

D David Staley 05:25

What year is White Tiger?

F Frederick Aldama 05:27

Yeah, so he's in the 70s. So, we're jumping forward a little bit, but I want to give him as an example, because most of the stuff in the 70s was just garbage. I mean, you had... you started seeing Latinx superheroes, but they were... they spoke like, "What you doing, man?" You know, like, nobody, you don't hear anybody talk like that. Most typically, their superpower had to do with their body, not their brain. Most typically you would have, when they did appear, they would do all the work. And then the A-Lister, Anglo superheroes would come in. And I'm not joking, They would take all the glory at the end of the issue. So you have White Tiger come

along - George Perez - and it's dynamic in the, in the visuals and it's kinetic, it moves, and he's Puerto Rican proud. He's like, you know, very... he's Puerto Rican, New York, Nuyorican, rooted in culture from the island and from the mainland, wearing his I'm A Proud Puerto Rican t shirt, strong, amazing storytelling visually. Pow, right? So, there are these moments that just come along that throw that sort of teleology out of whack a little bit. And we keep going, we keep getting some really amazing Latinx superheroes. Today, we have Black Latinx, so African American and Latino with Miles Morales as Spider Man, and they're the Marvel Ultimate Universe. We've got women, in fact White Tiger now, the mantle was passed down to Hector Ayala's niece. So, we now have a Latina who's White Tiger now, all of these making up our Marvel DC mainstream universe. One little piece of this that I should add: the third part of my book, I look at the willful erasures of Latinx superheroes when we get to Hollywood studio filmmaking.

D

David Staley 07:30

Explain.

F

Frederick Aldama 07:32

So, a great example: Bane, one of our great Latinx supervillains in the Batman DC Universe. He's smart, he's the child of political revolutionaries in a Hispanophone island in the Caribbean. He's jailed for the crimes of his parents, they were revolutionaries, and in jail, he becomes an autodidact. He reads everything from you know, Greek and Latin to multiple languages, and he's also trained himself physically. One of the greatest supervillains in the DC universe, and he's Latinx. Tom Hardy plays Bane in the Chris Nolan, The Dark Knight Rises. Missed opportunity, but also a willful eraser. You've got teams of people doing research on DC Comics, how could they make such a mistake? If not, because there was some willfulness in the casting of Tom Hardy. We see that constantly. X-Men - tons of Latinx characters in the X-Men universe - when it actually gets to the silver screen, gone. They're either Anglo or they're identifiably African or Black, African American, and the Latinx is completely erased.

D

David Staley 08:51

Speculation as to why that might be? Understanding it's your speculation.

F

Frederick Aldama 08:54

Yeah, speculation. We need to get people to start, you know, the big creators, the big creative minds in Hollywood and beyond need to start thinking beyond the kind of Black/White racial paradigm, our country is much more sophisticated and complicated than just Black and White. And that brown, in its erasure or in its extreme caricature, as a threat, a bandido, a buffoon even, hypersexual, becomes a kind of sounding board for White saviorhood. We need to get rid of those paradigms, we need to get rid of those narratives and start thinking about recreating our country in the way that it is complicated.

D

David Staley 09:38

So you describe this wonderful journey from sort of a kid reading comics to a scholar of comics. I'm interested in, I guess, the wider field. Why comics? Why take comics seriously, why have scholars become interested in comics?

F

Frederick Aldama 09:53

Yeah, great question. To be honest, when I was finishing my PhD at Stanford in '99, and then I had a postdoc, I actually wanted to write a book on comics. But, I also knew that I needed tenure and a job and all that good stuff, and I knew back then that there was just no way I was going to, you know, jump the hurdles with that.

D

David Staley 10:15

And to be clear, you're not talking about making a comic book, you're just simply talking about writing about comics, just even that was would be risky.

F

Frederick Aldama 10:22

Absolutely. So I knew as soon as I made full professor that I could do something like that. Now, thankfully, we have people like Jared Gardner and others, many others across the country. But my colleagues here at OSU working on this in a really serious way, just like we might work on, I don't know, James Joyce's Ulysses or something.

D

David Staley 10:42

So was the availability of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum a reason you came here, or at least a spirit of this kind of research?

F

Frederick Aldama 10:53

Absolutely. Yeah, it was one of the many reasons, right, that we, you know, many of us not only came but are really like anchored. Billy Ireland with its, you know, world renowned, massive trove of original art from, you know, all the way... the 19th all the way up to today, in terms of centuries. My colleagues, of course, as a result of that we've, you know, there's a critical mass of us, which also means we've got a critical mass of new PhDs and undergrads that are wanting to do this kind of stuff. Now, today, our PhDs are writing dissertations on comics. So yeah, there's been a big sea change here at OSU, but across the country, comic scholarship, growing up in and around that. And to be honest, I think the future of comic books, as you had kind of mentioned earlier, the future of comic books is in the classroom.

D

David Staley 11:47

In what way?

in what way:

F

Frederick Aldama 11:48

Single issue comics, mainstream comics, DC, Marvel and so on, they, they, of course, they do well, but they aren't doing what they did, you know, 20, 30 years ago. People, with \$4.99, they hesitate to buy a single issue comic, most folks are going to wait until it's collected into a volume and sold as a book. So, think about this: we now are reading books, comic books, people call them graphic novels, etc., but they're comic books, but you know, they're robust. Libraries can now buy those, they can put them on their shelves, our library can buy them. We can assign them in classrooms, the students can go home, they have a book to study now, the format itself is conducive to it. So there's a kind of intellectualism that has been able to attach itself because the artifact itself has changed.

D

David Staley 12:44

Well, you've maybe given some sort of sense of this, and you've certainly talked about it in relation to your own work, but what is it that scholars of comics sort of examine, give us a sense of the scope of scholarly interest in comics?

F

Frederick Aldama 12:58

Yeah, so it's as wide and as varied as literary scholarship, film scholarship, etc. So...

D

David Staley 13:06

We wouldn't laugh at people reading dime store novels, for instance, or people studying film, right, so maybe we shouldn't feel the same way about comics?

F

Frederick Aldama 13:15

Right, absolutely. We can be as moved by a comic that changes our perception about the world as we can of film or like you said, a dime store, a penny novel, etc. There is as much sort of ethical sophistication and complication in a comic book that we can find in a James Joyce Ulysses, say, so why not bring that into our classrooms? Bring the grammar of comics into the vocabulary of our students, which is not the same grammar as reading alphabetic novels. Showing them how the vocabulary of filmmaking, you know, the close up, the medium close up, shot, the long shot, etc., are working, how panel layouts function, how balloons can create tensions with what's going on in the character's body posture in a frame. Give them the tools for understanding, right, the grammar of visual storytelling in that sense, so that they can understand also how their emotions attach to the story, and then how those emotions are turned upside down, how they might start thinking about questions of ethics, what's right, what's wrong, and all of the very sort of complicated ways that that operates.



D David Staley 14:41

Do you have, in your classes, do you have students produce their own comics?

F Frederick Aldama 14:46

Yeah, I do, actually. In my Latinx pop culture course, we read comics and as an exercise, I have them take a half an hour to distill and reconstruct through visual means a hinge moment in their life, to go back to a moment in their life that it could have gone different. And some are very sophisticated drawers, others are not, it doesn't matter. The important thing is, is that they see the process involved in distilling something from the imagination, and then reconstructing it through visual means. And even the most simplistic, or simple stick figures can do an amazing job of conveying a story with its richness.

D David Staley 15:33

I have to ask, do you compose or produce comics?

F Frederick Aldama 15:37

I do, with someone. So, I work with different artists and we work together. I set up the story, I do most of the scripting and the writing, and then we work on storyboarding together, get a sense of how the story is going to work visually, and then I let them do the visual art part.

D David Staley 16:02

So, and you've mentioned this before, but I'm interested in as part of this production process, the way that word and image work together and how you as what, sort of the creator, the designer, think about that relationship?

F Frederick Aldama 16:18

Really important. So, going from a paragraph of writing about an experience, an exchange, an interior state of mind, down to five or six words that you know are going to be reproduced actually on the page. But in conversation with the artist, working out visually how the visuals fill back up the space of taking away that entire paragraph of words, where you're only left with one or two or three words.

D David Staley 16:58

Almost, well, almost an act of translation.

F Frederick Aldama 17:01

Absolutely an act of translation. Yeah, it's an act of translation, paraphrase, all of those processes that we use to distill and then kind of reconstruct,

D David Staley 17:12

Do you ever clash with your artist, collaborator? Do you ever sort of say no, that's not what I have in mind, or you've got it all wrong, or...

F Frederick Aldama 17:20

You know, one of the great things about the field and Latinx comic book creators is that we have a whole great massive variety of them with different styles, different ways of seeing the world. And I know most of these folks, I know how they think, and I know how they see the world, their values even. And of course, the style of their drawing, their line work and everything. So I pick in advance, and I'm like, I know we can work together and it works out, I've never had a problem.

D David Staley 17:53

I also note that you are the series editor of Latinographix, which is a new series with the Ohio State University, University Press. Tell us a little bit about the series?

F Frederick Aldama 18:03

Yeah, so to kind of get back to one of our earlier points, or my earlier point about the future of comics, the way I see it is really in the classroom. And I'm, I'm thinking, you know, I'm talking about high school, even before college, with our college kids and everything. I knew at a certain point that we had all of these incredible Latinx creators across the country, creating, making stories. It wasn't so much that they were not getting them out and finding readers. They were, the Internet, the digital revolution, all of that stuff has been really significant for these, for these creators. It's that for their work to have the kind of longevity, the shelf life, and the sort of seriousness of the scholarly apparatus, I knew that the future would be in the classroom. I went to OSU Press, I pitched it as a Trade Press series, but with OSU Press.

D David Staley 19:02

Trade Press means?

F Frederick Aldama 19:04

Means less than or right around \$20, something that's marketed in the same way that a best selling work of fiction would be marketed, so it's sent to reviewers from Publishers Weekly, New York Times, all of that stuff.

D David Staley 19:19

So a broader audience, not just an academic audience.

F Frederick Aldama 19:22

Absolutely. So, broad audience with the idea in the end of making sure these things are, we have books, we have these artifacts that we can now study, learn, enjoy, pass on, etc. So that was really the background where, last fall, a year ago, we had *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer*, Alberto Ledesma this spring. We also had *Angelitos*, Ilan Stavans and Cohen's book, and then this fall we have my *Tales from la Vida*, which is an edited collection and drawing. So we're doing really well.

D David Staley 19:58

You just mentioned the first book in that series was called a *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer*, tell us a little more about this book.

F Frederick Aldama 20:04

This is a really important book for me and for the community, for readers in general, because...and it's also the one we decided to launch the series with. Alberto Ledesma spent a great deal of his early and even young and adult life as an undocumented Latinx in this country. He managed, in spite of it all, to get a degree from Berkeley, get a PhD, and now he is Division of Graduate Studies Director at Berkeley. The journey of the one person speaking to the journey of the many, the many undocumented Latinxs in this country that bring so much value, that add so much to this country that we live in and that we all love, but that are forced to be invisible, that are forced to the margins, to not realize fully their potentialities and their dreams. And we see them with the young people especially, I wanted to make sure that book was the first one out of the gate.

D David Staley 21:10

And you mentioned some of the other books that are coming up in the series, including your own?

F Frederick Aldama 21:14

Yes, so *Tales from la Vida* is an edited volume that does include a work of mine with John Jennings. And the conceit with that was all my Latinx creators and friends, I want you to tell a story in two pages, show a story in two pages, something that you know, another hinge moment in your life, and they did, so we have over 80 contributors. It's a one stop shop for

people that might not be familiar with Latinx comics, you'll read it, you'll be like, oh my god, Javier Hernandez, there's something about this guy's story and about his style that I love. I'm gonna go find more of his stuff.

D David Staley 21:58

In doing a little bit of background research, I was looking at your website, and it says that you curate, this is a quote, "the planetary republic of comics." You have to tell us what this is.

F Frederick Aldama 22:07

Yeah, so this is a huge, massive database of original pieces that talk about comic books, comic book authors, etc., from everywhere outside of the U.S. The U.S. gets a kind of, you know, the lion's share of attention and scholarship, and I really wanted people to know that in Malaysia, we have comics, in Japan - of course, with you know, you were just talking about manga - in Korea, in the Philippines. Everywhere on the planet, we have comic books. And so, it's a searchable site, it is massive, and I was lucky enough to get people from all around the world to contribute pieces. Basically a living, breathing archive, that is telling the world that this is a place you can go if you want to learn about comics outside of those that are already spotlighted.

D David Staley 23:04

So, Japanese manga is clearly a very different style than say, DC or Marvel Comics. What are their sort of cultural differences can you point to as part of your work with this database?

F Frederick Aldama 23:17

Yeah, it's interesting that manga, for instance, already in the 70s was a place for boy/boy romances that you just wouldn't see in a mainstream comic universe in the U.S., in fact, you don't see it today. People get like, oh, my God, Archie, you know, now Archie universe has like a gay character, you know, wow. But they were already, I mean, you know, in the 70s, we already had cross dressing in manga. We had boy/boy romances, we had girl/girl romances, etc. Every country, historically, sociopolitically has its own contexts, and as a result, grows, authors and creators, you know, in very specific ways, but it's in surprising ways, things that really surprise you. You think that maybe, you know, Japan would be very conservative about that, and it's not.

D David Staley 24:14

So you mentioned Malaysian comics, for instance, if we translated the words into English, would that convey some, would we still be able to convey the context, I guess? Or is there something also visually, that marks these comics, as distinct such that maybe me as an American reader wouldn't be able to pick up on that?

F

Frederick Aldama 24:34

Yeah. It's still drawing dominant, word subordinate. So whether it's identified as a comic book, or a graphic novel, or a comic, or a historieta, or whatever, you know, word we're using, it's still... the concept remains the same, which is that we have the dominant as the visual kinetic force in the narrative.

D

David Staley 25:02

You had mentioned very early on in our conversation about cognitive approaches in your book, and I noted in your introduction that you are a founder and co-director of the Humanities and Cognitive Sciences High School Summer Institute. And so, how would you describe your work here, Cognitive Approaches to Culture, what does that entail?

F

Frederick Aldama 25:26

So, in fact, I'm directing and teaching right now at the Summer Institute, and I love it. I love that there's a space for high school students to see that the line between sciences and arts and humanities is really a line drawn in sand when you're asking the right question, say. And some of those are, why do we care about a character? Where does creativity come from? How is it that you can put two dots and a little line that's curved upwards and think "smiley face"? What is it about our brains that allows us to fill in those gaps? What kinds of schemas have we by say, convention and by biology, grown in each of us to be able to understand that as a smiley face? Why comics? Where does it come from, but even more foundationally? How is it that we can exercise our causal and counterfactual capacities, our capacity to imagine something that's not in our present, tangible present in our mind, and then work it out hypothetically, through visual form, or film form, or alphabetic form for someone else to come along and enjoy in the co-creative process? What are those foundational questions, and where can we find some answers? And for me, it's really about the humanities and the cognitive sciences.

D

David Staley 27:05

So what do the humanities, or what do you as a humanities professor, bring to that conversation?

F

Frederick Aldama 27:10

The questions, those questions, right? You know, I love character analysis. I love thematic analysis. It's what, you know, it's our bread and butter in the, you know, in literature classes. But even more so, I want to know why I love this character. Why, how can I even identify it as a character, as unique from another character? Those are the kinds of questions that people in the humanities, in the arts, are going to bring to the question of foundations of creativity, right.

D

David Staley 27:46

We've been talking quite a bit about Latinx culture in relation to comics, and I also know that you work in the area of Latinx studies, and I was wondering if you could give us a sense of the scope of this field. What is it that Latinx scholars study?

F Frederick Aldama 28:03

Okay, yeah. So let's start with Latinx, which, actually, that was a concept and term that was used already a decade or so ago, but mostly among LGBTQ Latino community folks, especially in an online space. And it's gained a lot of momentum in the last couple of years, and what I like about it is that it is inclusive. Latino is like male, Latina is female. But what if you don't identify either one or the other? Latinx is like, hey, we are a big family, we're all very complicated in the way that we self identify, let's be inclusive. But what I also love about it is it grew from young people, like I hear my college students talk about Latinx as a real concept of coming from a place of empowerment. And it's not a phase either it really it's, it's sticking, people are using it and I'm using it in titles of my books, I love it. I love that it's you know, that x there's just, it's the inclusive x. It's also a field that is inclusive. We, you know, I'm teaching my Latinx pop culture course right now this fall, and we do comics, we do TV, we do music, we read history through comics, we do music videos, we look at blogs and that space for Latinxs, and really try to understand how they're working, pull them apart and dissect them and understand how this knowledge, this field can be produced in so many different ways: history, sociology, politics, identity issues, etc. What are the major questions that scholars are asking in Latinx Studies? A lot of it is about representation. I mentioned at the very beginning of our...

D David Staley 30:03

The way in which Latinx culture is represented in pop culture, say, or...

F Frederick Aldama 30:07

Yes. So, when we talked at the beginning, I'd mentioned needing to kind of move away from simplistic paradigms of how we are in this country. A lot of the energy, the intellectual energy, the excavation work that you see in Latinx studies, is to really parse that and understand better not just, not just histories of representation and the maligning that has happened, but also the wonderful renaissance or the resistance to these kinds of narratives that have simplified us, coming from Latinx creators, comic book artists, etc, etc. Really complicating what it means to be a human being in this country that ancestrally is connected through the Caribbean or through the Central and Latin Americas to language, history, etc., etc.

D David Staley 31:08

Frederick Aldama, thank you.

F Frederick Aldama 31:10

Thank you very much.



Eva Dale 31:12

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