

THE FANTASMICAL GOTHIC HETEROTOPIA IN RHODE MONTIJO'S *PABLO'S INFERNO*

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ABSTRACT

Rhode Montijo's work is characterized by a distinctive blend of diverse elements converging in his "fantasmical world". As comic book artist, he is the author of the limited series *Pablo's Inferno* (1999-2000), narrating a little Mexican American boy's travel through the underworld. Accompanied by fallen demi-god Quetzal, Pablo embarks in a quest to (re)discover his cultural roots and commit to them. Like most of Montijo's work, the comic book series holds an intrinsic gothic mode exploiting the playful nature of the comic medium and interrogating Mexican American heritage, by means of absorption of different genres, tropes, and diegetic elements. By examining the use of the Gothic distinctive of his work, the analysis will highlight the representation of the elements the author retrieved from his strong connection with Mexican heritage and the modes of children's gothic fiction, revealing the unique cross-genre Montijo created to convey the identity related issues peculiar to the Mexican American experience.

KEYWORDS: Chicanx comics; gothic; Mexican American heritage; children's gothic; Mexican folklore; Aztec mythology.

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Marini, Anna Marta. "The Fantasmical Gothic Heterotopia in Rhode Montijo's *Pablo's Inferno*". *Camino Real*, vol. 13, no. 16, 2021, pp. 85-100.

Recibido: 22 de octubre de 2020

RESUMEN

La obra de Rhode Montijo se caracteriza por ser una mezcla peculiar de distintos elementos que convergen en su propio “fantasmical world”. Como creador de cómics, es el autor de la miniserie *Pablo’s Inferno* (1999-2000), que recuenta el viaje de un niño mexicanoamericano a través del inframundo. Acompañado por Quetzal, un semi-dios caído en desgracia, Pablos se embarca en una expedición en búsqueda de sus raíces culturales para comprometerse a ellas. Como acontece en la mayoría de los trabajos por Montijo, la miniserie presenta un modo gótico intrínseco que aprovecha la naturaleza lúdica del cómic y pone en tela de juicio el patrimonio cultural mexicanoamericano, absorbiendo una variedad de géneros, tropos, y elementos diegéticos. Examinando el empleo del Gótico que caracteriza su trabajo, este análisis enfoca tanto la representación de los componentes que derivan de su conexión con el patrimonio cultural mexicano como los modos típicos de la ficción gótica para niños, revelando el género narrativo único que Montijo ha creado para expresar los asuntos identitarios propios de la experiencia mexicanoamericana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: cómic chicano; gótico; patrimonio mexicanoamericano; gótico infantil; folklor mexicano; mitología azteca.

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The evolution of Californian creator Rhode Montijo’s work has been characterized by a rather distinctive blend of diverse elements, spanning across artistic media and with a strong connection to his Mexican American heritage. Besides his renowned Halloween-related creations populating his “fantasmical world”, Montijo has engaged in the industry of animation as character designer and is the co-creator of viral award-winning web series *Happy Tree Friends* (1999–2016). Aside from working as an illustrator, he has created several standalone illustrated books for children—such as *Cloud Boy* (2006), *The Halloween Kid* (2010), and *Skeletown* (2011)—as well as the chapter book series *The Gumazing Gum Girl!* (2013–present) revolving around the adventures of a little superpowered Mexican American girl.

As comic book creator, Montijo is the author of the limited series *Pablo’s Inferno*, published between 1999 and 2000 thanks to the granting of the Xeric Foundation award. Its plot starts off with the violent death of Pablo, a little Mexican American boy who subsequently finds himself at the doors of the underworld; from there, he will embark in a quest to (re)discover his cultural roots and commit to them. Like most of Montijo’s work, the comic book series holds an intrinsic gothic mode that exploits the playful nature of the medium

and interrogates Mexican American heritage, by means of absorption of different genres, tropes, and diegetic elements. In *Pablo's Inferno*, the identity crisis implicit to gothic fiction becomes a crisis of cultural identity and Pablo's journey unfolds as a reconstruction of ethnic belonging, sprouting from heritage-related anxiety. Transgressing boundaries and borders—both metaphorical and material—the little protagonist finds himself facing the strange and unknown and yet, through this journey a world opens for him, allowing him to deal with inner conflicts and form a satisfactory identity as Mexican American. Aside from the intrinsic preoccupation with death, the gothic mode facilitates an “unconscious outlet for [one's] own pain” (Howarth 6), as well as gothic elements can be exploited as tools to discover oneself and, by extension, one's own—forgotten, forcedly assimilated, or simply unexplored—heritage. The gothic chronotope—in adult as much as in children's literature—is “often a place [...] haunted by a past that remains present” (Jackson, McGillis & Coats 4) and so is the eerie spirit world in which Pablo's journey is set, where space and time are irrelevant, supernatural elements intertwine, and mythic mysteries untangle. The first book—whose narrative outline was actually written by Dan Chapman (Montijo, *The (re)Discovery*)—functions as introduction to the following four, in which Montijo's vision emerges and Pablo's adventure finds its true shape. The author connects the shift to his own personal experience: after creating the first installment of the series, he traveled deep into Mexico—instead of just limiting his visit to Mexicali, his parents' hometown on the border—in what he considers a personal (re)discovery of heritage (Montijo in Aldama 217-218; Montijo, *The (re)Discovery*). Thus, Pablo finds himself within a transformative heterotopia (Foucault), a space for self-reflection conflating a diversity of heritage elements and functioning as facilitator to articulate and embrace Mexican American otherness.

Other Mexican American comic book creators have tackled heritage related narratives by shaping cross-genres inspired by horror—from Rafael Navarro's horror lucha-noir *Sonambulo* (1996–present) to Eric Esquivel's magic realist horror *Border Town* (2018)—, whereas the nuances of the gothic remain fairly unexplored in Chicanx comics. By analyzing the use of gothic modes distinctive of Rhode Montijo's work, the analysis will highlight their connections with the representation and reinterpretation of different elements the author retrieved from

his Mexican heritage—and thus, how the gothic can be a suitable genre to convey identity related issues. In fact, the peculiarity of *Pablo's Inferno* lies in both the thoughtful insertion of pre-Hispanic, folk, and popular culture themes, and the unique cross-genre the author creates. Furthermore, it will be shown how Montijo's work is characterized by a connection to the modes of children's gothic fiction in particular, and their focus on specific child related struggles.

1. IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION AND THE SYNERGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Following his untimely death, Pablo finds himself at the doors of the underworld. Book #1 is structured as a parody of the initial steps of Dante's journey described in his epic poem *Divine Comedy*, from one hellish place to the following. The second book starts off with a connection between this narrative structure and the articulation related with the quest for Mexican American identity: in a quirky gothic carnival, Pablo meets his future companion Quetzal (#2 6) and from there, their shared adventure begins on a trail of signs and tropes. After overcoming some initial obstacles and meeting a few significant characters—which will be analyzed further on as they belong to Mexican cultural heritage—the two find themselves in a secret vault hidden under an abandoned church (#3 16). In this space—constructed according to eminently gothic tropes—they discover a great collection of texts compiled by a fictionalized San Bernardino, blending Catholic Novohispanic notions and pre-Hispanic knowledge (Figure 1).

The protagonists will leave the vault taking with them some of these texts, which they will consult later to better understand the depth of their quest and the necessity for their mission. Gothic modes engage with collective anxieties, as well as issues related with cultural and political oppression. The fear and sense of confrontation intrinsic to otherness often establishes dichotomic boundaries, whose apparent stability can be challenged by the transgression of the boundaries themselves. The gothic undertaking represented by attaining and dealing with forbidden knowledge is a device that allows the exploration of taboos, as well as neglected perspectives. The acquisition of such knowledge could put the gothic subject in the realm of the divine (Punter, *Literature of Terror*), possibly



Figure 1. *Pablo's Inferno*

Source: Montijo. *Pablo's Inferno*. Issue 3, 2000, p. 20. © 2000 Abismo – Montijo.

dangerously and yet, in Montijo's narrative the mediatory handling of the texts is performed by Quetzal, a fallen ancient god in search of redemption, whose profound care is evident. In *Pablo's Inferno* the (re)discovery of ancient texts is crucial, as the collection embodies the hybrid Mexican and the even more hybrid Mexican American heritage.

It is worth reminding—and employing here as a critical tool of comparison—Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a renowned novel characterized by intrinsic gothic modes, whose study has been often neglected in favor of the semiotic value of the text. Eco's medieval protagonists are friar William of Baskerville and his novice assistant Adso of Melk, who get involved in solving a series of murders happening in the abbey that they are visiting to attend a theological disputation. The unfolding of the mystery is strictly connected to the search for texts censored by the Catholic church, vetoed for containing allegedly subversive—and thus dangerous—perspectives and interpretations of reality. The access to the vault is quite similar in both works, as the protagonists descend through a trap door on the floor of a chapel, hidden by a sculpture. For William and Adso the locus enclosing knowledge is a labyrinthine monastic library, whereas for Pablo and Quetzal it is a dark, eerie cave in which they get to face a historical past fundamental to deconstruct the intrinsic conflicts of Mexican American identity. Both Montijo

and Eco exploit the self-conscious features of the gothic mode, and thus the trope represented by the finding of manuscripts, connected to mysteries about and contained in the texts themselves, leading to an interpretation in which knowledge and power intertwine. In gothic fiction, the problematization of authenticity and legitimacy can be achieved, indeed, through the reference to “a previous tale or lost text” (Horner & Zlosnik 10). Facing a postmodern crisis of cultural legitimacy, a fragmented gothic identity faces a diversity of possibilities and goes through processes of exploration, opposition, exclusion, and embracement, discovering marginalized elements and delving into its otherness.

Thus, a critical reading of the (re)discovered texts, followed by acquisition and reinterpretation, is necessary to the formation of a well-rounded, aware identity. The texts that Quetzal retrieves in the vault are considered to an extent forbidden—much as Aristotle’s book on comedy (from his *Poetics*) was for Eco’s William of Baskerville—, deliberately hidden and obscured by a dominant subject. In *Pablo’s Inferno*, the keys to explore and understand Mexican heritage are informed by the history of Mexico itself, accessed through the knowledge and culture contained in pre-Hispanic texts that were almost completely destroyed by colonizers in the 16th century and throughout the Spanish domination. In a way, within his heterotopia Montijo reinvents a crucial pivot in the Mexican people’s past, constructing a retrieval of Mexica codices and religious scrolls—mostly condensing notions of good and evil—and their interpretation as complementary texts in the formation of Mexican (American) identity. The reading of these texts and the assimilation of their content lead to the possibility to achieve fruitful empowerment, applying the teachings that emerge from the synergy of knowledge they represent. In practice, the acquired knowledge allows Pablo and Quetzal to bring back life in the barren spirit world, withered by the fading of its gods—or, possibly, the neglect of cultural roots. Quetzal takes upon himself the burden of keeping the heritage alive by writing and documenting their history in the spirit world, as he is “the last link to our past” and he is writing “so that our history will live on” (#5 49). Montijo’s story creates a spirit world that corresponds to the heritage diversity constructing the Mexican American subjectivity. By means of its gothic modes, Pablo’s heterotopia challenges the

dominant discourse on culture, as well as the structural assimilation of otherness exerted by the US institutional system—monoglossic and based on Anglo heritage.

In book #5, the protagonists—as it often happens in gothic fiction—have to act against evil as the gods are either dead, forgotten, or ineffective. In a postmodern challenge against a stable, preconceived order, Pablo will defeat the Devil himself resorting to actions inspired by a blend of different fragments that constitute Mexican heritage and the shared sets of beliefs characterizing it. For the final confrontation, Montijo creates a Devil that is shapeshifting and comes to embody all forms of evil, mutating in each panel from representation to representation of evil in different iconographic configurations. Without reaching the level of complexity that can be observed in Eco's novel (see Stubbs), intertextuality is present in *Pablo's Inferno* and structures the diegetic unfolding of the protagonists' journey. Heavily based on allusion and intertextual play, the comic books recreate Catholic and pre-Hispanic texts, either real or fictional—and yet inspired by real texts. Likewise, Montijo inserts a variety of Mexican cultural references, spanning from superstitions to mythic tropes, reproducing them with conceptual and iconographic accuracy.

2. CULTURAL ABSORPTION AND THE MEXICAN AMERICAN GOTHIC

Before analyzing the elements that Montijo extrapolated from Mexican culture, history, and iconography, it is necessary to underline the existence of gothic configurations peculiar to the Latinx ranges of heritage. So-called tropical gothic appropriates and adapts the gothic perspective to problematize and deal with contexts outside the European and Anglo American traditions (Edwards & Guardini Vasconcelos). When it comes to Latin American and US Latinx gothic, its modes are inevitably characterized by postcolonial stances and inclusivity, as well as an orientation toward racialized identity and resistance against imperialist practices (Lundberg, Ancuta, & Stasiewicz-Bienkowska). The gothic mode becomes a tool to confront an ethnic otherness that within the American society is depicted as exotic—and consequently commodified—and yet, at the same time it embodies a core cultural pivot “upon which racial, psychological,

and sexual anxieties are projected” (Hughes & Smith 3). It is worth reminding that in American popular culture Mexico has often been the setting for a gothicization of unknown exotic elements, in order to build horrific otherness—rather than an exploration of tropical or Mexican gothic—and perpetuate a colonial manifestation of cultural consumption (Ajuria Ibarra, *Gothic Re-Constructions* 121). Through his child protagonist’s ingenuousness and initial unawareness, Montijo’s work reverses this kind of perspective by approaching the colonial theme in an unprejudiced way, digesting it, and creating a fundamental postcolonial awareness. Reclaiming historical texts and traces, the construction of Pablo and Quetzal’s awareness avoids simple dichotomies favoring the “interplay of often opposed, but not mutually exclusive sources” (Santos) of Mexican (American) heritage.

Mexican fiction and folktales show an inclination for horror and gothic modes that Punter—aptly drawing on Octavio Paz—has defined as “a Kierkegaardian sense that the dreadful has already happened” (Punter, *Cyborg*). Such is the feeling the readers get when Pablo and Quetzal move out of the grotesque carnival limbo and into the mysteriously and oddly forsaken spirit world, in which haunted places recur. Ruins are a fundamental element in the gothic imaginary (see among many, Punter, *Literature of Terror*), as well as they are in the Chicana imaginary embodied mostly by Aztec and Mayan architecture. Pre-Hispanic constructions have been crucial in constructing a Chicana visual rhetoric and have recurred in murals and art (among many, Benavidez; Mahler); likewise, Mexican pre-Hispanic legends—such as the tale of Popocatepetl and Iztacchíhuatl—have been appropriated as symbols of the Chicana cultural resilience. In these representations, a mythical—at times even idealized—past and the present collapse, highlighting the persistence of conflicts in the coexistence between the dominant culture and the native.

In Mexican cultural expressions, the boundaries between life and death, magic and reality, frequently blur. Fiction has often relied on the hybridization of genres, accompanied by a sense of intrinsic ambivalence and ambiguity characterized by a blend of indigenous and colonial elements, as well as unequal political, socioeconomic, and ethnic relations. Spectral figures populating Mexican folklore have been appropriated and embraced by Mexican American communities, becoming symbols of sociocultural resistance. The present configuration

of these mythical ghosts and ghostly monsters—such as La Llorona, the Cucuy, the nahuales—often originated in the encounter between colonizers and pre-Hispanic groups, and they can be considered as vessels disclosing “anxieties over identity by means of spectral haunting” (Ajuria Ibarra, *Ghosting the Nation* 134). Their enduring haunting revives conflicts and fears rooted in the past, constructing a “phantasmatic historical projection” (ibid. 135) that supports a postcolonial exploration of conflictual and unresolved identities. They are specters raising from a layered past, in which the pride in *mestizo* heritage clashes with the reproduction of inequality (Rozenal) and a fragmented, complex diaspora. Montijo’s intertextual play exploits several references to the uncanny that is pervasive in Mexican folktale. In book #4, for example, Pablo and Quetzal visit the Spiderwomen, a Mexican instance of the motif represented by the Fates, here described as three old Indigenous women weaving the future (Figure 2). Once again, the gothic mode surfaces in their reference to the lost past as “the thread that binds together the fabric of all existence” (#4 19).



Figure 2: *Pablo's Inferno*.

Source: Montijo. *Pablo's Inferno*. Issue 4, 2000, p. 18. © 2000 Abismo – Montijo.

Right after their meeting with the Spiderwomen, the two have to deal with a nahual (21-24), a shapeshifting entity that is often embodied by a person with magical or divine powers who can turn into an animal and perform witchcraft. In this case, it is indeed a malicious *bruja* who can transform into an owl; besides imprisoning Quetzal, the witch exerts power and violence on Nayelli, a girl that the protagonists encounter in the desert and who will help them defeat the Devil. Elements of Aztec culture and cosmogony are interspersed throughout the whole series and their analysis would require a separate study. Quetzal himself is described as a fallen god in need of redemption, with a story remindful of god Quetzalcóatl's exile (#3 9). Right out of the limbo, he and Pablo encounter a Chac Mool (#2 9) and meet fire god Huehuetéotl (12-17), whose depiction reprises renowned Mexica sculptural representations of the deity. In the final confrontation with the Devil, to save his companions Pablo needs to retrieve for him a precious treasure from a cave where he meets a waning water god Tlaloc. Nonetheless, before dying the deity entrusts him with "the ultimate treasure" (#5 20): the corn and—thanks to Tlaloc's own sacrifice (Figure 3)—the water necessary to revive the barren land in the spirit world.

Montijo's intertextuality delves into popular culture as well. In book #3, there is an evident absorption of the *lucha libre* film tradition—or *cine de luchadores*—as Pablo and Quetzal find El Calambre wandering in an otherwise deserted cemetery (#3 10). The undead masked luchador—"heavily inspired by El Santo" (Montijo, *The (re)Discovery*)—joins the protagonists in their discovery of the aforementioned vault and will sacrifice himself to save them from the attack of monstrous wolves. Besides facilitating the iconography of Mexican wrestling, El Calambre embodies the ethos distinctive of legendary luchadores and the apogee of *lucha libre* cinema in the 60s. Wrestlers such as El Santo (Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta) and Blue Demon (Alejandro Muñoz Moreno) embodied a mythic dimension in and out of the ring, never breaking character and delivering cinematographic performances as well-meaning heroes, ready to fight against villains and classic horror monsters to protect innocent people. Throughout narratives that often verge toward campy horror, luchadores would fight off evil, just as El Calambre tries to protect Pablo and Quetzal by facing the wolves himself. His fight is

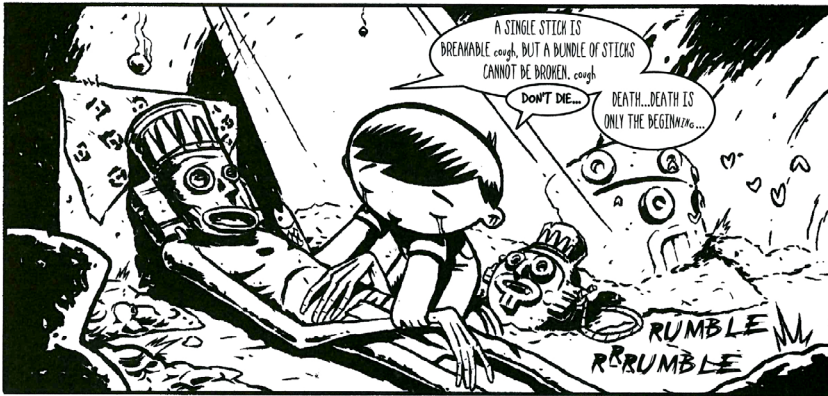


Figure 3. *Pablo's Inferno*.

Source: Montijo. *Pablo's Inferno*. Issue 5, 2000, p. 22. © 2000 Abismo – Montijo.

accompanied by captions containing fragments of the ancient texts Quetzal retrieves from the vault and in which he seeks a formula to save the luchador from transforming into a werewolf. It is worth mentioning that Mexican American culture—in particular in the borderland regions—holds a strong connection with classic *lucha libre*, also because the *cine de luchadores* films used to be broadcasted by local Latinx-oriented networks (see Greene).

Blending such a variety of elements, *Pablo's Inferno* participates in filling a void in the exploration of Mexican American heritage by interrogating its past from Montijo's personal perspective, without recurring to consolidated Chicax paradigms and discourses. In a way, the peculiarity of his work challenges the boundaries of the definition of Mexicanness, as Mexican American identity can encompass such a wide and diverse range of elements, both connected with Mexican heritage and related to the acquisition and reinterpretation performed by the subject.

3. CHILDHOOD WONDER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGENCY

Upon his death, Pablo leaves behind a familiar world to go on to a new existence in the spirit world, from which he will not come back. His acquisition of heritage and adaptation to the heterotopia in which

he finds himself existing are the result of a process of growth and development of insight, achieved through his fantasmical journey. Quetzal's role is that of a tentative protector for Pablo, albeit in search of his own redemption and a consequent new existence. If—at first and by comparison with the literary source of inspiration—he might be interpreted as a Virgil-like figure, Quetzal is not a wise, unfaltering guide: throughout their journey, he will commit mistakes, fail at responding to critical situations, and be overwhelmed by the events. He is not a role model either, as the Roman poet was for Dante; rather, he is humbled by the failures and weaknesses that characterized him as a god and led to his fall.

The protagonist couple is characterized by horizontal, complementary dynamics and an equal amount of agency, although Pablo's is much more powerful. As children do, he acts on emotion and basing his instinctive reactions on immediate feelings, contrary to Quetzal, who fails to solve problems due to overthinking (e.g. #3 28) and even puts himself in danger when overwhelmed (e.g. #4 23). Pablo's innocence is preserved and yet, at the same time, the child is provided of resilience and shrewdness that enable him to face the obstacles and overcome them in clever ways. Thanks to his heightened receptivity and sense of imagination—as many a child characters in children's gothic literature do—he has a more open, unprejudiced acceptance of incongruity (Cross 58). This kind of protagonists possess clear agency in the fictional space they inhabit, as they are “questioning, assertive, change-embracing” and accompanied by “adult (or supernatural) allies who likewise embrace change, in opposition to the conservative forces of evil” (Jackson 7), just as Pablo is. Drawing on Howarth—who reprises Erik Erikson's work (1950; 1968)—and his psychoanalytic approach to gothic children's narratives, a parallel might be traced between a child's development through resolved crises and the (re)discovery of one's own cultural roots and subsequent development of a cultural identity. Discovering his/her individual agency and its scope, the child has thus to “find out what kind of person [s/he] may become” (Erikson in Howarth 53). Without delving into the field of psychoanalysis, it is worth mentioning as well the existence of research—such as the longstanding work by Phinney (1992; 2007)—that has established connection between the passage to adulthood and the achievement of ethnic identity, based on

individual exploration and commitment. Pablo might be a little boy, but his journey in the underworld represents a process of collision, learning, and eventual commitment to his own heritage. Despite starting off with an already evident individual agency, throughout the comic book series he develops more nuanced insight and power strictly connected with his exploration.

One of the most noticeable editorial and diegetic aspects of the comic books is the continuous play on the very nature of *Pablo's Inferno*: is it supposed to be aimed at adult or child readers? Aside from sketches and original art, the books' extras comprise a cut and glue model to build a Pablo mobile, complete with instructions and diagrams (#1), or a connect the dots game (#5). Montijo also inserts little games allegedly directed to children, in order to find subliminal messages in the recap text on the inside front cover from the second book on. Pablo's cartoonish design was inspired by Precious Moments figurines in order to create a contrast with the spooky ambiance (Montijo, *The (re)Discovery*). In this sense, it is worth reminding the main contrast characterizing the bright colored world depicted in the *Happy Tree Friends* series co-created by Montijo. Its characters are designed as cute anthropomorphic animals and each episode is introduced by the trope of a children pop-up book's opening; nonetheless, the protagonists' daily adventures are marked by gore, extreme violence, and grotesque outcomes. In *Pablo's Inferno*, Montijo's heterotopia pushes the—most likely adult—readers' perception of adulthood, blurring the boundaries between children's and adult literature as Pablo challenges the adult standpoint throughout his journey. If gothic narratives can be fundamental to help children progress through different stages of growth and development (Howarth), Pablo's gothic quest can definitely help adult readers to approach complex issues related with identity and the crucial importance of learning about one's own history and cultural roots. Trying to figure out his place in the spirit world, Pablo forms the basis of his identity as a child and, metaphorically, of the Mexican American cultural consciousness. As Aldama has pointed out, Pablo's experience upon his death follows a sacrificial diegetic paradigm (85), as he does not come back to life: despite defeating the Devil and restoring life in the spirit world thanks to his acquired self-knowledge, he is destined to remain there for eternity. This kind of narrative structure can

confer sacrifice “a quality of transcendence to the performer of the sacrifice” (Melin Schyllert 15), embodying the negotiation of identity that a whole community is experiencing. Pablo’s permanence in the underworld after his undertaking entails both his achievement—in expanding his knowledge and consciousness—and, at the same time, his eradication from the tangible reality of his community.

Moreover, Montijo’s work holds a distinctive humor strictly related with grotesque renditions and childlike wonder tale modes, exploiting the ludic quality intrinsic to many a gothic narrative. Through devices such as parody and exaggeration, the gothic is often characterized by an underlying comic quality foregrounding a critique of modernity and thus, a postmodern “self-reflexivity and dialectic impulse” (Horner & Zlosnik 4). In *Pablo’s Inferno*, both protagonists are characterized by an implicit self-reflexivity, albeit expressed in very different ways; Pablo’s comments often reveal a witty dark humor, whereas Quetzal often delivers worrisome, disenchanted, or brooding considerations. The child’s openness toward incongruity is accompanied by his cheeky remarks blurted out unexpectedly, inducing a comic effect and a momentaneous relief from the eerie ambiance and scary characters

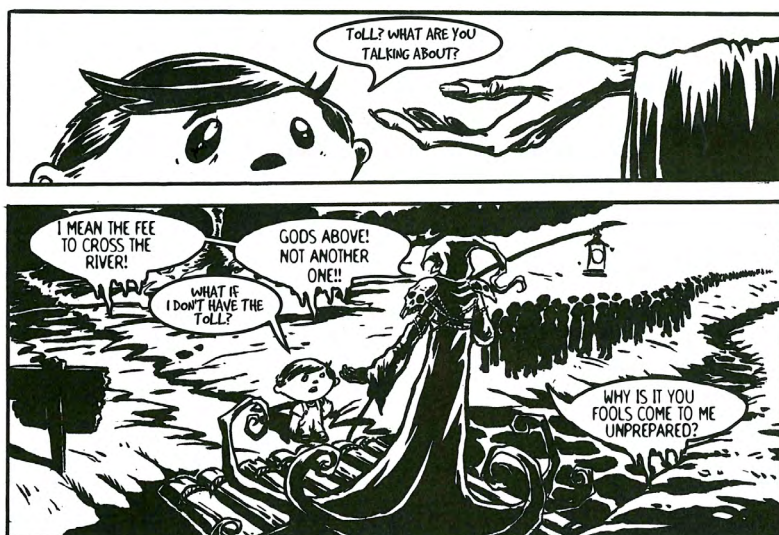


Figure 3. *Pablo's Inferno*.

Source: Montijo. *Pablo's Inferno*. Issue 1, 1999, p. 11. © 1999 Abismo – Montijo.

he faces. For example, in book #1 his interaction with psychopomp Charon (10-12) is marked by a few comic exchanges. Despite his frightening grim appearance, Charon indulges in a parodic tirade that turns into a rant as he faces a rather unimpressed Pablo, nagging at him about the toll he is supposed to pay for crossing (Figure 4). Further on, even when Pablo's adventure verges on horror—or when Quetzal expresses his anguish provoked by the waning of the gods—the underlying playfulness contributes to structure a space where cultural concerns and conflicts can be played out.

Surely, *Pablo's Inferno* mirrors the creator's own discovery of Mexican heritage, which helped his taking diegetic control, informed the shaping of his protagonists, and fostered the distinctiveness intrinsic to his following work. Nonetheless, the comic book series also represents a significant take on Chicana heritage and cultural resilience, eliciting the necessity to know and delve into one's own cultural roots and history to form an identity. While expressing such a fundamental message, Montijo's work sidesteps consolidated paradigms by reframing his narrative—and overall artistic production—within gothic modes, and exploits Pablo's journey as a subversive tool to challenge a “society ignorant of its history” (Aldama 88).

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