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## Challenging Gender Stereotypes?

### The Representation of Women in Two Ecuadorian Comics

The comic, the cartoon and the graphic novel are little-known genres in Ecuador despite the loyalty of their readers. In recent times, a handful of scriptwriters/illustrators have managed to open the way and publish their comic strips, either with help from the private sector or in publishing houses specifically created for this purpose. This study evaluates the representations of women in two Ecuadorian comic genres influenced by American comic tradition, and reflects on the predominant view of women in the Ecuadorian society. Female characters will be analyzed in the works of scriptwriters and cartoonists José Daniel Santibáñez, the author of *Guayaquil de mis temores* (*Guayaquil of my Fears*), and Fabián Patinho, the author of *Axioma* (*Axiom*). Firstly, this study will offer a brief historical view of the state of Ecuadorian comics. Subsequently, there will be a preliminary presentation of the works of Santibáñez and Patinho. The female representation will be studied based on previous reflections of theorists such as Karen McGrath, who has focused on the Latin American heroine of the comic book *Araña*; Meenakshi Gigi Durham, who reflects over women in popular culture; and Sarah Brabant and Linda Mooney, who have studied the female roles from the perspective of stereotypes. Finally, there will be a section for conclusions.

#### Ecuadorian Comics: A Brief Account

The Ecuadorian comic is a genre that still struggles to improve its distribution and promote a sustained increase in its number of readers. In the last years, some high-quality cartoons and graphic novels have been printed,<sup>1</sup> most of them thanks to some local publishers and artists<sup>2</sup> who have taken the lead without waiting for financial support from the state. However, for many potential buyers, the Ecuadorian comic is still invisible or inaccessible, and publishers find it risky to invest in cartoonists or writers as they see little chance for their financial gamble to transform into a self-financing business. The shortage of shops which sell comic books is another link in this vicious circle. Mauricio Gil, director and one of the

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1 Among these works it is worth mentioning *The Art of Smoking Mirror*, a graphic narrative published in a Spanish-English edition by artist Eduardo Villacís. For more information, see Chávez (2014).

2 In “The invisible steps. Comics and Graphic Novels in Ecuador”, a section in my previous study “The *Film Noir*’s Esthetics in Graphic Novel: the Case of *Angelus Hostis* (2012)”, I refer to the current state of the Ecuadorian comic (Chávez, 2017).

founders of the Mono Comics Publishing House, based in Guayaquil, explains the habits of the consumers of cultural products:

Ecuadorian people are still accustomed to looking for “the imported products”. However, some do not have the money to buy imported magazines that could cost more than USD 4 because of taxes. That is the reason why people prefer to buy the pirate DVD with episodes of an anime at 1 USD. Few are the places that sell national or foreign comics. The national comic is more difficult to sell, since people are not yet accustomed to seeing this kind of artistic production; and because the comics are not easy to get, people do not even know that they exist (Gil, 2014; translations mine).

In an effort to give us a panoramic view of this artistic genre, the cartoonist, José Daniel Santibáñez, wrote an article: “El cómic en Ecuador, una historia en génesis permanente” (“The comic in Ecuador, a story in permanent genesis”), where he traces a timeline that begins at the end of the 19th century. Santibáñez especially highlights the publications over the past 20 years. He also focuses on some of these graphic narratives that were printed in university magazines (such as *Lesparragusanada*, from the year 2000), or they were comic strips like *Fito Garafito* (2001) by Fernando Barahona, or fanzines such as *Caricato* (2005). He also refers to works on the web, and points out examples such as *El Cuervito Fumanchú*, by Iván Bernal, or *Kenyu*, by Entretenimiento Lobo’s team. Because it does not appear in Santibáñez’ study, it is also important to mention the work by Carlos Villarreal Kwasek and his interactive and bilingual comic, *Cielo Andino (Andean Sky)*, created in 2016 together with the composer Oliver Getz Rodahl, and Brian Skeel, an expert in mixing and mastering. Santibáñez does not mention this work as his own article predates the release of *Andean Sky*.

In general, Ecuadorian comics face some serious challenges. Santibáñez complains that “efforts are truncated at the time of publication, since printing is expensive, and there is no distribution, which establishes its failure before the product has even been born” (2012, p. 42).<sup>3</sup> Regarding the general situation of contemporary comics in Ecuador, there have been attempts to form groups in order to consolidate certain objectives. Diego Arias, an expert in the field of comics, points out that,

After 2010, it is important to consider the efforts made by cultural managers and actors of the Ecuadorian comic who were looking for a cohesion of cartoonists, sector workers and Ecuadorian illustrators (many of whom being cartoonists). The consolidation of organized groups, such as Ilustradores Ecuatorianos (Ecuadorian Illustrators), Red de Ilustradores Ecuatorianos (Network of Ecuadorian Illustrators) and Ilustres Ilustradores (Illustrious Illustrators) and Fanzinoteca projects promoted by artists and managers

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3 Fortunately, there are also projects where the comics are distributed freely to the public. In this last category, we should highlight the sponsorship of the Municipality of Guayaquil, which has supported financially the creation and distribution of cartoons with historical themes.

such as Adn Montalvo, Francisco Galárraga, Wilo Ayllón, Tania Navarrete, José Luis Jácome – the latter, author of the project “Arqueología del Cómic Ecuatoriano” (“Ecuadorian Comic Archeology”) –, among others, will surely contribute, in Ecuador, to open renewed spaces for the ninth art. (Arias, 2014, p. 24)

At the same time, it should be noted that the few comic books of Ecuadorian origin – many of which are self-financed – that do reach certain libraries, or, in one way or another, circulate among the faithful consumers of the genre,<sup>4</sup> are usually drawn and written by men. Interestingly, Mono Comics Publishing House has, among its staff, a relevant exception: Valeria Galarza, the author of the Ecuadorian manga, *Competir por ti* (*Competing for you*).

In an email interview, Alfredo García, a comic scriptwriter who does graphic works sponsored by the Municipality of Guayaquil,<sup>5</sup> a member of the Comic Club of the same city,<sup>6</sup> and author of about twenty publications, provides additional names related to the work of Ecuadorian women in comic books: “For example Jossie Lara, a cartoonist who has worked for companies in the United States, initially coloring *Highlander*, *The Immortal*. There are also artists like Emilia Sigcho and Claudia Uquillas, among others” (García, 2017).

This last group could also include Paola Gaviria Silguero, better known by her pen name, PowerPaola. Although most of the biographies consider her a Colombian artist, due to her family origin and because she moved to Cali as a teenager, the truth is that PowerPaola was born in Quito and lived in Ecuador until she was 13 years old. Her graphic novel, *Virus Tropical* (*Tropical Virus*), written and drawn in the way of a testimony, collects precisely her experiences in the country where she was born. Her duality as a Colombian-Ecuadorian artist seems important for her work.<sup>7</sup>

4 El Fakir publishing house, which is relatively new, publishes both printed and digital books. It promotes its own collection of graphic novels called “Ex-libris: Cómic con cabeza” [Literal translation: “Ex-libris: Comics with a head”]. PowerPaola (Paola Gaviria Silguero) published *Virus Tropical* in “Ex-libris”.

5 The Municipality of Guayaquil currently sponsors two collections of historical comics: *Memorias Guayaquileñas* [Memories of Guayaquil] and *Cápsulas de Historia* [History’s Capsules]. Alfredo García considers the municipality as one of the biggest promoters of comic books in Ecuador: it prints between 5,000 and 10,000 copies per title, when sometimes private initiatives barely reach 500 copies (García, 2017).

6 With objectives such as spreading graphic literature, motivating reading and supporting artists, the Comic Club of Guayaquil was born 14 years ago, which makes it one of the oldest in the country (García, 2017).

7 Scholar Felipe Gómez Gutiérrez analyzes the main female character in *Virus Tropical* and explains the importance of the narrator’s Ecuadorian origin to understand the nuances of the story: “Paola forges a unique identity that does not fit into pre-established essentialist classifications and is a product both of her upbringing in a family of women and of the unstable nature of a notion of ‘homeland’ that in her case oscillates between Ecuador and Colombia” (2015, p. 90).

## Comics and Women in Ecuador – Two Stories

From the perspective of stereotypes, and concepts such as gender and identity, two works are evaluated in this study; namely, *Guayaquil de mis temores* (1985) and *Axioma* (2014). Their analysis is based on the reflections of theoreticians such as Sarah Brabant and Linda Mooney. However, it is first necessary to have some basic information about the cartoonists and the comics themselves.

The comic strip *Guayaquil de mis temores*<sup>8</sup> was created by José Daniel Santibáñez. He was born in Guayaquil in 1959. Santibáñez studied illustration at Parsons School of Design in New York, and he was also a member of one of the workshops run by the well-known Ecuadorian writer, Miguel Donoso Pareja (“JD Santibáñez”). A graphic designer and teacher in different universities in his home country, Santibáñez has published comic books such as *Ecuador Ninja* (1984), *El Gato* (The Cat, 1978) and *Comic Book* (2006). In addition to the comics, he has cultivated the narrative of both police and science fiction. *Guayaquil de mis temores* is a pioneering local work in its genre; it was the first action comic – no humor comic strip, because the latter used to be more popular – published in a newspaper of national scope and, in addition, it was drawn and written by an Ecuadorian artist.

*Guayaquil de mis temores* was published in weekly instalments in the newspaper *Expreso* during 1985. It tells the story of an American police inspector, Antonio “Tony” Puiggrán, who travels from Miami to Guayaquil following the trail of Santiago, the ruthless boss of a powerful drug cartel with connections within the intelligence services. The action begins with a shooting in the United States in March 1989, and Tony arrives a month later in Guayaquil to meet with Colonel Saldaña, his contact with the local police. Once in Guayaquil, Tony will meet the most important female character: Gabriela Frazetta.<sup>9</sup> In one of the first scenes, and thanks to her knowledge of martial arts, Gabriela defends herself from a group of street stalkers; and only when one of them brings out a knife, does Tony intervene to threaten him with his gun. Once they have come to know each other well, Gabriela becomes an unconditional ally of Tony’s. Showing leadership and courage, Gabriela directs an assault on a drug laboratory (see illustration 1). After discovering that Santiago has diplomatic protection and that a renegade faction of the CIA collaborates with him, Tony ends up seriously injured. An unknown woman, first, and then Gabriela, save his life. After several adventures, the comic strip shows the final battle between the police – with Colonel Saldaña, Gabriela and Tony, on the one hand, and the drug trafficking cartel with Santiago

8 *Guayaquil de mis temores* is a title that plays with the name of a popular song: *Guayaquil de mis amores* [“Guayaquil of my Romances”]. The lyrics were written by Lauro Dávila and the music was composed by Nicasio Safadi. The song was recorded in New York in 1930 (Guayaquil, 2014).

9 Most probably Gabriela’s last name is a tribute to Frank Frazetta (1928–2010), a well-known cartoonist and illustrator.

and his henchmen, on the other. Step by step Gabriela and Tony feed a friendship that will be confirmed as a love bond.

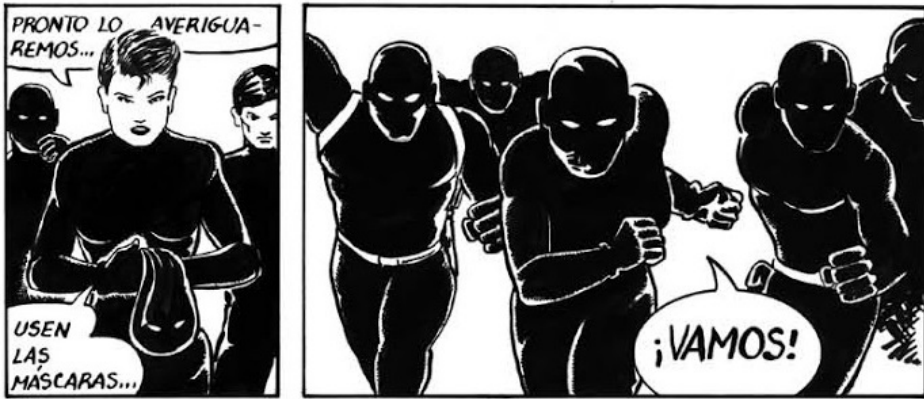


Illustration 1.

*Axioma* was created by Fabián Patinho. He considers himself a “historiador de la imagen” (“historian of images”). Patinho has worked in museums in Quito and studied popular art and iconography. He has also worked in video, painting and illustration, focusing mainly on comics. Regarding his comic strips, Diego Arias points out that they are “sarcastic, intimate, politically annoying” (2014, p. 98). *Axioma* is part of a short comic anthology called *La Deformidad Perfecta* (*The Perfect Deformity*), published in 2014. Two years prior, an exhibition curated by researcher and teacher Diego Arias and co-curated by researcher Eduardo Carrera, had been held at the Center for Contemporary Art in Quito. *La Deformidad Perfecta*, which has the sub-heading “Sample of the Ecuadorian Contemporary Comic”, is the catalog-magazine of this exhibition. Nine artists or teams of artists were invited to participate,<sup>10</sup> presenting an equal number of final works.<sup>11</sup>

In *Axioma*, Patinho subtly narrates the link between two women living in Quito, Ecuador. One of them – whose name we do not know – speaks with a person called “Alex” on the phone. The reader assumes that “Alex” is a man (“Alexander”). It is also clear that there has been a romantic relationship between the young protagonist and Alex. They agree to meet although the main character clarifies to her interlocutor that between them there is no longer affection from the past. In addition, she makes a special request to Alex: “Honey, don’t make this a kind of axiom” (Patinho, 2014, p. 46). The phrase is ambiguous, but based on

10 In the beginning, four more artists were invited to work in *La Deformidad Perfecta* project, including a woman (Arias, 2014, p. 97). At the end all participants were men.

11 Two of the participants (brothers Fernando and Francisco Barahona) worked together in the graphic narrative called *Hiper Chat*. There was also collaboration in the works of the illustrator, Eduardo Villacís, and the writer, Adolfo Macías, on the one hand, and the artists, Diego Lara and Roger Icaza, on the other.

the context, she seems to ask her former partner not to become obsessed with her, which means Alex should not take for granted an assumption that something romantic is going to occur. Later the protagonist is heading to Alex's house, wearing a shirt that says "Sor Juana," a reference to a feminist nun of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> She listens to music on what appears to be an MP3 player and walks the streets of a city that is never named, although Patinho has clearly drawn the architectural details of La Mariscal neighborhood in Quito. Suddenly she is attacked and robbed (see illustration 2). She is hit in her stomach and her attacker steals her music player. She manages to sit on a bench before lying down in pain.

In parallel vignettes, another story is told; a second woman – also young – is in an apartment. She seems to be waiting for something. She looks out of her window, toward the street. After that, she sits on the couch. She is silent. Finally, an out-of-frame voice says "Alexandra! Please come. Dinner is ready". At that point the reader discovers that she is "Alex". The second last vignette shows the young woman who has suffered the assault, still shrinking from pain on the bench. The final drawing shows Alexandra sitting at the table next to a man who seems to be her boyfriend. She does not touch the food. Her boyfriend, with cutlery in his hand, listens to music through his headphones. He is not the same man who assaulted the first woman, although the presence of an MP3 is a clear reference to the previous story. Alexandra and her boyfriend do not say anything. As in the second last vignette, it runs without dialogue.



Illustration 2.

12 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a Mexican nun who was "a self-taught scholar and acclaimed writer of the Latin American colonial period and the Hispanic Baroque. She was also a staunch advocate for women's rights [...] Sor Juana is heralded for her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, which defends women's rights to educational access, and is credited as the first published feminist of the New World" (Biography, 2014).

## Female Representation – Two Visions

*Guayaquil de mis temores* was published in 1985 and *Axioma* in 2014. The spaces in which female characters live could help us confirm or deny stereotypical representations in these cartoons. On the one hand, Gabriela, from *Guayaquil de mis temores*, lives in a dangerous city. The vignettes that introduce her as a character (see illustration 3) demonstrate her physical strength after she has been harassed in a public place. In the course of the story, it will be clear that she moves freely without any fear or limitations. She is a character who exercises her own power. From a physical point of view, she is strong. From a social dimension, she has money and contacts at the highest level. She does not receive instructions from anyone. Her personality does not conform to a “marianist” gender view. “Marianism” (from the Spanish “marianismo”) is a concept meaning that women do not actively intervene in areas outside home; they accept a role of dependence and submission (Eide, 2006, p. 142). Quite contrary to this notion, the graphic representation of Gabriela (with short hair and muscular physique) and especially the description of her behavior (namely, extreme independence and/or the ability to fight) makes it easy to associate her with a “machona”: a term in Ecuador that identifies a woman who ‘acts like a man’ or, to be precise, a woman who adopts the characteristics of the male stereotype as her own.



Illustration 3.

In a study about Marvel comics, Karen McGrath highlights that no one had published a single article analyzing the Latin American heroines of any comic book (2007, p. 269) until the publication of her own paper. This also demonstrates the novelty of these characters. Gabriela Frazetta, in *Guayaquil de mis temores*, despite not being the main character, can be considered a type of heroine for McGrath because of her actions and her importance to the plot. She saves, twice, the life of Tony Puiggrán, the American police inspector; the first time after an attack by Franklin Wood, a member of the CIA, and second time, a minion of Santiago, the drug lord. On the second occasion, Franklin Wood knocks out Tony, but Gabriela intervenes and fights with him until she kills him. Previously, an unnamed woman helped Tony by lending him her phone. If it were not for these two women (the

unknown lady and Gabriela), Tony would have been unable to complete his mission.

After reviewing the female presence in comics, McGrath's study (2007, p. 271) concurs with research studies by Bradley Greenberg and Larry Collette (1997); and Nancy Signorielli, Douglas McLeod and Elaine Healy (1994), among others, that women are usually represented in a smaller number than male characters. The study also points out a common practice; i.e. to objectify women or show them under a set of attributes typical of female gender stereotypes. Regarding the first point, certainly *Guayaquil de mis temores* has more male characters than female ones. However, this does not look like an intentional decision of the author, given the fact that he is portraying organizations – the police and the drug cartel – which are mostly run by men.<sup>13</sup> As for *Axioma*, the number of men and women is equal; in addition, women carry more weight in the story.

Regarding the possibility of an objectified image of women, Karen McGrath states:

Comic book artists rely on certain techniques to enhance the superhero fantasy world for the audience. However, in doing so, characters' bodies are objectified to reveal their superhero strengths. This objectification is especially problematic for women characters' depictions, because in using these techniques, their objectification is also a prominent sexualization of their characters (McGrath, 2007, p. 272).

For instance, Gabriela of *Guayaquil de mis temores* wears sexy blouses or tight-fitting clothing, which highlights the contours of her body. We should not forget that there is a tradition in the comic book of superheroes and the action comic – a tradition shared with other genres related to images such as advertising or television series – that portrays women as if they were “willing to have sex” (McGrath, 2007, p. 272). This tradition has been severely criticized for perpetuating discrimination. Gabriela's image, however, is more complex, since there is something intangible portrayed in her actions, such as an independent spirit or bravery, which point to a degree of empowerment. In her case we can find the duality of a woman with a beautiful body – according to the Western canon – and a warrior; a duality that can be found in other comic characters such as the legendary Wonder Woman. In fact, Wonder Woman has been read from a feminist point of view. Precisely, when evaluating the characteristics of comic book heroines, McGrath (2007, p. 275) mentions two concepts, previously collected by Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2003), about the qualities of the feminine and the feminist. The original quotation states:

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13 Not all authors of comic books show an ideological position in their works. However, a comic book could reflect certain prejudices in describing a world and a type of society. McGrath's reflection on the society portrayed in the comic *Araña*, which means “spider” in Spanish, is a good example. *Araña* has a Hispanic woman as a main character: she is the female counterpart of Spider-man. McGrath states: “So in this comic book, as in most organizations and workplaces, men, especially white men, not only are in positions of power but also outnumber women” (2007, p. 271).



These girl-oriented genres have generated a positive buzz among audiences, critics, and scholars. “It used to be the heroine’s job to get in trouble and the hero’s job to get her out of it,” wrote Richard Corliss and Jeanne McDowell (2001) in a recent issue of *Time* magazine – but now, they say, things are different; the subhead on their article raves, “Pop culture is embracing a new image of the action heroine who is both feminist and feminine.” (Durham, 2003, p. 24)

Although they may appear as contradictory, the feminine and the feminist are notions that usually complement each other in the representation of women both in comics and in other media. The feminine implies adapting to the codes of Western beauty; the feminist, a break with certain conventions in certain social segments (McGrath, 2007, p. 276; Durham, 2003, p. 26). For example, in the comic *Araña*, McGrath points out that the body of Marvel’s Hispanic heroine is drawn with accentuated curves (well-developed thighs, large breasts, thin waist), all of which would represent the feminine; but, at the same time, the protagonist is physically strong, with athletic arms, which gives her a feminist variable. There is a vignette in *Guayaquil de mis temores* (see illustration 4) in which the protagonists are exercising together, and the body of Gabriela represents the feminine and the feminist.<sup>14</sup>



Illustration 4.

However, the woman’s body cannot be excessively muscular, too large, nor should they have too wide bones, because “such bodies could not be situated as desired

14 When McGrath reflects over *Araña* and remembers the preceding cartoons, her statement could be applied to *Guayaquil de mis temores*: “Clearly the creators of this comic book [*Araña*] are following comic book traditions without considering the implications of such representations of women, and especially young women” (McGrath, 2007, p. 273).

objects of the audience's gaze" (Durham, 2003, p. 26). Like the voluptuous body, the thinness of the female figure is another stereotype by Western beauty standards. For example, *Axioma* shows thin female figures, and the bodies of the main characters end up being represented with certain peculiarities. The physical image of women is highlighted. In the first vignettes of *Axioma*, the protagonist is portrayed in underwear, and an atmosphere of sensuality and intimacy is transmitted (see illustration 5). A few vignettes later, Alex appears wearing a sleeveless shirt and a short skirt. Both are thin. Both are dressed in a youthful way, far from conservative. About women drawn or represented in this way, Durham points out: "The uses of girls' bodies in these shows represent the transcoding of late 20th-century's popular discourses of empowerment and agency – designed to appeal to female audiences – into conventionally fetishized presentations of ideal femininity and heterosexual desirability" (2003, p. 26). Partially, it is possible to apply Durham's reflection in *Axioma*: it seems clearer that the author had the aim of capturing feminine beauty in accordance with Western conventions. However, *Axioma*'s plot does not have the intention to strengthen a heterosexual desire. And this detail, precisely, is what makes Patinho's proposal different from other Ecuadorian cartoons.



Illustration 5.

*Axioma* develops the theme of love between two women. In Ecuadorian society, a large part of the population is conservative and Catholic.<sup>15</sup> Not so long ago there were "clinics" which promised the treatment and cure of homosexuality, and even now the members of the LGBTQI community are considered "second class citizens" ("Matrimonio Civil", 2019). Four characters interact in *Axioma*: two men and two women. However, only the women experience some type of suffering. The

15 Eight out of ten Ecuadorians are Catholics (Baudino, 2017).

first one suffers pain of a physical nature: she is robbed and beaten by a man; the second woman (Alex) has a psychological burden caused by waiting and loneliness (her boyfriend, who does not speak to her, eats dinner with headphones on). This double violence, physical and psychological, can also be understood as a metaphor for what the LGBTQI community itself experiences.

The title of the comic, *Axioma*, has a paradoxical meaning. According to the dictionary, “axioma” is a “Proposition so clear and evident that it is admitted without demonstration” (RAE). In the telephone dialogue, the protagonist seems to use that word giving it a different meaning. Apparently, she uses the term to ask Alex not to be confused, not to take his/her own wishes as irrefutable truths. In fact, *Axioma* includes plans and wishes that do not end up being fulfilled; the protagonist does not arrive at Alex’s house, and Alex herself waits for her friend and former lover in vain. In addition, only in the end is it revealed that Alex is a woman, and this shows that the assumptions that the reader may have formed, when reading the beginning of the plot, were neither clear nor obvious as an axiom.

It seems that several details in this story are not accidental. For instance, while walking down the street, the protagonist listens to a song on her MP3 player; “Embodiment the pain [...] As the chastity exhumes”, a line that refers both to violence and sexuality. Additionally, she wears a T-shirt that says “Sor Juana”, in clear allusion to one of the most important Latin American poets, Catholic sister Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695),<sup>16</sup> a poet, a feminist (Nash, 2012) and a lesbian (Bono, 2017).

McGrath’s study focuses not only on gender, but also on race and community identity. When it comes to Ecuadorian comic books, any reference to the representation of gender should also be complemented by identity features such as the ethnic group to which the characters belong. With the only exception of the unknown woman<sup>17</sup> who helps Tony after he is shot – she seems to be black – none of the female characters in *Guayaquil de mis temores* or *Axioma* is Afro-Ecuadorian, nor *montubia*<sup>18</sup>, nor indigenous.<sup>19</sup> Among the female protagonists, Gabriela is white and even has an Italian last name (Frazetta). The case of Alex and her partner in *Axioma* is different. Both women are *mestizas*. A *mestiza* or *mestizo* is “Any person of mixed blood. In Central and South America it denotes a person of combined Indian and European extraction” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). We also know that they are city girls and that they do not live in any poor suburbs.

Since Gabriela is a white woman, and Alex and her friend are *mestizas*, one might wonder if there are stereotypical descriptions from a racial point of view

16 See note 12 above.

17 She has such a short-lived role that we do not even know her name.

18 “Montubio” (also spelled “montuvio”) is “an officially recognized ethnic identity of coastal people of mixed-race and indigenous descent” (Ortiz, 2010).

19 According to the last census in Ecuador, “71.99% self-identified as mestizo, 7.4% as montubio, 7.2% as Afro-Ecuadorian, 7% as indigenous, and 6.1% as white” (“Censo”, 2011).

in *Guayaquil de mis temores* or in *Axioma*. Regarding the representations of heroines in popular culture, Durham points out that “the girls are more than thin: They meet every standard of conventionally defined beauty in American society. These standards, as we are well aware, are racialized and class-based” (2003, p. 26). The protagonists of the two comics belong to the middle or upper class. In *Guayaquil de mis temores*, before the final battle, Franklin Wood addresses Gabriela: “You have been a pain in the ass for me, rich girl. You ought to stroll through Policentro<sup>20</sup> instead of playing cops and robbers” (Santibáñez, 2013, p. 24). In *Axioma*, Alexandra and her friend live in the city, and they do not seem to have material needs. They wear nice clothes, fashionable accessories, and fancy gadgets. Such details give us an idea of the social class to which these characters belong.

The fact that *Guayaquil de mis temores* and *Axioma* portray white women with money or middle-class *mestizas* who live in the capital and do not suffer from financial problems could be, in the end, a stereotypical representation. However, other aspects such as the male roles should be taken into account.

The gender literature indicates that in addition to the objectification and sexualization of women, both men and women are depicted, in the media, in sex-stereotyped ways. Men are often depicted as emotionally strong, independent, rational, aggressive, and in superior roles (e.g., bosses) in the workplace, whereas women are often depicted as nurturing, caring, emotional, dependent, irrational, submissive, and in subordinate roles in the workplace (e.g. secretaries or assistants). (McGrath, 2007, p. 275)

In both cases (*Guayaquil de mis temores* and *Axioma*) there is a certain superiority of female characters as compared to the male characters. In *Guayaquil de mis temores*, Gabriela is emotionally stable and independent, just like the male hero, Tony Puiggrán. She is also as – or even more – strong and brave than Tony. For instance, Gabriela organizes the assault on a drug processing laboratory and puts herself at the head of the attack, while Tony convalesces from a wound. In the case of *Axioma*, no woman is portrayed as subordinate to any man from a financial or sentimental perspective. However, masculine superiority is represented in *Axioma* from a physical point of view; the assailant knocks out the female protagonist with one punch. In this case, the man is represented as an irrational, selfish being, whose only relevant feature is brute force. The other man in *Axioma* (Alexandra’s boyfriend) is not violent with his fists. He is rude in his attitude. He sits at the table and eats with his headphones on, without talking or paying attention to his girlfriend. This symbolic act dehumanizes him.

In a paper about stereotypes and gender roles published in 1976, the American scholar, Sarah Brabant, analyzed the stereotypes and gender roles of four comic strips of Sunday newspapers: *Blondie*, *The Born Loser*, *Dennis the Menace* and

<sup>20</sup> Policentro is a shopping center that became very popular among wealthy Guayaquil residents in the 1980s.

*Priscilla's Pop*. A decade later, Brabant and her colleague, Linda Mooney, revisited that study in a second article. As a way of monitoring the results, they used certain general parameters that are useful for assessing gender roles in cartoons. For example, Brabant and Mooney quantify the number of times the characters appear helping in housework, or the times they are portrayed in vignettes related to paid work. The study had surprising results; one of them related to financial dependence: "In 1984, all of the males were shown in outside employment at least once. There was no indication in either 1974 or 1984 that any of the females were employed outside the home" (Brabant & Mooney, 1986, p. 144). Along these lines, none of the female protagonists in the two Ecuadorian cartoons are housewives, nor are they described doing household chores. On the contrary, it is Alex's boyfriend who prepares dinner in *Axioma*. According to the study of Brabant and Mooney, male characters never wear aprons: "The apron appeared less often on all three females (characters Gladys, Blondie and Alice), but despite the increase in home and child care for males, the apron continued to be exclusively female apparel" (Brabant & Mooney, 1986, pp. 147–148). Certainly, the apron is an important detail, since it symbolizes the "domestication" (Brabant & Mooney, 1986, p. 142) of those who use it, that is, their belonging to a life of household chores. Likewise, the study by Brabant and Mooney (1986, p. 146) recalls that the research of the 1970s did not show that female characters had a habit of reading, or that they even knew how to read. However, in both Ecuadorian cartoons we find educated women. The aura surrounding Gabriela is that of a cultivated character. In the same direction, the young girls in *Axioma* are students. The protagonist tells Alexandra on the phone: "That's right, Alex. I will go to your house strictly to prepare the homework of algebra" (Patinho, 2014, p. 45).

Durham (2003, p. 26) believes that female characters (so-called girl power) can sometimes include some ambiguity in sexual preferences, but it is normal for heroines not to accept such transgressions, ultimately consolidating heterosexual love and patriarchy. This is not the case in *Axioma*: neither of the two women, at any time, shows signs of regretting their sexual orientation.

## Conclusion

The concepts of the feminine and feminism, as they are understood by theorists such as McGrath and Durham, are applicable to the present study. Although there is a typical vision of women in the main characters of *Guayaquil de mis temores* and in *Axioma*, related especially to the concept of the feminine, their demonstrations of the feminist in both comic strips show them to be ahead of their time. Regarding the feminine, the characters of Gabriela, Alexandra and her friend are invariably represented as beautiful according to social Western canons; they are slim or slightly voluptuous (*Axioma*), or they have an athletic

and desirable body (*Guayaquil de mis temores*). Concerning the notion of feminism, *Axioma* develops the theme of lesbianism, which makes it different from other local comic strips. In *Guayaquil de mis temores*, the figure of Gabriela stands out as a character that is equivalent, in strength and bravery, to that of Tony, the protagonist. Both *Guayaquil de mis temores* and *Axioma* show characters that move away from prejudice and consolidate images of strong and independent women.

The theme of lesbianism in comic strips is related to some social changes in Ecuador. The depiction of lesbian love in *Axioma*, a comic from 2014, has to do with a more open society than the one from 1985 (*Guayaquil de mis Temores*). Important political and cultural fights took place in those 30 years. In 1997, for instance, transsexual activists raised their voices against the Ecuadorian state and demanded the government to stop the criminalization of same sex couples. Some of the leaders of the movement were even murdered after that (“Papa Francisco”, 2020). However, this social activism managed to decriminalize homosexuality in the country.

Ecuador is a multicultural, multiethnic nation-state; therefore, it is interesting to mention that the main female characters in *Guayaquil de mis temores* and *Axioma* are not indigenous women, nor *montubias*, nor afro-descendants. Gabriela is related to a minority (whites) usually linked to social and economic power, and Alexandra and her friend, who are from the middle class and live in the city, belong to *mestizos*, the typical majority group. And although *Guayaquil de mis temores* includes, among its secondary characters, an Afro-Ecuadorian woman, her role in the comic is too limited to explore further. Any protagonist coming from a minority ethnic group would have been worthy of analysis, but such absence is not surprising. It would have been an almost revolutionary feature if any Afro-Ecuadorian or indigenous women had been portrayed as the main character in a comic, granting visibility to these groups that are usually ignored in local mainstream art.

The female characters in *Guayaquil de mis temores* and *Axioma* make decisions without waiting for advice or authorizations. These comic strips portray three educated women who are far from the traditional housewife roles. They do not aspire to have children, neither do they miss a home life. Gabriela is a “machona”, a woman who adopts the characteristics of the male stereotype; she is brave, ready to fight and to use weapons, and free to make her own decisions. Alexandra and her friend are lesbians, and in such a predominantly conservative and Catholic society like the Ecuadorian one, to show a non-heterosexual orientation is, in itself, a rebellious act.

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