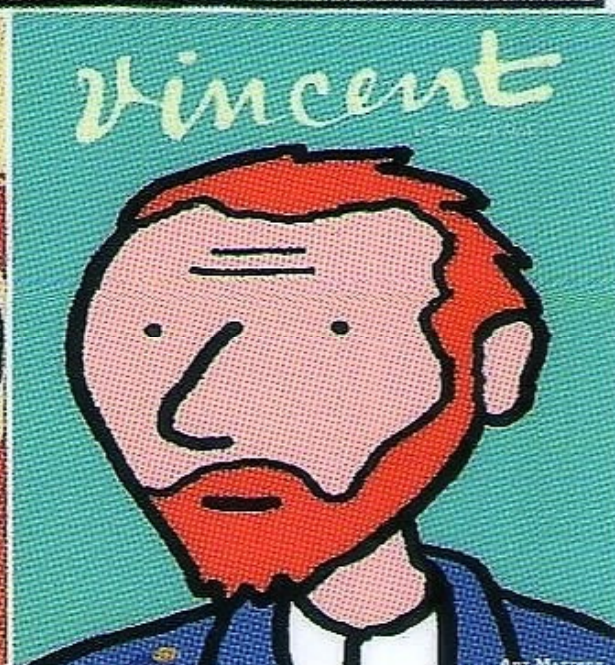
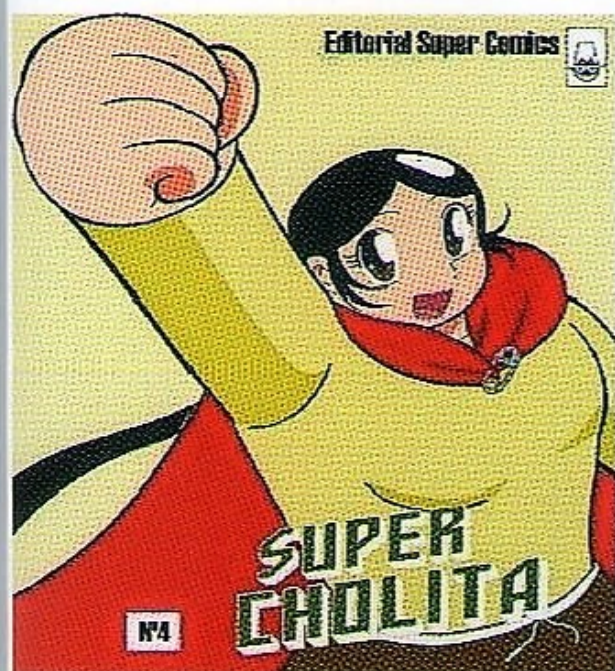


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Alcatena's Malón: National Identity and Cultural Work in the American Comics Industry

Amadeo Gandolfo and Pablo Turnes

In this essay, we will analyze a portion of Argentine cartoonist Enrique Alcatena's career, which started back in the mid-1970s. Alcatena is known for his baroque style, his intricately drawn worlds, his love of superheroes and fantasy, and his collaborations with Eduardo Mazzitelli on scripts. His career also serves as a potent example of transnationalism. He has published extensively in Italy (where most of his collaborations with Mazzitelli first appeared); in Great Britain (for the Scottish DC Thomson and the English Fleetway publishing houses); in India; and, for brief stints, with DC, Marvel Comics, and Eclipse during the 1990s.

We focus particularly on Alcatena's time with DC, where, alongside Chuck Dixon, he created the Super-Malón, a group of Argentine superheroes.¹ This group, loosely inspired by a previously existing character from the 1950s called El Gaucho,² was part of an initiative on the part of DC to expand its universe by incorporating characters from various countries other than the United States. In this essay, we are pursuing the following questions: What stereotypes does the Super-Malón embody? What ideas about Argentina does it transpose? How does the existence of these heroes relate to Alcatena's career in the United States comics industry? What economic and working relationship did the artist establish with DC Comics? And how does this economic aspect relate to the ways in which this group of superheroes inserted itself into the DC Universe?

In works dealing with the complex links between the American comics industry and foreign "national" traditions that supposedly oppose it, scholars usually trace the inescapable influence of an American comics model by highlighting how it was imported, modified, or imitated in different nations. Every national industry has its innovators, many of whom are inspired by early 20th Century American comics, particularly Walt Disney. Osamu Tezuka, Mauricio de Souza, Hergé, and Dante Quintero may all serve as examples, as they all have in some way engaged with lessons imparted by the House of the Mouse, infused them with their own brand of national flavor, and saw the creation of publishing houses and mass media companies in their image.

In our previous work we followed this analytical model in order to analyze the import and adaptation of the word balloon in the newspaper strips of Argentina, but we also attempted to show how these innovations took root and mutated in the country itself (Gandolfo and Turnes, 2017).³ In this essay, we invert the usual focus: Instead of ascertaining the influence of the American comics industry on that of Argentina, which implies

a unidirectional relationship of influence, we will attempt to show the possibilities and limitations an Argentine artist working for American comics would face, asking whether or not his contributions to a shared universe can be lasting.⁴ In this aspect, we will attempt to reconstruct a network of cultural agents and intermediaries which linked not only the American and Argentine comics industries, but also the European ones, and to show, in the figure of Alcatena, how an artist must go through a complex web of negotiations to be published in different countries. We will also take up the concept of "comics work," as defined and used by Brienza and Johnson as

any labor within the field of the cultural production of comics that contributes to or informs a comic's production. In Becker's terms, comics will show "signs of the cooperation" (1982, 1) between the numerous parties involved in its production, and these signs are the outward, visible manifestations of comics work. However, to reveal and interpret these signs, comics work must be understood not just as that which creates obvious visual and material signs but as that which operates -- often invisibly -- behind the scenes to enable these signs and to build a comic and its message and meaning from these signs (Brienza and Johnston, 2016:3).

This expansive definition allows us to consider comics production as the direct work not only of the writer and artist, but also of the agents, editors, and several other intermediaries that make transnational comics possible. That is to say, when taking into account a case such as Alcatena's, limiting our scope to the artist's work exclusively would be an oversimplification of a much larger web of contacts, relationships, and interactions that are often hard to follow due to its informality and peer-to-peer dynamic. However, it is impossible to truly grasp the development of a career path in the comics industry without contextualizing said career with the intricacies of that very field.

The contributions of Argentine comics artists to the American industry are an old phenomenon that has, however, seldom been examined in depth. As Laura Vazquez has stated, the first wave of Argentine artists working for the U.S. industry started in the 1930s, when King Features Syndicate offered some Argentine artists the opportunity to work on newspaper comic strips. The most renowned and successful example from the first-wave of Argentine cartoonists was José Luis Salinas, who drew *Cisco Kid*, a western strip, from 1948 to 1968 (Vazquez, 2010:224).

The relationship continued well into the 1950s, when a group of cartoonists decided to move to the United States to further develop their careers: Alfredo Olivera, Franchó (Arnoldo Franchioni), Osvaldo Laino, Narciso Bayón, and Roberto Battaglia. They joined Vic Martin (Victor Martín, who had migrated to the U.S. in the early 1950s) and settled in New York for some time, where they worked for established U.S. publishing houses in a subordinate and largely anonymous condition. Martin continued

working for *Sick* and *Cracked* magazines at the publisher Ziff Davis. Narciso Bayón was an editor for several publishing houses and worked as a cover artist for Editors Press. Francho worked as a cartoonist with *MAD* magazine, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

None of the group members ever “made it big” in the United States, and most of them returned to Argentina in the early 1970s, as their contributions remained mostly unnoticed in American comics production. Some cases, however, were different. José Luis García López, a sort of adopted Argentine,⁵ went on to become the leading character design artist for DC Comics, establishing a style that most of us associate with 1970s and 1980s DC. José Delbo worked for decades at both DC and Marvel, penciling titles such as *Wonder Woman*, *World's Finest Comics*, *ThunderCats*, and *Transformers*. One thing, however, should be stressed: The attempt to “make it in America” during all these years was a solitary and individual experience for Argentine artists, the success of which was entirely dependent on individual talent, insistence, and “moxie.”

Furthermore, a different, more stable and long-lasting relationship, was established with the European comics industries. The establishment of the publishing house *Abril* in Argentina in 1941⁶ signaled the beginning of a steady influx of Italian artists into the Argentine comics industry. Many of them were part of Surameris, a syndicate founded by Abril, and would go on to collaborate with Editorial Frontera, the pioneering publishing house founded by Héctor Germán Oesterheld in 1957. These cartoonists would be vital in defining the Frontera style of adventure comics.

Ironically, Frontera ended when its artists received competing offers from international markets. When financial and distribution problems started to arise, many of the artists (not only the Italian ones, but also the local talent) took up jobs with Fleetway, a British publishing house, and with the main publishing branch of Abril in Italy. As Oesterheld himself said:

When Europe started offering good prices, tempting the cartoonists, we couldn't counteract the offer [...]. But that was thanks to bad management. Because when *Hora Cero* started we paid better prices than Abril [...]. Sometimes I've heard talk that the cartoonists worked selflessly for *Hora Cero* and *Frontera*. That's not true. They were paid better, that's why they were here (Trillo and Saccomanno, 1980:109).

This collaboration with European markets would prove to be fruitful and durable. Many Argentine artists provided pages for the British and Italian markets for a long time. In fact, this synergy would be the backbone of the business model proposed by Ediciones Récord from the mid-1970s until its bankruptcy in the mid-1990s.

Récord, founded by Alfredo Scutti, had two poles: one in Argentina and one in Italy. Scutti acted as a mediator and manager between the two industries and their artists. He published magazines, had offices in

both countries, and commissioned work from both Italian and Argentine scriptwriters and artists. Récord's business model was not new, but it was the most complete realization of an idea that had been around since the 1950s: that of a transnational network which allowed Argentine comics to thrive both at home and abroad.

Récord favored a certain style in its publications, related to the idea of "adventure" either in a realistic or fantastic setting. Its program was heavily divided by genre (western, science fiction, fantasy, crime, and war comics) with a naturalistic style of drawing and liberal doses of sex and violence. Their magazines were aimed at an adult readership and were heavily influenced by *Métal Hurlant* and other French magazines.

In its beginnings, Récord had a first line of creators (Oesterheld, Ricardo Barreiro, Solano López, Enrique Breccia, Alberto Breccia, Juan Zanotto, Lucho Olivera) who were paired according to certain aesthetic and even personal preferences. Then came a long list of secondary creators, both Argentine and Italian, who were paired according to availability. Récord's system wasn't perfect: "The authors were not paid when their comics were republished in Italy and they ceded all of their creator's rights" (Vazquez, 2010:223). Yet they accepted the deal because it gave them notoriety in Europe and, in some cases, eventually allowed them to bypass the editor and sell their work by themselves.⁷

Included in that second line of artists was Enrique Alcatena. He started working for Récord in 1975, no more than a year after *Skorpio* magazine -- Récord's flagship product -- had started. Alcatena quickly became a mainstay of the publishing house. At first, he was given one shots, usually period pieces, and was paired with Italian scriptwriters whom he never got to know. A self-taught cartoonist, Alcatena learned on the job, thanks to Récord's industrial system, but also on his work as an assistant to Julio César Medrano, a professional cartoonist. The system was repetitive and heavily skewed towards the editorial mainline. As Alcatena himself puts it:

You went to their offices, they gave you a script, you had a certain amount of time to finish it (generally a month), you came back with the finished script [...] [and] talked to [Juan] Zanotto, who was the art director. He told you what to correct, what to change. You took it home, brought it back corrected and that was it. Then another script came in (Alcatena, 2018).

Through the intervention of César Spadari,⁸ Alcatena started working for the British market during the late 1970s, drawing comics for DC Thomson and Fleetway. He drew many science fiction and war comics, and he even collaborated with Grant Morrison, illustrating some of his early scripts. The system was similar to Récord's. In most cases, writer and artist didn't know each other and worked separately, without ever really collaborating. This was reinforced by Thomson's tendency not to credit artists in their comics.⁹

In the mid-to-late 1980s, Alcatena started collaborating with a couple of Argentine writers with whom he would develop a lasting relationship. In 1986 he illustrated *La Fortaleza Móvil* (*The Moving Fortress*), a script by Roberto Barreiro that would mark his debut in fantasy comics in Argentina (Fig. 1).¹⁰ Then, in 1988, he produced his first collaboration with Eduardo Mazzitelli, *Pesadillas* (*Nightmares*). While Barreiro marked his admission to the world of fantasy comics (and they would collaborate on other works in the same vein), it was alongside Mazzitelli that Alcatena eventually found his voice as a cartoonist, producing some of the most powerful works of the genre's history in Argentina.

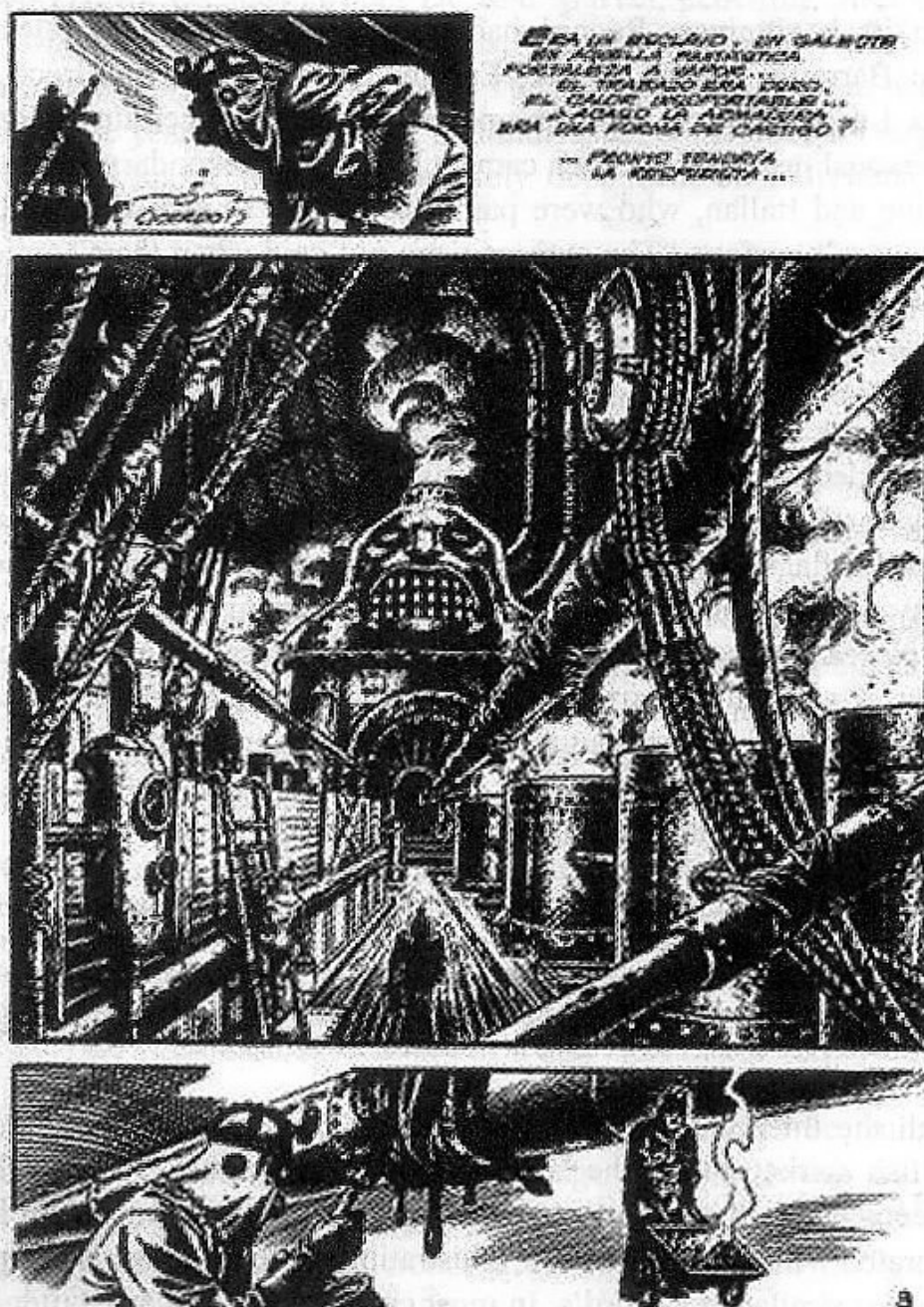


Fig. 1. Ricardo Barreiro and Enrique Alcatena. *La Fortaleza Móvil* (1986). *Skorpio* magazine. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Récord.

When collaborating with Mazzitelli, Alcatena drew inspiration from diverse Asian and African art traditions, developed a more intricate and detailed line work, and designed the page to produce both the biggest impact and the most harmonic organization of information, thus unleashing an unparalleled visual style. At the same time, their way of working was radically different from the labor organization experienced at *Récord*. They discussed ideas and plots beforehand, usually trying to align both their desires and tastes, after which Mazzitelli wrote a full script. Alcatena then designed the page layout in the way he felt was most appropriate for the story.



Fig. 2. Eduardo Mazzitelli and Enrique Alcatena. *Acero Líquido* (1992-1993). *Skorpio* magazine. Buenos Aires: Ediciones *Récord*.

Meanwhile, Récord's operation in Argentina crumbled in the mid-1990s. The decade proved to be the final breakdown of the Argentine comics industry as it had existed since the mid-1930s. Due to a combination of low sales, changes in taste, and increased imports, the few publishing houses with some "clout" in Argentina would close their doors, plunging the industry into its biggest crisis and restructuring process.

Alcatena and Mazzitelli, however, would continue to produce work for the Italian comics industry (Fig. 2) -- a job that is still ongoing, even as Alcatena claims that they "don't know anything" about the Italian market. "We don't know the editors, nothing. We send them stuff and they pay us. Sometimes with a slight delay" (Alcatena, 2018). During the late 1980s and early 1990s and through a combination of contacts and luck, Alcatena managed to enter the American market:

I started getting work through the Villagrán brothers [Enrique and Ricardo, cartoonists]. They had been working for the United States for a few years [...]. There wasn't much Argentine presence there [...]. I don't know how the Villagrás had managed to get in [...]. They knew Chuck Dixon and Tim Truman. I don't know how Truman found out about the *Moving Fortress* in *Skorpio* magazine. I didn't know them back then, they must have sent him samples. So, Truman got in touch with the brothers, then they got in touch with Scutti and Scutti called me and told me: "Hey, Quique, some North American is looking for you for an ink job at DC. Something about Hawkman" [...]. And it was through Scutti that I got those pages. He took his cut, obviously. But that's okay (Alcatena, 2018).¹¹

Although Alcatena was the first artist the Villagrás placed in the United States, soon there would be others, and in the 1990s Argentine artists finally started becoming commonplace in the American comics landscape. Some of them, like Eduardo Risso and Ariel Olivetti, would even go on to become major figures, respected and well-paid.

What made Argentine artists suddenly so desirable for the North American market? One possible answer put forth by Alcatena is that they were simply cheaper. There are past records in the American comics industry for the practice of looking for cheaper labor abroad. The most prominent one may be DC's scouting and hiring of a group of Philippine artists at the end of the 1960s. Carmine Infantino, Joe Orlando, and Tony DeZuñiga traveled to the Philippines looking for talent. They found Alex Niño, Alfredo Alcalá, Néstor Redondo, and other cartoonists, whom they employed through the mediation of DeZuñiga. He, however, took an enormous cut, leaving each artist with a price of \$6 dollars a page. In the words of Alex Niño: "Six dollars compared to \$75 [i.e., the page rate at the time] [...]. It was unfortunate. But I don't blame Tony DeZuñiga. Let bygones be bygones. Agents take big cuts. And a lot of people were taking money off what we were owed" (qtd. in Duin and Richardson, 1998:328).

Probably not coincidentally, DC's efforts were undertaken just as the *IJOCA*, Spring/Summer 2018

Academy of Comic Book Arts, an attempt at unionizing by Neal Adams and other artists, was getting started. According to Jean-Paul Gabilliet, the ACBA did not meet the expectations Adams and other young creators such as Archie Goodwin and Dick Giordano had raised. It only managed to obtain the promise to study royalties, a small insurance policy and, from Marvel, the return of original art before dissolving in the mid-1970s (Gabilliet, 2013:183-186). A second attempt at unionization took shape as the Comics Creators Guild, started in 1978 when a change in copyright laws in the United States had opened the possibility for creators to retain or recover the copyright of their work. Once again spearheaded by Adams, the Guild was also ineffectual in its demands, which included "a page rate of three hundred dollars for artists and one hundred dollars for writers" (Gabilliet, 2013:190). The Guild dissolved almost without a whimper, and the editorial part of the industry adopted the standard work-for-hire contract that had been in place since the 1970s.¹²

These failed attempts illustrate the perennial weakness of "talent" in American comic books. Perpetually subjected to "collaborator" status, hired hands with no long-term contract or benefits, freelancers roaming the offices (or mail accounts) of editors with their samples, writers and artists have traditionally been discouraged from unionizing and taking collective action. Another fact that plays against these labor-organizing attempts is the enormous disparity of working situations within the industry. From journeymen and hacks trying to eke out a living to superstars with exclusive contracts and health benefits, the dissimilarity in professional status and the star system that the American comics industry fosters breed inequality. As we have seen with Scutti, this was something that was par for the course in Argentine comics as well:

We are not employees. That's the crux of the matter [...]. You're a contributor [...]. So you are in a kind of confusing and weak status [...]. There's people that cannot afford the luxury of fighting the management. And I can't go and tell them 'I can because I work for DC'. It's easy to be a heroic avenger when you are working for a different market (Alcatena, 2018).

As part of a collective of artists with whom he collaborated at Récord and who found themselves unemployed after its collapse, Alcatena attempted to publish his own magazine¹³ and establish an association of professional comic book artists (Association of Argentine Comic Artists, ACHA in Spanish). None of these initiatives would get far. Yet the effects of the collapse of the Argentine comics industry would be somewhat softened for Alcatena thanks to his involvement with DC.

As mentioned above, this involvement started with *Hawkworld* (1989), the reinvention of Hawkman that Tim Truman penned and drawn. He continued working with Truman for Eclipse, first inking his pencils and then

drawing several mini-series featuring the pulp character Spider (1992). But the bulk of his work (apart from a ten-issues stint on Marvel's *Conan* between 1995 and 1996) would be at DC, drawing annuals, specials, and mini-series.

Alcatena worked primarily with two writers. One of them was Chuck Dixon, with whom he produced a *Detective Comics* annual starring Leatherwing, a pirate version of Batman (1994) (Fig. 3); a *Legends of the Dark Knight* annual that recounted the origin story of Man-Bat (1995); a short story in a *Green Lantern* annual (1996); and the story we are primarily concerned with here, the *Flash* annual where the Super-Malón was introduced (2000).

The other writer Alcatena worked with was Alan Grant, with whom he produced a story about Clayface in *Legends of the Dark Knight* (#89-90, 1996-1997) and a special Elseworlds one-shot that depicted Batman as a psychiatrist in turn-of-the-century Britain (2000).¹⁴



Fig. 3. Chuck Dixon and Enrique Alcatena. "Leatherwing," *Detective Comics* Annual #7 (Jan. 1994). DC Comics.

All of these works were short-term projects. Alcatena never landed a regular series at DC, partly because he was not interested, partly because the offerings were slim pickings.¹⁵ His only contribution to the shared universe is the Super Malón (spelling alternatives: Súper Malón or Super Malon).

This supergroup appeared in a *Flash* annual that was part of a series of thematic annuals published by DC in the year 2000 under the banner Planet DC. Ostensibly, their objective was to diversify the universe, introducing a

series of characters from "other countries" where superheroes were not as plentiful as in the United States. But, at the same time, it was the typical throwaway scheme designed for annuals -- issues that were never taken very seriously by the editorial staff or the readers. Previous years had seen similar thematic annuals (with the following banner themes: *Elseworlds* in 1994, *Year One* in 1995, *Legends of the Dead Earth* in 1996, and *Pulp Heroes* in 1997). Most of Alcatena's work for DC had been in those special issues, something which coincided with his own desire to work on point by point projects.

Most of the annuals engaged in something that is very common when trying to place superheroes in countries other than the United States (and, sometimes, England): the amplification and extension of picturesque and "typical" details of said country and its traditions as a way to differentiate the heroes from its American template. In the *Superman* annual that is a part of the Planet DC event, the Mexican heroes fight an ancient Aztec god, Ometecotl.¹⁶ One of the local heroes has his origin story tied to the 1985 earthquake that affected several of the Mexican regions including the capital. The *JLA* annual takes place in Turkey and makes a lukewarm political commentary in which Turkey is the middle space between East and West that must be protected but whose political and military might and imperialistic leanings must be denied and stifled. The villain in that comic book is a general (a placement that recognizes the central role of the military in Turkish history) who tries to engineer a coup, with the help of Etrigan the Demon, so as to restore a Sultanate. Finally, the *Green Lantern* annual "muddies the waters" by taking place in Tunisia but bases itself on Babylonian myths, completely confusing the geography and tradition of both regions. Through their art, all of the annuals insert superficial signifiers of the artistic and mythological traditions of said countries, paying lip service to their "specificity."

At the same time, the only way such characters can be a part of the sprawling shared universe of DC Comics is by the insertion of a popular character from the company. It is a tacit assertion that "Third World characters" (understanding by "First World" just the United States, the only important country in the diegesis of superheroes) will never really be considered worthy of an independent fictional life but must merely serve as window dressing of more popular properties, a curiosity to fill pages. And, sure enough, most of them have not been used since then. Their adventures take place "far away" from the traditional American metropolises, real or fictional.

One can make a point that even today, when characters with Muslim, Asian, or Hispanic roots are increasingly popular and form part of DC's and Marvel's shared universes, they must do so at the cost of their specific place: All of them operate outside the United States, and many have connections to established superheroes who were once both American and white (Blue Beetle in its Jaime Reyes version, Ms. Marvel in its Kamala Khan civilian

personality, Green Lantern's Arab American Simon Baz, and Latina Jessica Cruz). The idea of "legacy heroes" marked by sincere admiration is also a form of franchising: They act as second-generation immigrants, both from their countries of origin and of the original heroic signs of the shared universe. This is a way to simultaneously display their specificity as something-other-than-white and to avoid, in some cases, an effort to better acknowledge their cultures of origin.

But what about the Super Malón? It was the only group that was introduced in the Planet DC initiative. It was composed of Cachirú (a hybrid of Batman and Hawkman, inspired by a autochthonous bird), Salamanca (a sorceress whose name comes from the cave where witches and devils gather to celebrate Sabbaths), Yaguararé (a speedster bearing the name of the fastest feline in Argentina), Cimarrón (an exceedingly strong being, half man and half-horse; *cimarrón* is a type of wild horse), Lobizón (a werewolf inspired by the popular local legend that says that the seventh male son in a row will be a lycanthrope), Pampero (who can control the winds and is named after a specific Argentine wind), Bagual (a *bagual* is an untamed horse and also a rebel, in this case some kind of rural bandit), and Vizcacha (a type of nocturnal rodent from the northern provinces of Argentina).¹⁷ The reality in the Super Malón's first and almost only appearance, however, is that even these quick and perfunctory facts are not really stated. The story starts with the characters already trapped by the evil wizard Gualicho (a word meaning "curse," here embodied by a native Patagonian conjurer) in an otherworld dimension in which they are becoming specters.¹⁸ The involvement of the Flash (Wally West) occurs only after his mentor, Jay Garrick, the Golden Age Flash, is trapped in a similar fashion as the Argentine heroes. The heroes' names are barely ever mentioned, with the exception of Salamanca (Fig. 4). This probably has to do with the way they were conceived, from the sign that links the character to Argentina to its design and only then its personality and powers. "History" is nonexistent here. The Super Malón appears as a guide to Wally West, who must defeat Gualicho in a race.

The story and the designs of the characters have a distinct Silver Age, and even Golden Age, vibe. Far from the complicated pouches, guns, armors, and beards of 1990s heroes, each character sports a pretty simple and colorful suit, mainly spandex, with a feeling of homemade simplicity.¹⁹ Alcatena has said that he was "the crazy guy who wanted to make something that was pretty Silver Age-y and Earth 2-like." As he adds: "I invented all the characters and sent them to Chuck, without explaining their powers much, because they don't appear much. Afterwards he decided 'This one does this, and that one does that'" (Alcatena, 2018).

The Super Malón highlights two complicated tensions that define the creation of national superheroes for the American comics industry. First, there is the tension between the picturesque and the generic. The group is molded

after traditional animals, customs, and legends of Argentina. Yet at the same time the short “page time” they were given and their almost nonexistent origin stories and personal traits did not allow these characteristics to be elevated above other DC heroes. Alcatena recognized this tension: “I read pretty adverse criticism [...]. They said [...] ‘can’t there be an Atom in Argentina? Must every hero be linked to Argentine stereotypes?’ I think it’s better to make superheroes that have something to do with tradition than to make generic superheroes that simply operate in Argentina” (Alcatena, 2018). Second, this tension is further complicated by the mode of production. The phenomenon here is that of an artist working from Argentina for a gimmicky event of an American comic book company – an artist who has knowledge of the local Argentine traditions and contributes the character designs and some characteristics of said characters but leaves the definition of powers and personalities to an American writer. And the genre, which has its own historically codified styles and conventions, ends up shaping and reshaping any plans for true originality in this regard. The way Alcatena chooses to draw and design the characters harks back to another time in superhero comics. This was a conscious decision that was related to the way he understood and conceptualized the genre: “The colors, the uniforms, the concepts, the aliens, the monsters, the Bottle Cities, the Bizarros, the Clayfaces, all that fantasy world had a major impact on me as a child. What attracted me fundamentally was the fantasy aspect” (Alcatena, 2018).

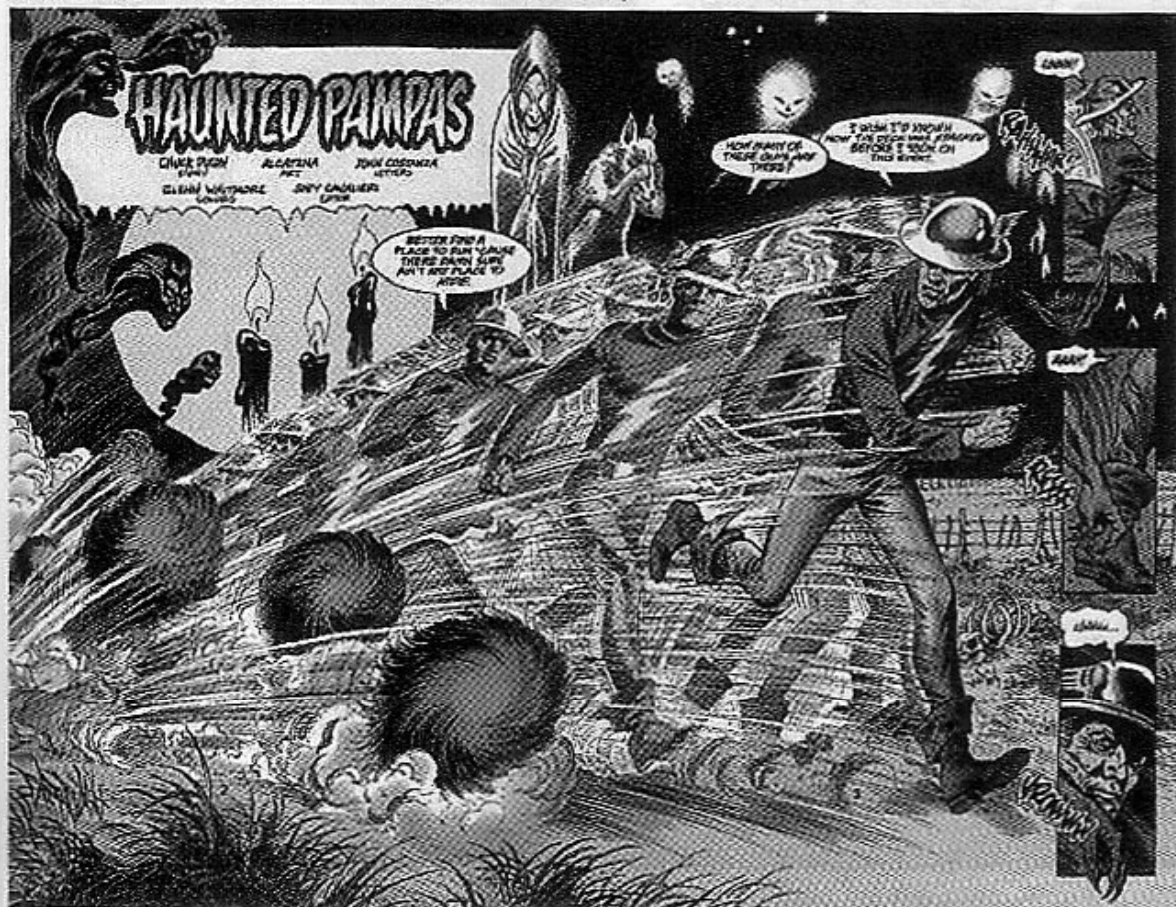


Fig. 4. Chuck Dixon and Enrique Alcatena. “Haunted Pampas.” *Flash Annual* #13 (Sept. 2000). DC Comics.

This juxtaposition of productive conditions basically explains the end product, which is at the same time a product of genuine affection, an homage to a bygone type of superhero narrative (one which was frowned upon during the years Alcatena worked in the American industry), and a largely disposable plot line not meant to be revisited again by the industry and the shared universe.²⁰ In this respect, the comic recalls the first appearance of El Gaucho, DC's first Argentine hero. Underdeveloped to the point where their only distinguishing characteristic is their attire, the Batmen of All Nations would have to wait more than 50 years to be dusted off and attain depth.



Fig. 5. Chuck Dixon and Enrique Alcatena. "Haunted Pampas." *Flash Annual* #13 (Sept. 2000). DC Comics.

At the same time, these tensions also surface regarding the “local” flavor of the story. As we have seen, every member of the Super Malón is superficially modeled after Argentine traditions and fauna (Fig. 5). And the comic is filled with touches that show Alcatena’s penchant for incorporating local color into this adventure. Some panels are filled with fantastical creatures from Argentine folklore, which Alcatena does not explain or contextualize, in a practice that is fairly common for the artist. In his collaborations with Mazzitelli, battle and confrontation scenes usually overflow with mythical creatures that are entirely of Alcatena’s invention. He rarely repeats a design and rarely explains the origin of said monsters beyond the brief description given by Mazzitelli in the script.

Yet this lack of contextualization also highlights the difficulty of accurately conveying the nuances of Argentine life and culture. This is especially notorious in the annual’s second short story, featuring Cachirú and Salamanca. This tale has these characters face a “phantom mazorquero” who cannot rest until he is reunited with his long-lost love, Doña Rosario, an upper-class woman who refuses to die. Here, history forcefully turns into caricature as a consequence of the brief page-count and the difficulty in conveying the intricacies of Argentine 19th Century history to an American audience. La Mazorca (The Corncob) was the name associated with shock assassination and intimidation as practiced by Buenos Aires’s governor Juan Manuel de Rosas and his team. They operated at night and favored throat slicing as a form of execution. They were widely reviled and feared by the opposition, many of whom decided to move to Uruguay and Chile to escape assassination and persecution. La Mazorca was a recognized force of terror during the government of Rosas in the Argentina of the first half of the 19th Century; the function, scope, and reach of their terror operations are widely discussed in Argentine historiography. Furthermore, this discussion is intrinsically linked to the overall historiographic significance of Rosas’s government.²¹

In the comic book, such nuance is entirely lost to the generic trappings: La Mazorca is described as “the secret police of governor Rosas” and the ghostly mazorquero’s death as occurring “during the civil war.” The question is: What civil war? The entire historical period between 1820 and 1862 could be considered a long-lasting civil war in Argentina. What is more, the mazorquero is the hero of the story, which turns into a traditional story of star-crossed lovers unable to be together because of class difference -- in short, the Romeo and Juliet scenario. At the same time, the graphic display of the spectral mazorquero represents, above all, an unexpected aesthetic pleasure for the artist and the members of the audience who can decode what it means and how out of place it is in a DC comic book. The big splash page on which the mazorquero makes his first appearance -- a fiery red figure that hovers in front of the Tower of the English, a clock tower situated in the quarter of

Retiro -- is impressive and serves to underscore the incongruity that is the defining sign of a shared superhero universe by mixing elements from real life and history with the absurdity of the genre.²²



Fig. 6. Enrique Alcatena. "Out of the Past." *Flash Annual* #13 (Sept. 2000). DC Comics.

These considerations present us with a question: Are superheroes viable outside of an American milieu, and to what extent are they a representation of the power and politics of the United States? Walter Ong links superheroes to the "superstate," claiming that the undemocratic and violent ideals of fascism in Europe were being imported under a democratic guise in the form of the Superman (Ong, 2013). These accusations were then taken up by leftist intellectuals, who flipped them and turned them into an indictment of American capitalist bourgeois values. Umberto Eco wrote that the structure of the Superman stories, without progress or consequence, was one of the ways in which men were "heterodirected," that is, told what to desire and how to get it by the pedagogical system of consumer society (Eco, 1984:249-297). Manuel Jofré builds on Eco's argument in an examination of "bourgeois comics" which, in his view, are often defined by a division between superior and common beings, the latter being passive and "lacking all humanity" (Dorfman and Jofré, 1974:116). Richard Reynolds, in one of the first studies of superheroes as a genre (*Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, 1992), underlines the figure of the "Lone Wolf hero" as an American invention:

[...] [T]he self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from many of the humdrum concerns of society, yet is able to operate according to his own code of honor, to take on the world on his own terms, and win. For Americans, the historical path from Munich to Pearl Harbor coincides with the emergence of Superman and Captain America -- solitary but socialized heroes, who engage in battle from time to time as proxies of U.S. foreign policy (Reynolds, 2013:108).

Finally, in a more recent study concerning nationalist superheroes, Jason Dittmer has argued that superheroes should be repositioned -- from being "understood as a 'reflection' of preexisting and seemingly innate American values" to being "co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices" (Dittmer, 2013:2-3).

According to these interpretations, there is something inherent to superheroes which makes them stand for, *mutatis mutandis*, the imperialistic and economic power of the United States in the world. Even if you do not believe that there is a one-to-one correlation between American policy and superheroes throughout their history (and we do not, as a matter of fact), most artists recognize that there is something that makes the United States the privileged soil for superheroes to thrive. As a final point, we will now consider a sociological and materialistic explanation, which continues our exploration of cultural work in the American comics industry, rather than an ideological one.

When we think about superheroes, we think about Marvel and DC and their concept of a shared universe: patchwork quilts woven from the hard work and imagination of thousands of creators. The fact of the matter is that superheroes thrive in American comic books thanks to a particular

type (or types) of organization of labor and exploitation of intellectual property. Through a long process of refinement, tight editorial control, and the establishment of tropes and signifiers, superhero comics have emerged in American comic books as a standardized and highly perfected genre. This does not mean that every superhero comic book is perfect, but rather that the industry ensures a certain level of base competence which, at the very least, breeds a comforting mediocrity. At the same time, the organization of labor in fragmented and isolated units guarantees an enormous level of production and, thus, the obstruction of collective action. This feeds into the revolving door of creators, each of whom contributes to the expansion of the shared universe with their own intellectual particularities.

This dynamic finally acts as both a narrative and an economic device. On the one hand, the superhero comic book is a perpetual playing field on which any character could potentially recur, always ready for a new interpretation or a deepening of their personality, adventures, and history. On the other hand, the system facilitates depriving creators of their rights, since the ever-growing canvas is always in the hands of corporate owners. To put it bluntly: The narrative complexity of the superhero-shared universe in their two most noteworthy examples is directly dependent on the pillaging of creative labor from the creators. Characters grow and change; creators are expendable.

All of these elements help to somewhat explain why Alcatena ultimately decided to leave the American comics industry. For many Argentine artists, working for the Big Two was seen as a dream come true, the entrance to *the* comics market. Yet Alcatena was never entirely happy with it and remained unconvinced even after having done a last collaboration for the *Hawkman* one-shot from the Convergence event DC launched in 2015²³:

The market does not exist. And for what it's worth: What I liked of my work for the United States was giving pleasure to the kid that I once was. Those were the characters that got me into comics, and now I could be there and draw them. But it was a very emotional thing, not a professional achievement [...]. It was nice for me, but there comes a time when you tell yourself, either I stay fixed in the past and I do these characters for the rest of my life because I cannot separate myself from my childhood, or I take it as a job and I do not get involved anymore. And I do not want that, I want to continue being involved with my work. That's when I decided to move away from it (Alcatena, 2018).

Alcatena's loss of passion made him realize he was starting to regress as far as his style was concerned. His withdrawal from the U.S. markets was a conscious choice to keep working for the Italian market, which allows him to keep copyright of his work while not being subjected to a strict editorial control. Still, he has not given up his take on the superhero genre. In 2012, Alcatena teamed up with the Argentine artist Fernando Calvi to launch Tótem Comics, a digital platform that functions as a superhero publishing initiative.²⁴ Over the past few years, more (and often younger) artists have joined the

project by producing their own characters and titles which deal with sexual and political issues in a way that would be hard to accomplish in such a compartmentalized and conservative scene as the American mainstream comics industry.

Thus, the (South) American Dream of becoming a successful comics artist in the U.S. can only be upheld as long as the artists accept the working conditions imposed by the industry. This, of course, is nothing new to those familiar with mainstream comics production in the U.S. and in general. Yet the fact that renowned artists such as Alcatena and Enrique Breccia decided to quit after a relatively short time of production while younger artists like Ariel Olivetti, Jorge Lucas, Mauro Cascioli, Max Fiumara, and Luciano Vecchio (who is also part of the *Tótem* initiative) still work for the U.S. mainstream industry might point out a generational breach that reverberates in their work ethic.²⁵

In short, while older generations got to know regularly paid artistic work in comics both in Argentina and Europe, younger generations developed professionally in a post-industrial context characterized by more precarious, unstable labor conditions. Alcatena remains the odd one out, stretched between two poles. On the one hand, he acquired his work ethic in an industrial medium, something younger artists never came to know. On the other hand, his authorial imaginary is indebted to superhero and fantasy comics, tightly bound to the U.S. mainstream comics tradition, something artists from his generation have often ignored or even despised. His case is interesting since it stresses Argentina's malleable culture, which mixes different foreign influences while at the same time trying to keep a "national" flavor to everything that's produced. The collapse of the local industry made this nationalistic aspiration obsolete, which in turn forced Argentine artists to bolster their adaptive skills to better serve European and, increasingly, U.S. markets.

The 21st Century has shown that concepts such as "adaptation," "imagination," and "innovation" are increasingly the requirements for the current globalized labor force. In the long road from the late 1950s to the present, the tension between capital and labor as experienced in the different worldwide comics industries could help us better understand how late capitalism has turned imagination into a commodity, making the entertainment industry a key asset of its globalized effort to keep the system going.

In this framework, the assumption that the work force is made of nothing but disposable and interchangeable parts -- namely, the artists -- would be simplifying things unduly and would risk taking into account capitalism only from a corporate point of view. The comics industry offers a more interesting and complex perspective, where a concept such as "shared fictional universe" serves for reinterpretations. It reinterprets what is usually understood as the mere extraction of added value from creative workers as an actual battlefield.

Characters and titles, ideas and graphic and conceptual resources, are not only meant to be corporate properties. Rather, they are tools for the creative laborers to make corporations rethink and recalibrate their politics from time to time.²⁶

Finally, considering Alcatena's career, there is another possibility, too: refusing to feed the machine through hard and often unrecognized and ungrateful work. The Internet and more independent publishing projects can serve as new ways of reimagining that which remains deeply rooted in childish fantasies. Through them, new ways of imagining, enjoying and understanding the world we live in may emerge.

Endnotes

¹ "Malón," or "maloca," is the name given to the raids of Mapuche bands into Spanish, Chilean, and Argentine territory from the 17th to the 19th centuries, as well as to attacks on rival Mapuche factions. The malón among the Mapuche is described as a means of obtaining justice or forcing nation states to negotiate pacts of non-aggression by having a series of luxury goods redistributed among the different native leaders and their people.

² El Gaucho's first appearance was in *Detective Comics* #215 (Jan. 1955) as part of the Batmen of All Nations. Originally created by writer Edmond Hamilton and artist Sheldon Moldoff, the character would remain outside of DCU's continuity until its reinvention during the *Black Glove* story arc. See Grant Morrison and J. H. Williams III, "The island of Mister Mayhew," *Batman* #667 (Aug. 2007). New York: DC Comics.

³ At times -- and especially in Latin American countries -- this type of analysis seems linked to the popularization of theories of capitalist dependence and underdevelopment. Both Oscar Masotta (1970) and Jorge B. Rivera (1992) take American comics as the natural starting point and model for Argentine comics. This was made explicit by Laura Vazquez (2012) when she compared Disney and Dante Quintero. In Brazil, Gonçalves Junior examined the origins of the Brazilian comics industry through the influence of the American model of newspaper strips and comic book (2004). Finally, in a much more nuanced version, Natsu Onoda Power traces the influence of American animation and comics on Osamu Tezuka in his reconstruction of the roots of comics in pre-capitalist Japan (2009).

⁴ A shared universe is a set of creative works where more than one writer (or other artist) independently contributes a work that manages to stand alone and simultaneously fit into the joint development of the storyline, characters, or world of the overall project. The term *shared universe* is commonly used in comics to reflect the overall milieu created by a particular comic book publisher, where -- via media franchises -- characters, events, and premises

from one product line appear in another one.

⁵ He was born in Spain but migrated to and grew up in Argentina. He usually mentions José Luis Salinas and Alberto Breccia as his influences. An example of this can be read at <<http://www.capedwonder.com/jose-luis-garcia-lopez-interview>>.

⁶ Abril was founded by Cesare Civita, an Italian Jew who had fled Europe with his family after Italy had passed its 1938 Racial Laws. He was already working as an editor for the Mondadori publishing house, and, once in Argentina, negotiated the rights to start publishing Disney comic strips. Via Surameris, he hired artists fleeing post-war Italy in the early 1950s. Some of these artists would become key players in the development of modern Argentine comics -- including Hugo Pratt, but also Alberto Ongaro, Mario Faustini, and Ivo Pavone.

⁷ There are many stories about Alfredo Scutti's mishandling of creators' rights, the way he took advantage of the artists' need to find work, and the enormous sums he amassed selling Argentine original works in both Italy and France. Carlos Trillo said: "[T]here came one day when I realized that it was awful business working with Scutti. He flooded the international markets with our material, and if you went to offer your stuff to France or Italy the editors would tell you: 'But I can get your stuff for 8 pesos! How can you charge me \$80?'" (Vazquez and Agrimbau, 2012). Perhaps the most notorious of his felonies is the handling of *El Eternauta's* publishing rights: He received them from Elsa Sánchez (Oesterheld's widow) in the mid-1980s. Elsa Sánchez was at the time struggling economically, in addition to reeling from the death and disappearance of her husband and her four daughters. Scutti paid a ludicrous sum, which Elsa Sánchez accepted given the circumstances. The irregularities of the contract allowed Sánchez to fight Scutti in court during the 1990s, in a protracted and complicated legal battle that ultimately gave her the rights back ("Dictaminaron que los herederos de Oesterheld tienen los derechos de autor sobre 'El Eternauta,'" 2015).

⁸ "César Aurelio Spadari (b. 1938) is an Argentine artist who has worked for the Spanish publisher Bruguera on several realistic series (*Grand Prix*, *La Llamada de Africa*) and on comics adaptations of novels in the collection *Joyas Literarias Juveniles* ("Hacia el Zambesí," "Dos Años de Vacaciones," "Nuevas Aventuras de Robinson Crusoe", etc.). He has also done agency work, and his artwork has appeared in both British and Dutch girls' magazines from the 1970s through the 2000s. In 1987, he began a collaboration with the Scandinavian publisher Semic Press and became an illustrator for the Swedish *Fantomen* (*The Phantom*) comics. He has also drawn for the Swedish magazine *Min Häst*." See Lambiek Comiclopedia: <https://www.lambiek.net/artists/s/spadari_cesar.htm>.

⁹ It is interesting to note that this work was interrupted in 1982 because of the Malvinas/Falklands War, which prompted Alcatena to look for work elsewhere

and eventually to start a long tenure at the children's magazine *Antejito* (Alcatena, 2018).

¹⁰ *The Moving Fortress* and *Subterra* would be published in the U.S. by 4Winds Publishing Group, an editorial enterprise helmed by Tim Truman and Chuck Dixon in association with Eclipse Comics, in 1988 and 1989, respectively. Scripts would be co-credited to both Barreiro -- the original writer -- and Dixon.

¹¹ It is worth noting that Alcatena, in contrast to other Argentine artists, does not consider the role of intermediaries or managers as purely parasitic, but rather as a necessary part in a bigger network which allows working for international markets. Not only did Scutti claim his share in this instance, but the Villagrán brothers continued to be his agents in the United States for the entirety of his stint there; they took around 20 percent of his income. In his own words: "At some point Truman wrote me saying 'let's cut the middle man.' But I felt bad about it. 'I can't do that' was my answer. They took their part, the managers' part. But money was great anyway" (Alcatena, 2018).

¹² Neal Adams, however, had a different version of the story. In an interview published in *The Comics Journal* in 1982 he stated that, as a consequence of the Guild's establishment, "a lot of people started putting pressure on the companies [...]. So, what we have as a result of all that rigamarole is the companies offering better conditions for their artists [...]. And what's happened as a result of all that is that those people who are working the hardest at the Guild discovered that they were being kept so busy by the companies and independent projects that their interest waned in the Guild. They had less to fight for. So, in effect a lot of the goals of the Guild were accomplished almost immediately without the Guild having to walk into someone's office *once*" (Groth, 1982:93).

¹³ *Hacha*, which managed to publish six issues between 1996 and 2001.

¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the relationship with Alan Grant was two-sided, since the writer had something of a love affair with Argentina during the 1990s: He was invited to conventions and traveled to the country several times during these years, to the point where he also collaborated with *Hacha* and other Argentine magazines, usually with Alcatena as penciler.

¹⁵ At one point, he was offered to ink the *Lobo* regular series (1993-1999), which, besides not being a good fit, implied that he would be inking, something that he never really liked (even though this was how he had made his start in American comic books).

¹⁶ The Lord of Duality, whose symbol, in the comic, is said to have appeared in several different cultures throughout time, at the same time contextualizing and decontextualizing the reference.

¹⁷ Note that all the animals and legends that inspire the Super Malón come from rural areas, unwittingly perpetuating the image of Argentina as a primarily agricultural and cattle-producing country, the "world's barn," an

almost empty expanse populated by savage gauchos.

¹⁸ Even if it may not have been planned by Alcatena that way, this could be read metaphorically as the "old vibe" of superheroes slowly fading away in an age where the *zeitgeist* was quite different. That is to say, the only place for those old characters and particularly for that more colorful approach to superheroes was oblivion.

¹⁹ In this respect, though, and in a subtle roundabout way, Alcatena takes up a topic that *Watchmen* and several later ones of Alan Moore superhero works offered, in their attempt to make superheroes more relatable and closer to "reality." It is the quality of superhero clothing as something not made out of unstable molecules and alien-like fabrics, but of everyday materials. This is, simultaneously, a revision of, and a throwback into the Golden Age suits and their simplicity.

²⁰ Moreover, Alcatena deliberately imitated Carmine Infantino's style and effects, many of which were -- to the dismay of its author -- effaced by the coloring.

²¹ Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877) has been seen alternatively as a dictator, a popular leader, a defender of Argentine independence and sovereignty from Britain and France, a defender of federalism, and as the key figure who set the basis for a unified Argentine republic with Buenos Aires as the economic and political center of the country. How you consider La Mazorca depends on your strand of historiography.

²² We would like to point out that the location that serves as a backdrop for Alcatena's mazorquero is a tower that was built as a gift from British residents in Argentina to commemorate the 1810 May Revolution, built by British architects with materials shipped from England. As we have said, Rosas had a longstanding dispute with British forces during his long government, and he fought them several times. Paradoxically enough, Rosas would go into exile in 1852, moving to Southampton (England), where he would live as a farmer for the rest of his days.

²³ Interestingly enough, his last work for DC closes the circle started with *Hawkworld* back in 1989, with the same character -- Hawkman -- as the protagonist.

²⁴ <http://www.totemcomics.com.ar/p/blog-page_25.html>.

²⁵ An exception should be made for the case of Eduardo Risso, who succeeded in a way colleagues of his generation never did. Alcatena mentions his case as one where the artist does not hold a particular passion or love for the superhero genre, thus becoming better suited to work in the industry by performing a mere professional task.

²⁶ In fact, since the change in working conditions introduced by the new copyright laws of the 1970s, the industry has had to enact royalties. This, in turn, benefited Alcatena, thanks less to the Super Malón than to Leatherwing, the pirate Batman. This character, which is at the same time a variation on

the original Batman and a “new” character, was added to the Batman cartoon *The Brave and the Bold*, and his alternate earth has been officially recognized as one of the 52 earths that compose the DC Comics Multiverse in Grant Morrison’s *Multiversity* (2014-2015). Both of these appearances resulted in royalty payments for Alcatena. It is kind of disheartening (yet also entirely logical) that Alcatena’s most lasting addition to the DC Universe was yet another version of its most popular character and not an original creation.

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Amadeo Gandolfo is a professor in the sociology career of the University of Buenos Aires. He holds a degree in history (Universidad Nacional de Tucumán) and a Ph.D. in social sciences (Universidad de Buenos Aires). He co-organized the International Conference Viñetas Serias in its final edition (2014). He is part of the Narrativas Dibujadas research group under the direction of Laura Vazquez; and of the Grupo de Estudios sobre Acciones en Público, under the direction of Gabriel Nardacchione. Both are based in the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (UBA). He offers comics criticism workshops with Pablo Turnes, with whom he also co-edits the web magazine *Kamandi* (www.revistakamandi.com). He has published articles in academic journals and has collaborated with several magazines related to the art, politics, cinema, and comics of Argentina. His doctoral thesis was "The Drawn Opposition: Politics, Professions and Artwork of the Argentine Political Cartoonists (1955-1976)". His postdoctoral research deals with the oeuvres and lives of Jules Feiffer and Oscar Conti (Oski). He is a postdoctoral fellow at CONICET (National Council of Scientific and Technical Research).

Pablo Turnes is a professor in history (Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata). He holds a Master's in History of Argentine and Latin American Art (Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales -- Universidad Nacional de San Martín) and a doctorate in social sciences (Universidad de Buenos Aires). He completed his doctorate as a fellow of the National Council of Scientific

and Technical Research (CONICET) and is a postdoctoral fellow at the same institution. He is also associate professor of the Chair for History of the National and Latin American Media at the Universidad Nacional de Moreno. He co-organized the International Conference Viñetas Serias in its three editions (2010, 2012, and 2014). He is part of the Narrativas Dibujadas research group at the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (UBA), under the direction of Laura Vazquez. His master's thesis will be edited by Tren en Movimiento under the title *The Exile of Forms: Alack Sinner by José Muñoz and Carlos Sampayo*. His Ph.D. thesis is titled "The Exception in the Rule: The Comics Work of Alberto Breccia (1962-1993)." His current postdoctoral project takes on the issue of memory and comics from an Argentine and Latin American historical perspective, with particular focus on traumatic events and dictatorial regimes from the recent past.