Turf, Tags, and Territory: Spatiality in Jaime Hernandez’s “Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz”

By Christopher González

1 Visually rendered space is a crucial ingredient on the comics page. As Charles Hatfield puts it, “Besides its narrative qualities, comic art is, again, visual: a straightforward enough fact, indeed a banality when bluntly stated, but one that places special obligations on critics and scholars in terms of methodology and range of reference” (133). Unlike a writer who uses text alone to create narrative, comics artists have the tools of visual iconography at their disposal that allow them to designate specific spaces on a page which represent and correspond to actual spaces within the inscribed storyworld. Whereas the text-only writer represents space by using words and phrases that orient readers to locations and positions of objects within the storyworld, the comics artist may achieve the same task by employing an image as simple as a line to something as complex as a photorealist image of a human face. In most comics, specific visual iconography establishes and enriches the texture of the storyworld; it suggests three-dimensional space via two-dimensional cuing. In other words, space in comics is a vital aspect of the medium itself, a point so abundantly clear as to be taken for granted. However, just as in the early stage of narrative studies where explorations of the temporal aspects dominated, comics studies has only recently taken up the issue of space—not simply as a secondary characteristic but as a substantial constituent of comics. Many factors may explain this—from the observable use of two-dimensional space in comics, to the immeasurability of spaces within storyworlds, to the uncertainty surrounding the term “space” itself when discussing comics. Indeed, multifarious manifestations of space in comics are much more complex than most scholarship acknowledges.

2 In this essay I wish to consider three aspects of spatiality—what I call configuration, localization, and spatialization—as they play out in Jaime Hernandez’s three-part series “Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz” from 1987. I argue that an exploration of Hernandez’s use of space can help us understand how space in comics may enrich a given comics storyworld and also influence reader engagement with comics itself. By using a storyline that is rare in his oeuvre—gangland violence—Hernandez establishes how spaces are claimed and owned within his storyworld—spaces that manifest as neighborhoods, cities, homes, automobiles, and bodies of people. Through careful consideration of these aspects of spatiality, Hernandez produces a unique take on gang life in the barrio while also producing one of his most powerful comics. Thus, I explore Hernandez’s manipulation of time-space as well as his protagonist’s engagement in a similar endeavor within the Hoppers storyworld. While Hernandez uses images to realize a storyworld onto the two-dimensional canvas of the page, Eulalio “Speedy” Ortiz strategizes the creation of his own persona through careful choreographic scripts common to “thug life” as well as his own navigation of space. At its core, “The Death of Speedy Ortiz” underscores how both Hernandez and Ortiz must overcome specific spatial challenges in pursuit of their respective goals. “Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz” provides an exceptional opportunity for such a study.

Considerations of Space in Comics

3 As it relates to comics, one can think of space as having three aspects. The first of these concerns the actual space occupied by the visual art on the page, as in, for example, the panel. This aspect of space has been explored in great detail, particularly by Thierry Groensteen in The System of Comics (2007). Groensteen theorizes a spatio-topic system of comics that encompasses, for instance, the arrangement or dimensions of panels on a given page, among other considerations. Yet Groensteen’s examination of space in a holistic system of comics lacks depth, evident when we consider two other aspects of space in comics.

4 The second of these aspects is often what we think of when we identify a narrative’s setting—the location in which narrative events occur, but also the three-dimensional texture of a storyworld. Indeed, early explorations of space in narrative often analogized space as a stage, one that functioned as a sort of container where temporal events occurred as the narrative progressed: “In early narrative texts, space is often reduced to a mere backdrop or stage design whose relevant features are largely assumed to be known even if the setting itself is as crucial as the locus amoenus in medieval and romantic literature or indicative of the social status of characters as in the novels of Jane Austen” (Buchholz and Jahn 553-54). Later, Bakhtin’s exploration of the chronotope gave equal weight to both time and space, just as his source inspiration, Albert Einstein, theorized.

5 Yet as Susan Stanford Friedman has demonstrated, Bakhtin’s notion of topos, or space, is often set aside in favor of other characteristics of narrative. One has only to consider how dominant the exploration of time is in Gérard Genette’s Narrative Discourse (1980) relative to space, despite the tacit understanding that time and space are equally significant. Friedman suggests that we need a compensatory emphasis on space in order to bring back into view Bakhtin’s continual attention to the function of space as an active agent in the production of narrative. We need a topochronic narrative poetics, one that foregrounds topos in an effort to restore an interactive analysis of time with space in narrative discourse. (194)
Borders insist on purity, distinction, difference, but facilitate contamination, mixing, and creolization. Borders of all kinds are forever being crossed; but the experience of crossing depends upon the existence of borders in the first place [...]. Bodies too are border sites, marking the distinction between inside and outside, self and other. Bodies are a flesh and blood upon which the social order marks its hierarchies based on boundaried systems of gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, sexuality, and so forth. In all these modes and functions, borders are sites and social locations that generate and shape narrative in conjunction with time. (196-97)

Thus, not only is space geographic and cartographic, it is intimate and interwoven with identity.

6 Friedman's call to attend to spatial elements of narrative only implicitly acknowledges the third aspect of space, which concerns how readers reconstruct the spaces of a storyworld in their own minds as they read. This theory of spatialization has been theorized by David Herman and Marie-Laure Ryan, among others. As part of the cognitive effort of reading, readers constantly work to recreate the inscribed storyworld in a narrative as well as to constantly update and revise this mental model of the storyworld as the narrative progresses. In *Story Logic* (2002), Herman describes narratives as "systems of verbal or visual cues prompting their readers to spatialize storyworlds into evolving configurations of participants, objects, and places" (263). Herman's work on spatialization has helped elucidate how mental models are suggested by certain characteristics of narrative such as deictic shifts, but his model has not yet considered spatialization in graphic narrative specifically. Herman's precise typology, I suggest, is poised to help scholars of graphic narrative begin to move away from predominant terms that privilege the temporal aspects of narrative. For example, "configurations" or "constellations" with regard to adjacent panels in comics might serve scholarship better than "series" and "sequence" when spatial characteristics of comics are under consideration.

7 Ryan, for her part, has explored how readers are able to create cognitive maps of the events conveyed in narrative. Her use of the term "cognitive map" is "a mental model of spatial relations" (215). Ryan's investigation of how storyworlds are mapped by readers (and the difficulties such a task presents) highlights the relation between "the temporal dimension of language and the spatial nature of maps" (218). But as with Herman, Ryan does not consider such cognitive mapping vis-à-vis graphic narrative. Indeed, one might ask how the two processes of cognitive mapping (i.e., reading text-only narrative vs. graphic narrative) are different. The process of creating a mental model of space cued by static images inscribed in comics has not yet been explored in sufficient detail. Indeed, part of what I explore in this essay is how, in comics, the reader reconstructs a storyworld in a way that goes beyond what has been inscribed in the sequential and configured layout of the panels. The reader not only reconstructs the images within a constellation of panels but, as a function of filling in gaps, creates a greater textured storyworld than what is inscribed within the page. Viewed in these specific ways, space within a storyworld may take on a life of its own and can, for example, become a crucial member of the cast of characters as it rises above the designation of mere backdrop or setting. Rather than characterize graphic narrative as "essentially boxes of time," as do Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven (769), I assert that the triangulation of space along the artist-comic-reader relationship is what enables an expression of time to begin with. So, the comic panel is not "essentially" time. Rather, spatial and temporal aspects of panels in comics are equally important for investigation.

Visual Storytelling in Gang Culture

8 Before applying my model for spatiality to Jaime Hernandez's comics, I want to take a moment to establish the primacy and value of visual storytelling that permeates gang culture, by and large, as the predominance of visual markers such as tattoos, scarring, and tags are a salient factor in my analysis. It will be useful to briefly consider the gangland narrative as it typically appears in fiction and autobiography. Though not readily apparent to a casual observer, there is an intriguing parallel between creators of narrative and individuals who take up what Tupac Shakur famously labeled the "thug life" and what Chicano gang culture has called "la vida loca" (crazy life). That is to say, gang members are often preoccupied with the task of creating their own narrative—one that allows them, and their reputations, to become larger-than-life. For gang members, certain acts of violence are typically used to weave a self-designed narrative or origin story to intimidate and to invoke respect and fear from rivals. Such acts are carefully planned and are not the result of mere happenstance; they are the result of strategic storytelling—one that is rooted in fact rather than fiction. More specifically, both the creator of narrative and the gangland initiate are involved in similar world- and persona-creating processes that engage in the same sorts of narrative worldmaking strategies, albeit for vastly different reasons. While the narrative-maker's purpose is frustratingly difficult to locate (i.e., does he create fictional worlds to suit his own tastes or those of an ideal reader, or both?), the gangbanger's purpose is readily apparent: to reach the upper echelons of power without suffering disability or death at the hands of a rival. The comparison of narrative worldmaker to gangbanger is a bold one. Yet viewing the gangbanger, or vato loco, along the vector of narrative may help us understand how so-called thug life or "la vida loca" uses narrative strategies in negotiating the space in which this deadly "game" is played. Several of the characters in "The Death of Speedy Ortiz" work to create their own narrative within Hernandez's storyworld while being aware of the value of space in la vida loca

9 Moreover, despite the potential of graphic narrative to undertake a seemingly unlimited range of stories, few comics have explored the world of la vida loca or thug life in general. For reasons that are not altogether clear, gang narratives tend to be rendered in text-only autobiographical words. For example, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), and Luis J. Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993) are all masterful examples of autobiographical forays into the allure and ultimate destructiveness of gang life. These writers, as they detail in their books,
survived their violent youths in order to tell the gang narrative. We have yet to see similar types of stories through the lens of comics. Consequently, the paucity of thug life narratives in comics form makes the works of Jaime Hernandez all the more important for study for several reasons. First, while Jaime and his brothers all grew up in Oxnard, California and were ostensibly far from the effects of gang life on the atmosphere of a community, Jaime’s narrative engagements with la vida loca, unlike the narratives of Brown, Thomas, and Rodriguez, are not explicitly autobiographical. (While Hernandez admits his first-hand engagement with lowrider culture in his youth, “The Death of Speedy Ortiz” is not personal in the same way as, say, *Down These Mean Streets*.) Since there is nothing in Hernandez’s comic that blurs the ontological line of fiction, we can read it purely as fiction. Second, the visual-verbal mode of storytelling in comics allows Jaime to foreground the spatial elements in his storyworld that act as signifiers which transcend immediate localizations of time, such as the graffiti tags that literally decorate the Hoppers storyworld. Though often backgrounded relative to what the visual-verbal narrator foregrounds within the panels, these tags serve an overarching, if minor, storytelling function within the Hoppers storyworld, just as similar tags do in real-world practices. Consequently, these tags serve as a sort of connective tissue that unites the serialized issues of the Hoppers storyworld. These tags are also created by faceless entities that strive for a sort of omnipresence, much like Hernandez himself. In fact, the splash page of Part Two of “The Death of Speedy Ortiz” displays the title written as graffiti on a background wall in the panel. Hernandez adopts the name “Loco,” in this panel, a name appearing throughout many of the comics set in the Hoppers storyworld. Finally, as a rare instance of the meeting of graphic narrative and thug life, Jaime’s comics highlight the value of space as currency in the two endeavors, affording a new way of looking at them both.

**Gangland Appropriations of Space**

10 Undoubtedly, the most obvious and iconic method of claiming territory among gangs is the graffiti tag. These tags function as an identity place marker, wherein the person who creates the tag has declared a specific place as off-limits to certain people—often those who are seen as outsiders. More importantly, the act of producing graffiti “permits inner city teenagers, who are denied access to legitimate mastery over spaces, to claim control of a more ephemeral and chimeric nature” (Ley and Cybriwsky 494-95). The graphic tag itself is a metonymy of the tag’s owner, much like a signature is associated with an actual person. In certain situations the tag may be attacked or vandalized, perhaps overwritten with another tag. While one might argue that an attack on a tag is not the same thing as an attack on a person, the insult and disrespect felt by those involved is palpable. The tagged space, the side of a building for example, often represents the surrounding spaces as well and not simply the actual tagged space. In fact, the defacement of the tag, because of its degree of permanence and claims to ownership of larger spaces, may be a potent insult with staying power. The graffiti tag itself is a visual icon of identity, one that is simultaneously declarative and vulnerable.

11 Graffiti tags, however, are not the only means by which gang members may claim territory. Body art and tattoos often proclaim territorial affiliation and gang membership. Perhaps most famously, members of the El Salvadorian gangs known as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (M-18) declare gang membership as well as the consummation of certain acts of violence (such as a tattooed teardrop for each life they have taken) in the form of obtrusive tattoos on prominent areas of their body, such as the face or neck. These body markings, as with graffiti tags, are visual icons and markers that announce certain aspects of character or personality at a distance. They are not unlike warning signs. Further, as Karin Elizabeth Beeler argues, tattoos “function as a narrative or tell stories of their genesis; alternatively, the tattoo can in turn generate a story” (2). Beeler identifies “tattoo narratives” as “stories of desire, of trauma and violence, and of cultural preservation—stories that are intimately connected to the symbolic and physical or bodily aspects of the tattoo” (3). While “The Death of Speedy Ortiz” is not a tattoo narrative by Beeler’s standard, it is a graphic narrative in which tattoos are yet another form of the graphic expression of *la vida loca* in Hernandez’s comic.

12 The third, and perhaps most impermanent of gang claims to territory is by word-of-mouth—which is another way of saying the instantiation of gang scripts. Certain assertions and claims are made and distributed via gang social networks. It is a high-stakes game of “he said/she said” that may often lead to bodily assault or worse, yet these verbal narratives can spread and embolden or undermine power structures. Understandably, because so much rests on these gangland micronarratives, many acts of violence perpetrated among rival gangs may stem from misunderstandings and/or lies. All of these methods of claiming territory—tags, tattoos, and gang chatter—play out to some degree in Hernandez’s comic. In fact, because the misunderstanding and misreporting of information among characters is a quintessential aspect of any drama, Hernandez uses this as a means by which his narrative unfolds. Because such a high premium is placed on space in this specific comic (i.e., territory in the Hoppers storyworld), anything that disrupts the delicate balance of territory ownership threatens to plunge rival gangs into increasingly more violent acts of retribution, with Speedy caught in the middle of it all.

**Spatializing Comics**

13 One of the central components of Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* is his exploration of how space operates on the page. However, the definition and articulation of Groensteen’s system, while helpful and insightful, uses a highly exclusive understanding of space in the medium of comics. His opening chapter, titled “The Spatio-Topical System,” establishes his theoretical framework for understanding space in comics, whose basic building block, he argues, is the panel. As he puts it, “But the choice of the panel as a reference unit is particularly necessary since one is interested primarily in the mode of occupation of the specifics base of comics. In its habitual configuration, the panel is presented as a portion of space isolated by blank spaces and enclosed by a frame that insures its integrity” (25). The panel, as an elemental building block of comics, is a logical site for understanding how such spaces work as units as well as cohesive areas of visual narrative. Yet Groensteen restricts his examination to what occurs at the level of the two-dimensional space of the page. He is not concerned with how space is represented within the storyworld of a comic, nor is he concerned with how the reader reconstructs the spaces within the storyworld. Rather, Groensteen attempts to establish a
14 Groensteen's work has been an essential tool for comics theorists, and my point is not to diminish the value of his theorization. Instead, my point is that Groensteen's "spatio-topical apparatus" is but one aspect of a larger understanding of how space operates in comics, and it is what I characterize as configuration in my three-part model. His approach to uncovering those measurable, quantifiable aspects of the system of comics necessarily neglects those characteristics of space that are difficult to quantify. For example, it is impossible to accurately measure the distance of specific areas of space within the storyworld suggested by any given panel within a comic. We can only approximate the measurable space between, say, two characters. Here we rely on approximations, descriptions that might suggest intimacy or friendliness. Yet just because we cannot definitively measure the spaces within a storyworld does not mean that they are not worthy of consideration or incorporation into a true "system" of how space operates in comics. So, while Groensteen's examination of space is localized directly on the page of the comic readers hold in their hands when they read, it is only one small part of a larger spatial system that is comprised also of the spaces within the storyworld and those spaces as reconstructed by the mind of the reader.

15 Space often appears in verbal narratives in the form of setting and description. In many high school English classes, students are taught that setting is equivalent to time and place, both of which help contextualize the story. Setting thus becomes the stage on which the events of the narrative take place, and only rarely does the setting become a fully-fledged consideration within the story. Spaces must be described in narrative prose; the narrator or character must report to the reader about the spaces within the storyworld. Indeed, the description of spaces until recently has been considered negligible, or at least of secondary concern to the unfolding events within a narrative and the resultant consequences of those events or actions. Long stretches of descriptive prose require cognitive effort on the part of the reader, who must take the verbal cues that suggest certain spaces (whether those spaces are occupied by objects or are empty spaces is inconsequential) and re-create those items found within the storyworld in their minds. To use a famous example from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), consider as Gatsby looks longingly to the green light across the water:

> I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (21-22)

Readers, using the textual cues from Nick Carraway's narration, imagine Gatsby as he gazes at the green light. Every space within that scene—the ground upon which Gatsby stands in the "shadow of [his] mansion" (21), the "far away" green light across the water, the intermediary space, dark and unknown, of the water itself, the starry sky above Gatsby, and so on—are prompts in the text to create an image within a reader's mind. Indeed, before we even consider a reader's own reconstruction of this scene in visual form within his or her mind, the various spaces in this specific scene from *The Great Gatsby* resound with meaning. Put another way, the spaces suggested by Carraway's narration give the scene its galvanic charge and resonating power long after we have finished reading Fitzgerald's novel. In fact, here it seems that time is not a central concern in this section of narration. It is the various spaces themselves that prompt us, along with Carraway, to make an attempt to enter into Gatsby's thoughts in this moment. Why does Gatsby seem to tremble as he reaches out to green light? Here he remains inscrutable, and all readers are left with are the various spaces that function as puzzle pieces that provide some clue to Gatsby, and indirectly, Carraway. Cognitive efforts like this on the part of the reader are vital for providing texture and verisimilitude to storyworlds. If Carraway had simply stated that Gatsby stared across the harbor and trembled, we would still have the elements of narrative. The verbal cues that suggest space give this scene its transcendent quality. As this small example shows, rather than being a secondary aspect of narrative, spatial cues are highly significant.

16 But what of comics? Of graphic storytelling? Are articulations of space through the visual as important an element in comics as they are in text-only narrative? Certainly visual cues are more potent than a verbal description in that the reader has less variability in reconstructing the visual element in his or her mind. For example, a verbal description of Speedy (something readers get in earlier issues of *Love and Rockets* when Speedy is mentioned but not seen) may never yield an image of Speedy in quite the way that Hernandez inscribes him on the page. Readers of visual narrative have less freedom in re-creating an inscribed storyworld than readers of text-only narrative.

17 This somewhat obvious point may help explain why a closer examination of how space is used within a comics storyworld has yet to receive sustained attention. Visual iconography in graphic storytelling is so potent that a few simple lines, cleverly arranged, can allow readers to "see" a human face in what may actually look like an electrical outlet, as Scott McCloud demonstrates in *Understanding Comics*. 

**Alternative content**
At length, McCloud makes the argument that the reader interprets basic, iconic images in very specific ways. He suggests that the more iconic an image is, the more pliant the image is in terms of what the reader does with it. “When we abstract an image through cartooning,” he maintains, “we’re not so much illuminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). It would seem that abstraction, as McCloud describes it, is a function of spatialization. An abstracted, iconic face is bereft of spatial depth and complexity. Readers, as a result, work to fill in abstracted images in the varying manners they see fit—including providing the reconstructed images with a spatial depth as suggested by the visual cues.

This conclusion is unsurprising, given the fact that comics work to represent the three-dimensional storyworld on the two-dimensional canvas. The reader must undoubtedly take the cues inscribed on the page and reassemble the storyworld in his or her mind. The degree to which this is accomplished rests on a triangulation of the three aspects of space that I have already introduced and will expand upon below. All of these factors serve a critical function in reading graphic narrative and are not simply inert stages upon which the action and events of the narrative unfold. Working with this assumption, I will now examine how these aspects of spatiality help illuminate Hernandez’s “The Death of Speedy Ortiz.”

Spatiality in “Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz”

La vida loca is an irrational way of life, as its name suggests. It entails living with a reckless abandon without worrying about the self. The self is expendable, and it is the charge of one’s “homeys” to retaliate if he is harmed. It is a vicious, self-propagating cycle. But in “The Death of Speedy Ortiz,” Hernandez makes an attempt to break the cycle of retaliation for transgression of space that is common to gang culture. Since Speedy turns out to be the instrument of his own death, there is no one for his homeys to retaliate against.

Turf, in the sense of space, place, or property, is of central concern in “The Death of Speedy Ortiz.” Beyond the turf war between Dairytown and Hoppers, characters consistently make claims to ownership, even in terms of human relationships. Rojo sees Esther as his girlfriend, but Esther tells Speedy that she and Rojo are no longer in a relationship. Ray is interested in solidifying his burgeoning relationship with Maggie but holds back because he senses Speedy has a claim to her. Ray, despite bearing the mantle of the prodigal son, is still sensitive to the implicit rules of the turf game. Maggie, conflicted as she is between her feelings for both Ray and Speedy, understands that Esther, despite her connections to Dairytown, has a legitimate claim to Speedy. Blanca, who actually does have a real, physical relationship with Speedy, albeit a superficial one, eagerly retaliates against Esther and Maggie when she senses that they are encroaching upon her turf (i.e., Speedy). Because there is little if any open and honest communication amongst all of these characters, there is an atmosphere akin to that of Shakespearean tragedy; that is to say, if one and only one of the characters were to reveal his or her true feelings, all subsequent misinformation and misfortune might be avoided. Rather than effective communication, the characters all take their cues from scripts that specify claims to (or ownership of) particular regions of space.

In spite of this emphasis of turf, tags, and territory in “The Death of Speedy Ortiz,” that is, the narrative contributions of infringed territory or claims to ownership, spatial elements both at the level of form and the level of reading all work together to strengthen the emotional transaction between reader and text. Thus, I propose a model that suggests three aspects of spatiality that predominate in comics. Though each has its own degree of variability, one useful way of thinking about these three aspects is to envision them as each residing in an independent spectrum relative to one another. Space as appropriated on the page, or how the images and panels follow a specific configuration in terms of size, shape, orientation, and so on, comprise a functional aspect of the comics’ material form to which the reader responds. In the case of Hernandez’s comics, panel arrangement and distribution are not as salient a characteristic in the sense that they do not inform his work at as significant a level as, say, Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth—whose arrangement is obtrusive and designed to be highly engaging, if not frustrating.
In "The Death of Speedy Ortiz," arrangement is an aspect that is important (for without it would have a different narrative if one at all), but it does not predominate, as do the other two aspects of spatiality. For example, Hernandez rarely deviates from a configuration that uses three rows of panels per page. Nor does he ever use more than three panels per row. He only sparingly uses one panel per row, and these are often the opening splash panel. In other words, there is nothing inherently innovative about Hernandez's use of panels in the sense that Groensteen delineates. Instead, it is the other aspects of space—space as location of objects and space as something reconstructed in the mind of the reader—that take preeminence in Hernandez's comics.

"The Death of Speedy Ortiz" uses space within the storyworld to great effect in order to heighten its sense of tragedy. As with many tragedies, there is a series of misunderstandings and miscommunications among the characters as the narrative unfolds. Speedy's own recalcitrance and refusal to express what is on his mind and how he feels contribute to his demise. Thus, not only are the characters' emotions on display within the storyline, the readers are also moved emotionally and motivated to understand why Speedy's death occurs. Despite this high level of engagement with the characters' emotional states, however, the sense of time is not emphasized within the narrative. It is difficult to ascertain how much time has passed from scene to scene, and only rarely does a time marker appear within the story. Speedy calls out for the reader's attention on an emotional level, and the emotionality of the story is as much about his place within the storyworld as it is Speedy's death. The narrative is not concerned with Speedy's death, per se. Rather, the story is about Speedy's inability to negotiate space vis-à-vis the terms of gang warfare exacerbated by certain masculine codes which prevent him from expressing deep thoughts, reflections, or emotions. In a sense, there is little space for him to engage with other members of the Hoppers storyworld on such an emotionally sophisticated level.

1. Configuration

I use the term configuration to denote what Groensteen calls the "spatial-topic apparatus," and I do so advisedly. My aim is not simply to rename those spatial aspects outlined by Groensteen, but rather to underscore several things. First, that the configuration of images and icons within the panel, along with the constellation of images that together work as a unit within any given comic, despite its interconnectedness with time, emphasizes the concept of space more effectively than "spatio-topia." Second, my use of configuration foregrounds the constructed nature of these images on a page. A third reason for extending beyond Groensteen's formulation, as mentioned above, reflects a concerted effort to label spatial elements in graphic narrative with words that privilege the temporality of narrative, such as "sequence." While Groensteen's theorization of the spatio-topical system truly only considers the panel, my use of configuration not only applies to the three parameters Groensteen establishes in his system (form, area, and site) but also applies to the constellation of panels, by which I mean a specific number of panels that operate as mise-en-scène. An analysis of the opening of "The Death of Speedy Ortiz" is illustrative of configuration.

In the story's opening panel, Speedy takes a central position as one would expect.

Alternative content

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Speedy, due to his foregrounding, appears as the largest human figure in the panel. In other words, the space occupied by Speedy in the panel takes up most of the page. So, his positioning on the panel as well as the area he occupies are significant visual cues to the reader. To his left, Maggie Chascarrillo, also rendered as a large figure in the panel, appears disinterested and dismissive of Speedy, setting the expectation that the two characters are unable to communicate their true feelings to one another despite being so physically close to one another. In addition, the figure of Maggie occludes Speedy slightly, though meaningfully. In the background, Ray is the third largest figure in the panel, along with Esther, who is only mentioned in the panel. The story events in the panel also help set up what follows in the narrative: Speedy asks Maggie about Esther, and Maggie replies that she doesn’t know as much about her own sister as Speedy does. However, if we track the space occupied by Speedy, Maggie, and Ray in the following three panels, we see how intricately linked space on the panel can be to the larger thematic content within the narrative. Since it is Speedy’s story arc that dominates in this particular narrative, his relation to space becomes all the more important for examination. In the first four panels of the story, Speedy goes from a full body rendering in the opening panel, to having half of his body depicted in the second panel, to less than half in the third panel, to taking up less than 25% of the fourth panel.

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Speedy goes from being a larger-than-life figure in a reclined, semi-relaxed position, to a frustrated little man in the space of four panels. Moreover, the fourth panel resides at the top left of the second page. Speedy moves from playfulness to outright anger. He is a mixture of bravado and angst, and his emotional volatility corresponds to his reduction in panel space. The configuration of these panels reminds us that there is a temporal chain of events that unites the panels, but there is also a spatial link running across the page. Time and space both resonate with thematic concerns as well as reader investment in the narrative.

2. Localization

Similarly, localization within the comics storyworld is another significant aspect of space in any system of comics. However, this aspect of space, the space as it is used and manifests within the narrative storyworld, contributes greatly to our understanding of the narrative discourse of a given comic. Localization has a strong bearing on how the third aspect of space, spatialization, is undertaken on the part of the reader. A few examples from “The Death of Speedy” illustrate how localization can contribute to analyses of comics. The second scene in which Speedy appears shows him having sex with Blanca in the storeroom of the restaurant.

Readers are cued to imagine the space of the restaurant storeroom (as a result of spatialization) where Speedy and Blanca are having sex, and one might imagine a typical storeroom with enough room to walk around and move merchandise in and out. However, Hernandez creates a sense of claustrophobia in the panel by surrounding the two characters with straight vertical and horizontal lines—literally boxed in by boxes of 500 taco shells—with Speedy pressed so closely against Blanca that it leaves no space between them. Seemingly, there is only room for their thoughts. And yet, their inability to communicate in this intimate moment reveals to the audience what the two characters cannot reveal to one another. Blanca can only see Speedy’s physical act of sex as an affirmation of his love for her: “He does want me! I knew it! I knew it!” she thinks. But Speedy, despite being in the throes of passion with Blanca, can only think of Esther: “Fuckin’ Esther. I'll show that bitch!” Hernandez uses the cramped space in this panel to reflect Speedy’s disengagement with the realities of his environment. Several panels later we see Speedy outside of the restaurant.

Alternative content

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Having finished with Blanca, Hernandez depicts Speedy with a face that has little affect. Just as he is gone from an intensely constrained space to an open one—a drastic change—Speedy vacillates from high emotional to low emotional engagement. The various spaces within the storyworld, as well as the objects located within those spaces, are vehicles by which Hernandez can emphasize thematic concerns as well as characterization.

Spaces as geographic sites also contribute significantly to narrative progression. Except in rare instances in this three-part series, Speedy often appears in two types of spaces within the story more than others: in his car or in an open public space. His car functions as his sanctuary and is ultimately the site where he takes his own life. It is the only space that belongs completely to Speedy. The reader never sees anyone else inside Speedy's car, and Hernandez prevents the reader from gaining access to this space within the car. It is a decidedly private space. There is only one panel where the reader feels as if he or she is riding along with Speedy in the car, and even so only the barest of highlights can be seen in this very dark panel. When not shown in his car, Speedy appears seated on a tree stump several times. The tree stump, of course, presages Speedy's destiny—namely, that he will be cut short in his prime.

The constellation of panels in which Speedy and Rojo meet for the one and only time is an excellent example of Hernandez's depiction and representation of the storyworld space. In this scene, Speedy has just finished a conversation with Maggie when Rojo confronts Speedy. With the exception of one panel, this sequence has the sense of an infinity of space just beyond the characters. Hernandez often uses this technique when depicting Speedy in quiet moments, as in the first panel in this sequence. We see Speedy deep in thought, and we can only speculate as to what he's thinking at that moment.

For him, perhaps wondering about the possibilities of a relationship with Maggie, the world has fallen away into darkness. The rest of this set of panels with Rojo unfolds as if it were on a theater stage with the streetlight serving as a spotlight.

Alternative content

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The open spaces of the public and the private sanctuary of his automobile give impetus to Speedy's actions. He is empowered in his car, and while in public, Speedy is more easily moved to violence as a result of the gang scripts and codes he follows. Other spaces that might be available to him are denied. Near the end of Part Two, Chivita forces Speedy out of the restaurant and bars his entry with her extended arm. Speedy's expression becomes indignant, and mostly, unreadable. This sequence is nearly duplicated exactly when his sister Izzy forces Speedy to leave the house, and again Speedy has the same indignant expression from earlier in the story. These rejections accumulate and push Speedy to feel as though he has no space to call his own. Hernandez's method of suggesting space and locating objects within those spaces contributes to the gangland-themed story he wants to tell.

3. Spatialization

Hernandez masterfully takes the trope of the gangbanger, one that often ends in either prison or death at the hands of another gangbanger, and instead uses an act of suicide to close his narrative. Speedy does not kill a rival gang member for transgressing territory or space. Rojo, Esther's boyfriend from Dairytown, does not want to resort to violence but claims that he cannot stop his "homeys" from acting on his behalf. And though there is often talk about killing someone, there is no killing that actually occurs in the story. The only life that is taken belongs to Speedy. As a metaphor, Hernandez uses the gang life as an act of suicide, here used literally. And, as Todd Hignite has said,

The death itself takes place entirely offscreen, shifting between his friends' realization of the event and the stark illumination of his absence when Izzy opens a curtain in her empty room. The denial of the voyeuristic thrill of the actual death itself is a complete rejection of the history of genre comics' fetishism of the payoff, and it is at this point where superheroes truly go by the wayside. (127)

The fact that Speedy's death takes place offscreen engages the readers' minds in a way that an unambiguous image cannot.

Alternative content

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Readers do not see Speedy's suicide; it is indirectly reported by one police officer to another: "Aw, jeez… Jerry, get on the radio….”
In the chronology of events, this panel that shows the two officers gazing at Speedy's car is the final event of the story. It is the moment when Speedy's body is discovered, yet the reader is not privy to the car's interior. This space within the car is off-limits to the reader. Instead, the reader is left to imagine the scene, to move beyond what has been inscribed in the panel.

30 One final example may help us understand how aspects of spatiality might influence reader emotions. Near the end of part three, Speedy and Maggie have what will turn out to be their final conversation. Speedy finally is able to reveal to Maggie that it is she that he has truly wanted all this time. Maggie reacts violently to this revelation in the top two panels of the page. The panel that follows is arguably one of Hernandez's finest achievements not only in "The Death of Speedy," but perhaps in his entire oeuvre.

Alternative content
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In the panel, Speedy is depicted from the chest up, off-center and slightly askew. Hernandez's characteristic use of chiaroscuro casts the right half of Speedy's face in shadow. Behind him can only be seen the blackness of night. If we agree with Scott McCloud that images which are more photorealistic tend to make them less a blank that becomes a type of stand-in for everyone, Hernandez's rendering is the most photorealistic image of Speedy we get in the entire narrative. And one of the things that aids the image's less iconic, more photorealistic status is its high level of spatial depth. The various shadows on Speedy's body give him a depth, and not coincidentally, a complexity that he has lacked throughout the comic heretofore. Readers now see Speedy as less of an icon (in McCloud's sense), less "cartoony" and more realistic. Indicators of time are absent, and without words to cue the reader, emotions are triggered strictly by Speedy's body itself—his face in particular. Here, time is abstracted; space is concretized. The panel functions as Speedy's valediction, and it is a powerful one that works to trigger emotions in the reader.

Conclusion
In this essay I have only begun to take the first steps towards an accounting of a system of space that encompasses the totality of the comics experience—from creation, reading, and emotional engagement. Jaime Hernandez's "The Death of Speedy Ortiz" provides a revealing subject for examining this holistic constellation of spatiality in comics, one that may help initiate further inroads for exploring space in graphic narrative. Spatiality is necessarily an integral part of graphic narrative. Unlike many investigations of space in comics, we must come to understand that spatiality is not relegated to the literal page, nor is it a plot device that helps motivate narrative progression. Spatiality in comics undergirds a holistic transaction between the artist and reader via imagetext. It only makes sense to consider all of these aspects of spatiality as an inseparable vehicle that makes the enjoyment of comics possible in the first place.

Works Cited
Jaime Hernandez grew up in Oxnard, California.[2] He is the youngest of his family, with four older brothers and one sister.[3] His family embraced comics: their mother read them frequently and old issues were kept in large quantities in the house, to be read and re-read by all over the years.[3] "We grew up with comics," Hernandez said. "I wanted to draw comics my whole life."[4]. They read all types of comics and enjoyed those that gave a fairly realistic depiction of family life as well as the standard superhero adventures. Hernandez was particularly influenced by Hank K...