Reclaiming Agency and Challenging Power: Redefining *Alienness* through Visual Metaphors in *LaGuardia*[1]

Reclamación de la Agencia y Cuestionamiento del Poder: Metáforas Visuales en la Resignificación del concepto *Alienness* en *LaGuardia*

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Abstract: *Recent scholarship in Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory have highlighted the role of language in constructing and perpetuating social hierarchies. Yet, limited attention has been given to how multimodal narratives, such as graphic novels, contribute to the redefinition of marginalized identities. This study examines* LaGuardia, *a graphic novel by Nnedi Okorafor, focusing on how it employs multimodal metaphors to reclaim the stigmatized label of* alien. *Through a qualitative analysis combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the research explores the interplay between visual and verbal elements in constructing dignified representations of migrant identities. The findings reveal that* LaGuardia *challenges dominant narratives by humanizing non-human characters, granting them agency, and fostering identification with marginalized groups. These results suggest that graphic novels can serve as powerful tools for social critique and transformation, expanding the scope of metaphor theory and discourse analysis to include culturally resonant, multimodal forms of storytelling.*

Keywords: agency, alienness, *LaGuardia*, multimodal metaphors, reappropriation.

Resumen: *Las investigaciones recientes en el Análisis Crítico del Discurso y la Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual han evidenciado cómo el lenguaje construye y sostiene jerarquías sociales. Sin embargo, se ha prestado poca atención a cómo las narrativas multimodales, como las novelas gráficas, contribuyen a la resignificación de identidades marginadas. Este estudio analiza* LaGuardia, *una novela gráfica de Nnedi Okorafor, enfocándose en cómo emplea metáforas multimodales para reclamar el término estigmatizado de* alien. *A través de un análisis cualitativo que combina el Análisis Crítico del Discurso con la Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual, la investigación explora la interacción entre elementos visuales y verbales en la construcción de representaciones dignas de identidades migrantes. Los hallazgos revelan que* LaGuardia *desafía los discursos dominantes al humanizar a los personajes no humanos, otorgarles agencia y facilitar la identificación con grupos marginados. Estos resultados sugieren que las novelas gráficas pueden ser herramientas poderosas de crítica social y transformación discursiva.*

Palabras clave: agencia, *alienness*, *LaGuardia*, metáforas multimodales, reapropiación.

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[1] En el presente artículo se utilizan las imágenes de una novela gráfica editada en España por Norma Editorial con fines divulgativos y únicamente en línea, contando con el permiso expreso de dicha editorial.

1. Graphic novel as a catalyst for social change

The growing scholarly interest in graphic novels has highlighted the capacity of visual imagery within this medium to comment on complex social and political issues. Indeed, graphic novels have the potential to address frequently overlooked challenges (Boatright, 2010; Danzak, 2011; Gibson, 2021; Colton *et al.*, 2023), including racism and the often severe realities faced by immigrants. Consequently, authors of graphic novels bear the responsibility to confront inequality and develop characters and narratives that directly counter prejudice. This approach helps foster more inclusive representations (Barrientos, 2023). Recognizing the potential of graphic novels to serve as catalysts for social change, this article will examine how multimodal metaphors are employed in Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia* graphic novel to reclaim migrant identities by redefining the concept of the illegal alien from a stigmatized label into a dignified identity.

The term *illegal alien* is often criticized for its negative connotations, persisting in official references such as the Cambridge Dictionary. In the context of U.S. immigration, Western stereotypes have frequently shaped portrayals of immigrant experiences, resulting in narratives where racial biases remain intact, perpetuating the *status quo* and marginalization (Barrientos, 2023). As a result, for many years, the phrase *illegal alien* was prevalent in both media and legal spheres (Scobey-Thal, 2024), and it was not formally proscribed in legal contexts until 2013. These enduring labels and the underlying ideologies accentuate the need to reexamine and redefine the portrayal of immigrants, an endeavor that graphic novels like *LaGuardia* are well-suited to undertake.

The potential of graphic novels to serve as agents of change and awareness in the migrant experience—particularly in the United States—has become a contentious topic in public discourse. Scholars have increasingly recognized the utility of graphic novels for representing the migrant experience (Boatright, 2010; Helsel, 2018), raising awareness (Stanerson, 2020; Savić, 2022), and helping to combat discrimination (Suender and Piazza, 2021; Lunde, 2023). Nevertheless, existing studies have seldom investigated how these works can empower migrants to gain agency in defining their own identities, thereby challenging mainstream narratives that denigrate migrant identity. This article addresses that gap by examining the metaphorical and visual dimensions of graphic novels and their potential to support migrant agency in self-definition.

Through the selected linguistic and visual strategies, the graphic novel redefines the notion of the alien as a dignified and empowered identity, countering its traditional associations with marginalization and exclusion. Elaborating on this basis, the analysis will first examine visual metaphors as a means of expression within migrant discourse, focusing on how they encode and construct identity. Second, it will explore how the graphic novel's multimodal relationship between text and image reshapes and transforms the perception of a stigmatized label. These elements will be assessed to understand their role in

challenging dominant narratives and offering alternative representations of migrant identities.

Following this introduction, the following section presents a critical review of the literature, focusing on the theoretical framework and concepts that underpin this study, including notions of otherness, agency, and identity. This section engages with key foundational studies to assess the possibilities for reconfiguring the concept in question and to evaluate whether the proposed strategies are effective in supporting the reconstruction of identities and transforming perceptions associated with stigmatized labels. Subsequent sections will present the research methodology developed and the rationale behind choosing *LaGuardia*, followed by a discussion of the results in the analysis sections. Finally, the concluding section will revisit the central aims of this article and reflect on its broader implications.

2. Critical Review of Literature

To reshape the conceptualization of alienness, it is essential to recognize language as an instrument of transformation and to appreciate its influence over meaningful choice in terminology (Fairclough, 1995). In this regard, Fairclough (1995) provides the foundational principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), underscoring how ideology and power permeate linguistic structures. Within this analytical framework, stigmatizing labels such as *alien* reflect dominant power relations that must be rigorously challenged to dismantle the prevailing narratives that prevent a substantive reconfiguration of these hierarchical relationships. Although new metaphors possess the potential to generate new realities (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), this process is neither straightforward nor easily accomplished, as it often conflicts with preconceived notions of reality and the power structures that underpin them (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Kress, 2009). Our value systems are inextricably tied to the metaphors that shape our understanding of the world, thus enabling targeted interventions to reconceptualize the meaning of metaphors such as *alien* (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

Consequently, while redefining alienness toward a more positive conception remains challenging due to its deep-seated negative connotations, it becomes feasible by cultivating secure and inclusive discourses, exemplified by works such as *LaGuardia*. Moreover, the graphic novel not only provides a space for the reclamation and reappropriation of the term but also lays the groundwork for a new model of migrant discourse. In this model, conventional roles are not simply reversed. Unlike in Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, where the marginalized migrant takes on a human form and otherness is constructed, this approach avoids reproducing such dichotomies. Instead, it seeks to affirm and dignify the stigmatized identity, offering a discourse that resists marginalization without relying on transformation or assimilation. For these transformative discourses to be effectively developed, scholars have emphasized the significance

of multimodality as "the normal state of human communication" (Kress, 2009, p. 1). Building on this premise, the application of CDA theories to multimodal analysis (Machin, 2007) enables the integration of image, text, and color in dismantling harmful labels, thereby contributing to more inclusive and equitable modes of representation.

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Tasić and Stamenković, 2015) frequently serves as a lens through which the relationship between image and text in graphic novels is investigated. A central principle within this theory is "mapping" (Tasić and Stamenković, 2015, p. 118), which conceptualizes metaphor as the transference of meaning across distinct domains. As a result, notions such as alienness are portrayed in graphic narratives as layered metaphors that connect with other thematic dimensions. Within this dynamic interplay of words and images, *LaGuardia* redefines conventional understandings of migrants, offering a more inclusive perspective on identity and agency. Besides, Tasić and Stamenković (2015, pp. 119-120) propose a classification system comprising three categories that describe the interaction between text and image in graphic narratives, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The use of different types of metaphors allows for the establishment of distinct forms of conceptual mapping, each emphasizing a specific layer of metaphorical content. This layered approach facilitates a more enduring and impactful resignification of alienness, as it not only grants agency through the verbal dimension but also reinforces it through the visual dimension. The interplay between these layers enhances the communicative power of the discourse, contributing to a more nuanced and empowering representation of marginalized identities.
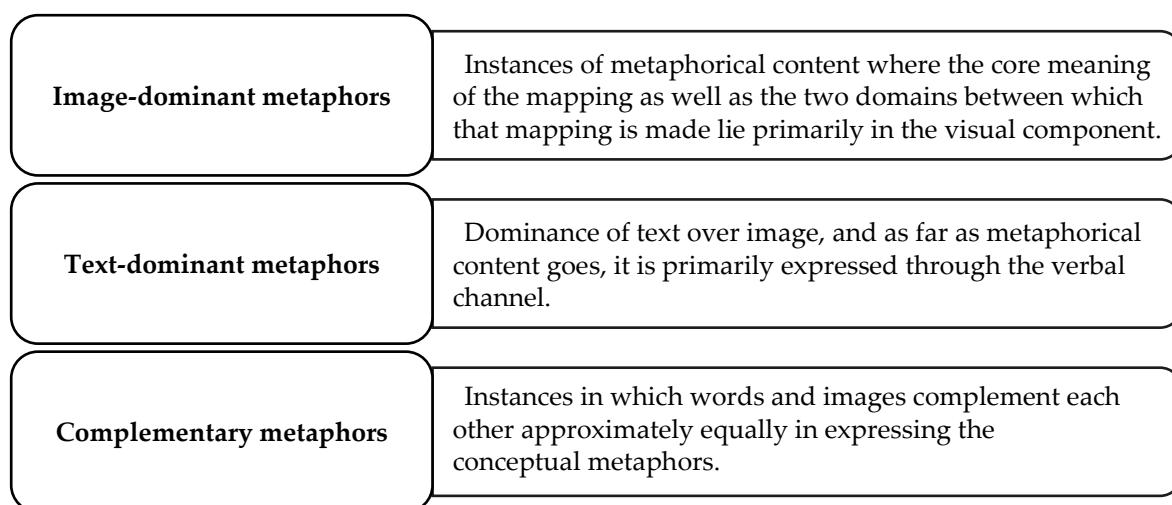
Image-dominant metaphors	Instances of metaphorical content where the core meaning of the mapping as well as the two domains between which that mapping is made lie primarily in the visual component.
Text-dominant metaphors	Dominance of text over image, and as far as metaphorical content goes, it is primarily expressed through the verbal channel.
Complementary metaphors	Instances in which words and images complement each other approximately equally in expressing the conceptual metaphors.

Fig. 1: Classification system of categories describing the interaction between text and image.

Finally, Serafini and Reid (2023) introduce Multimodal Content Analysis (MMCA) as a methodological framework that combines qualitative content analysis with social semiotics. This approach enables the exploration of the interaction between linguistic, visual, and design elements. Nonetheless, this recent theory cannot be applied in this context, as the primary focus of this article

lies on the interrelation of the metaphorical dimension to reclaim agency in the reconstruction of identity.

Considering all this, through the use of conceptual metaphor theory and the mapping process, it becomes possible to separate the notion of the alien from the layers of meaning traditionally associated with marginalization or negativity. This, in turn, enables the creation of discourses that imagine new realities reconfigured through metaphors deeply embedded in everyday life. Such metaphors, when conveyed through graphic novels, facilitate a form of multimodal transformation. As will be explored in the case of *LaGuardia*, these shifting dimensions help to dismantle prototypical hierarchies by dissolving fixed power relations. Instead, they foster interconnected layers that reflect diverse experiences and enrich the discursive landscape.

3. Corpus and Methodology
3.1. Description of the Corpus

LaGuardia was published by Berger Books in 2019 and centers on Future Nwafor Chukwuebuka, a physician treating humans and extraterrestrials. She flees the societal conformity of Nigeria to protect Letme Live, a sentient plant-like creature targeted by invaders intent on eradicating its species. Upon returning to New York, Future becomes entangled in the broader struggle for the rights of aliens amidst the enforcement of restrictive travel bans. The graphic novel is structured into four chapters: Homecoming, The Travel Ban, Roots, and Future Citizen, reflecting key stages in the protagonist's journey and the overarching narrative of resistance against inequality.

While it may be argued that a single work cannot comprehensively represent the broader discourse on migration and identity, *LaGuardia* offers unique insight due to its deep personal foundation. The narrative draws inspiration from Nnedi Okorafor's negative airport experience, compounded by her reflection on athlete Mo Farah's struggle with U.S. travel bans. Okorafor references Farah's statement, "Trump has made me an alien" (Okorafor, 2019, p. 129), directly engaging with and critiquing the metaphor of alienness within her work. This personal connection highlights the novel's critical examination of the stigmatized concept of the alien and its reclamation as a symbol of dignity and empowerment.

LaGuardia was selected for analysis due to its profound engagement with the core themes of identity, alienness, reappropriation, and agency, as well as its form as a graphic novel. Beyond being a work in which visual and verbal elements are interwoven, *LaGuardia* stands out as a graphic novel that effectively intersects linguistic, visual, and cultural dimensions. It addresses migrant identities with dignity while situating the complexities of the migratory experience within the symbolic and conflict-laden space of LaGuardia Airport. This setting serves as a charged site for negotiation, surveillance, and transformation. Furthermore, in contrast to typologies that focus exclusively on

linguistic aspects, often isolating metaphors from their sociocultural and multimodal contexts, *LaGuardia* offers a more comprehensive and situated approach. Its narrative and visual strategies facilitate a contextual analysis that engages with dynamic social discourses, allowing for a more layered understanding of how migrant identities are represented, contested, and redefined. The integration of metaphor, imagery, and narrative within this framework enables a richer exploration of the resignification of alienness, making *LaGuardia* particularly suitable for examining the intersection of discourse, identity, and power.

The graphic novel analyzed in this study was manually selected through convenience sampling to ensure alignment with the research objectives. This selection was intentionally made to address the study's focus on the reconceptualization of alienness, a theme that is insufficiently represented in publicly available or preexisting corpora. From a technical standpoint, the text is composed in English and includes a targeted selection of instances where the metaphor of alien is articulated. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that images selected for analysis will not be reproduced for copyright reasons.

3.2. Analytical Approach

Following the data selection, it was determined that a corpus-based approach was the most appropriate methodological approach for this investigation, focusing on identifying the most prominent metaphorical instances that characterize *LaGuardia* as a multimodal discourse. To systematically identify these elements, the data underwent quantitative analysis based on Tasić and Stamenković's (2015) classification of primary categories of image-text interaction. Each image related to identity, the construction of what is considered alien, the spaces occupied by these identities, their interactions with the world, and how they are perceived, was examined. Not all instances were included in this classification, as might be expected, since, as a graphic novel, certain elements are primarily intended to advance the main narrative rather than engage directly with the themes examined in this study. Besides, for each valid element, the channel through which the core message was transmitted was identified and classified accordingly. This classification process was conducted manually due to technological limitations preventing automated systems from performing complex interpretive tasks. Once categorized, the most representative examples were selected for in-depth analysis.

This study faces several limitations, most notably the focus on a single graphic novel. Moreover, the reliance on manual analysis and convenience sampling introduces further constraints, as individual interactions with discourse inevitably vary, making it impossible to ensure the complete absence of selection bias. As a result, the findings of this investigation cannot be generalized beyond the specific case examined. Furthermore, distinguishing between text-dominant and complementary metaphors presents interpretive

challenges that are not always clear-cut. Expanding the corpus to include additional graphic novels would have been ideal; however, such an effort would be constrained by time limitations, particularly in the absence of tools capable of automating the analysis.

Given these factors, a qualitative approach, supported by descriptive data from the corpus, represents the most suitable method for addressing the research aims. A multimodal approach was employed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the portrayal of alien social actors. Additionally, the integration of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) facilitated a critical examination of the discourse surrounding key themes such as otherness, identity, agency, and the reappropriation of self within the context of graphic novels. Beyond fostering critical awareness, graphic novels also hold the potential to engage broader audiences, thereby promoting a more widespread and impactful process of identity reappropriation.

4. Results and Discussion

The results from the selected corpus sample, categorized according to the classification based on text-image interaction (Tasić and Stamenković, 2015), are presented in Figure 2.

Type	Frequency	Relative frequency	Theme
Image-dominant metaphor	3	5.36 %	Hope, emotions
Text-dominant metaphor	40	71.43 %	Interrogation, identity questioning, travel bans, fighting against inequality
Complementary metaphor	13	23.21 %	Ban protests, human-alien interaction, hybridity, aliens' benefits, rejection.
TOTAL	56	100.00 %	

Fig. 2: Classification of visual metaphor instances in LaGuardia.

Tab. 1 presents 56 instances directly related to the reappropriation of the term *alien* through visual metaphors. As discussed in the critical literature review, the data show that most instances are classified as text-dominant metaphors, comprising more than half of the sample. These are followed by complementary metaphors, which represent slightly less than one-quarter of the instances, and image-dominant metaphors, which account for approximately one-twentieth of the sample. Key examples from each category will be analyzed

to demonstrate how these multimodal metaphors contribute to the dignification of marginalized identities.

What is more, one might expect image-dominant metaphors to appear more frequently in a graphic novel, given the form's strong emphasis on visual storytelling. However, the data reveal that *LaGuardia* relies predominantly on text-dominant metaphors, reflecting a deliberate narrative strategy. In this case, aliens are not simply part of the visual background or passive figures; instead, they are given a strong narrative presence through dialogue that actively challenges racist attitudes and reshapes the discourse. The prominence of text, combined with visual elements, highlights how the graphic novel employs multimodal strategies to resist marginalization and affirm agency, as illustrated through the examples that follow.

Stereotypes can undermine migrants' social status, potentially leading to discrimination against these minorities (Junior and Juana, 2022). Nevertheless, unlike other graphic novels, *LaGuardia* portrays aliens as sentient beings capable of experiencing emotions and hope. This representation is exemplified in the image-dominant metaphor presented in Fig. 3, where a solitary sign bearing the words "New Hope Apartments" is displayed, serving as the sole textual marker for the building. This infrastructure depicts the apartments housing extraterrestrial migrants upon their arrival in New York. Moreover, the metaphor of hope embodied in their residence signifies the aspiration for eventual recognition of "social membership" (Krzyżanowski and Wodak, 2008, p. 102). Besides, when racism stems from the process of "othering" (Lunde, 2023, p. 25), it becomes essential to reappropriate a label so that the marginalized individual is recognized as part of society and consequently moves beyond the position of the other.
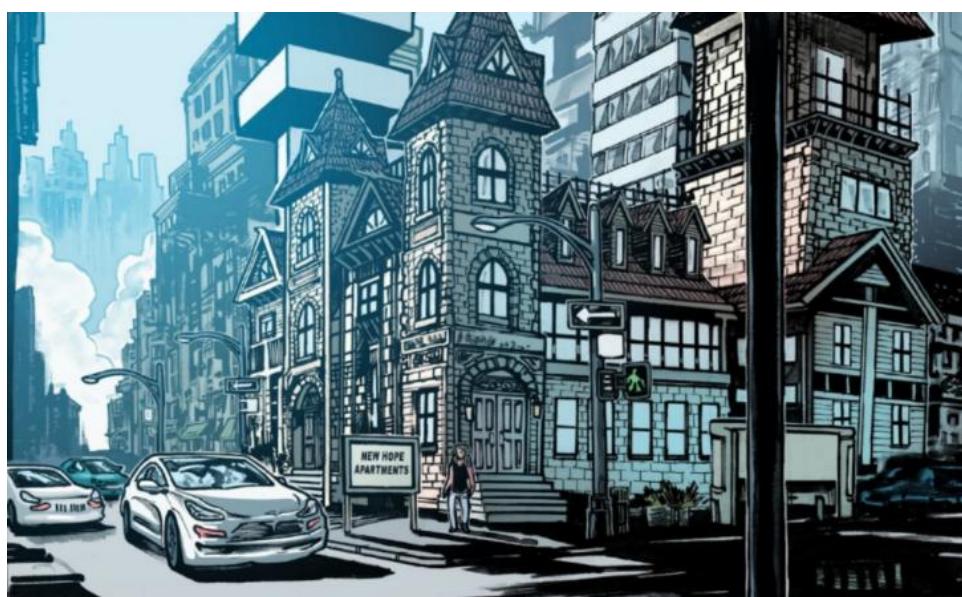

Fig. 3: New Hope Apartments. LaGuardia *(fuente: Norma Editorial).*

Individuals often perceive social and cultural groups through a highly

selective lens (Jones and Krzyżanowski, 2011), a process shaped by the sociopolitical contexts in which they are situated. This selective perception often contributes to the construction of identities that reinforce existing power structures, leading to marginalization and the proliferation of stigmatized labels. As Thomas (2020, p. 272) observes, "[t]he United States has had a long and dark history concerning those it considered to be 'non-citizens', starting from the very beginning with the massacre of native peoples and the appropriation of their lands." Such historical trajectories illustrate how dominant discourses shape exclusionary definitions of belonging. However, the potential for transformation becomes possible when discursive and representational spaces emerge that allow for the redefinition of these conceptualizations. These shifts open avenues for more inclusive and dignified understandings of identity that challenge reductive or stigmatizing categorizations. This concept is illustrated in Fig. 4, text-dominant metaphors, where an extraterrestrial being is referred to as a person rather than merely a plant, reflecting a shift in perception and acknowledgment of identity.

Fig. 4: "It's a floral, a person". LaGuardia (fuente: Norma Editorial).

Describing immigrants as illegal introduces a racialized dimension to the discourse, framing individuals in terms that extend beyond legal status. Such labeling constructs rigid and exclusionary boundaries, delineating who is deemed welcome or unwelcome, belongs to the in-group or is relegated to the out-group, and is valued versus devalued (Thomas, 2020). These linguistic practices contribute to the homogenization of individuals into a singular, stigmatized out-group perceived as unworthy of dignity or recognition. Consequently, this discursive framing reinforces systemic marginalization and

justifies the social and political exclusion of entire communities. Nonetheless, as illustrated in Fig. 5, a significant aspect of this study is the use of varied bright colors depicting extraterrestrial beings and their speech bubbles. This contrasts with the stereotypical use of green, which homogenizes these characters and disregards their diversity and individuality. Lastly, this deliberate choice of color also contributes to the reclamation of agency by emphasizing each character's uniqueness and complexity.

Fig. 5: Extraterrestrial beings. LaGuardia *(fuente: Norma Editorial)*

The character Payment in Fig. 6 plays a crucial role in highlighting migrant resistance and in fostering what Vourinne and Kauranen (2023, p. 18) describe as "solidarities across different social positions". Rather than reinforcing otherness through language, such as in the exclusionary phrase "human only", the graphic narrative challenges the distance imposed by normative interactions between individuals from different backgrounds. This dynamic is effectively conveyed through the conceptual metaphor represented in Fig. 6, where the alien character is positioned to be disrespected due to its marginalized status. Unlike conventional portrayals in which the marginalized figure remains a passive victim, Payment actively resists the abuse of power exercised by the privileged figure. This resistance is further emphasized by the depiction of how discriminatory attitudes are perpetuated across generations, as illustrated in the image where a child mocks Payment. Finally, the urgency of creating safe spaces

for the construction of identity emerges as a key theme in this scene, encapsulated in Payment's response: "At least that way your kid will learn some manners today."

Fig. 6: Reclaiming agency, LaGuardia (fuente: Norma Editorial).

It is essential to recognize that fostering safe spaces for future generations is only part of the effort to resist marginalization; it is also equally crucial to claim and occupy public spaces. The visual metaphors that evoke imagery of Black Lives Matter protests underscore this need to reappropriate and reshape the dominant narrative. This is particularly evident in Figs. 7 and 8, where complementary metaphors provide the characters with a sense of agency and action. The redignification of the term *illegal alien* is symbolized through protest banners bearing messages such as "No one is illegal" and "Aliens are friends," highlighting the reclaiming of language and space as integral to resisting exclusion and asserting identity.

Fig. 7: Protest banners, LaGuardia (fuente: Norma Editorial).

Fig. 8: Protest banners, LaGuardia *(fuente: Norma Editorial).*

"Identity is story" (Danzak, 2011, p. 188), and a story cannot be reduced to a single, simplified narrative. Instead, identity comprises diverse and unique voices, each shaped by its own cultural and personal meanings. *LaGuardia* strategically employs multimodal elements and metaphorical representations to challenge and dismantle stigmatized perceptions of alienness. Through this form, the graphic novel enables history to be narrated from the migrant perspective, positioning migrants as agents of their narratives and allowing them to occupy spaces where they can attain equity and respect (Danzak, 2011; Naghibi *et al.*, 2020; Dar *et al.*, 2023; Vourinne and Kauranen, 2023).

5. Conclusion

Through the combined lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the analysis reveals that *LaGuardia* reclaims the term *alien* by recontextualizing it within a narrative of empowerment and belonging. The novel employs multimodal strategies to construct non-prototypical representations of extraterrestrial beings, granting them human-like agency. Specific narrative elements, such as aliens participating in protests or forming emotional connections with human characters, dismantle traditional notions of otherness and foster identification with marginalized readers. These findings extend CMT's application to graphic novels, highlighting how multimodal storytelling can reshape social identities.

This research contributes to CMT and CDA by demonstrating how visual-verbal metaphors in graphic novels can challenge hegemonic discourses and affirm the identities of marginalized communities. The dignified portrayal of aliens in *LaGuardia* offers a counter-narrative to dominant cultural representations, providing readers —particularly those with migrant backgrounds— spaces for self-recognition and emotional resonance. The study highlights the potential of graphic novels as tools for social critique and transformation, suggesting that literature and art can make meaningful

contributions to social and political discourse.

While the study offers rich insights into the use of multimodal metaphors in *LaGuardia*, it is limited to a single graphic novel. Therefore, conclusions may not be fully generalizable across all graphic literature. The analytical framework could also be enhanced by integrating additional multimodal methodologies to capture further layers of meaning embedded in visual and textual interplay.

Future research could apply this multimodal and metaphorical framework to a broader corpus of graphic novels that address themes of migration, race, and identity. In particular, Serafini and Reid's (2023) Multimodal Content Analysis (MMCA), which merges qualitative content analysis with social semiotics, offers a promising methodological expansion. Using MMCA could deepen our understanding of how meaning is constructed across modes and how graphic literature transforms public narratives surrounding marginalized communities.

Ultimately, this article has revealed that graphic novels like *LaGuardia* are more than artistic expressions. They are powerful discursive tools that challenge dominant narratives and catalyze social change. By reclaiming historically oppressive labels and reimagining them through dignified and multimodal representation, such works empower marginalized identities and invite broader audiences to engage in more inclusive and empathetic forms of understanding.

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