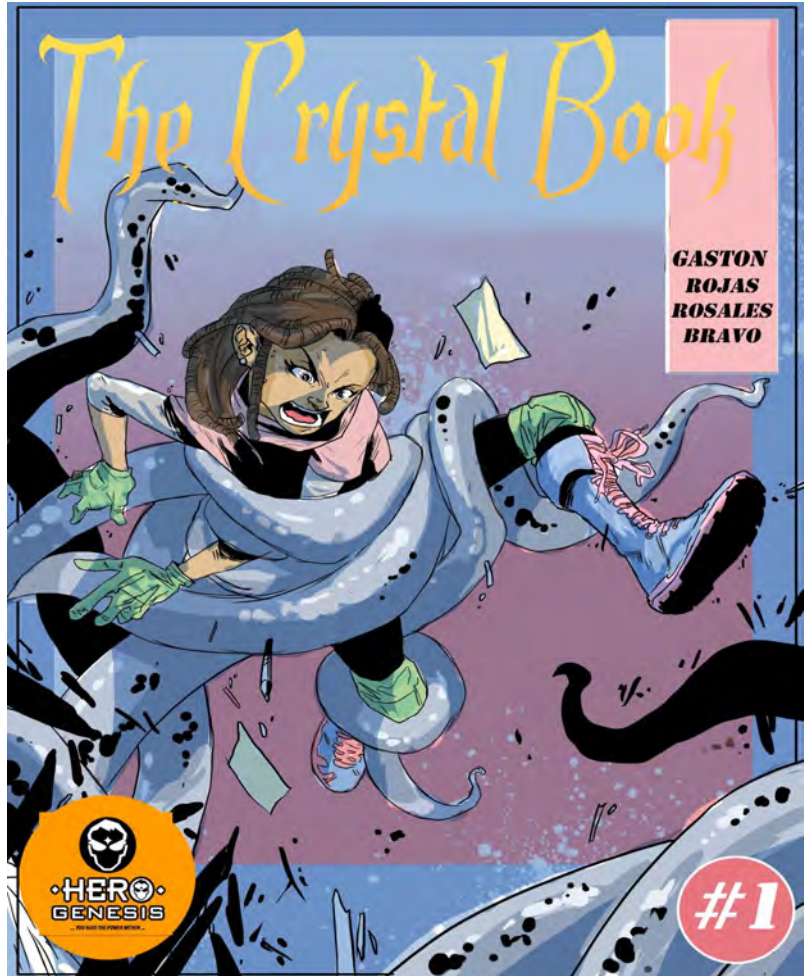## *The Crystal Book*: A Comic-Based Method for Cross-Cultural Learning

by Javier Gastón-Greenberg

The Crystal Book, Book 1, cover art.

The Crystal Book (*El Libro de Cristal*) is a multilingual, transmedia comic developed as both a powerful story and an adaptable teaching tool. The project emerged from my doctoral dissertation, *Hero Genesis and Crisis: Comic Books and Identity Formation in Revolutionary Cuba* (2021), and took shape through collaboration with artists and writers in Cuba. While teaching in New York City, I began adapting these ideas into a classroom resource that could connect diverse students through storytelling, history, and cultural exploration. The result is a comic-based approach that uses visual storytelling to spark curiosity, support student inquiry, and connect culture with creative expression.

The story begins in a Brooklyn middle school, the very school where I was teaching while developing the comic. The characters and settings of the comic world were inspired by my students and colleagues. I built the fictional world to reflect their real one, so students could see themselves in the story and feel connected to it.

The Crystal Book **Collaborators:** Alex Bravo, Artist; Alejandro Rojas, Co-writer; Iris Rosales, Co- writer; Javier Gastón-Greenberg, Co-writer and producer.

In the narrative, Karla, a Cuban American student and aspiring comic artist, submits her comic to a publisher for a competition. But when she arrives at the publisher's office, he transforms into a monstrous tentacled figure, a cosmic force that feeds on forgotten and untold stories. The monster intends to consume Karla's story and erase her memory of ever creating it. As it begins to erase her work, Karla enters a psychological crisis, feeling her voice slipping away. At that moment, a portal opens and pulls her into another world. There, she learns that this dark force is weakening the power of the crystal book, a mythical artifact that holds all stories ever told. By erasing cultural memory and silencing creative voices, the villain seeks to control people by controlling the stories they tell and believe. Karla must now protect these stories before they are lost.

To do so, she journeys through worlds inspired by pre-Columbian Mexico, colonial Cuba, and Golden Age Spain. Along the way, she meets cultural and mythological figures such as Quetzalcóatl, a deity of knowledge; Andrés Pedit, a spiritual guide who channels the Orishas; and Don Quijote, the visionary dreamer. These encounters help her realize that her personal story is connected to larger cultural narratives across time and place.

The Crystal Book, Book 1, pages 9 and 10.

The structure of the comic follows a project-based learning (PBL) model. Book 1 introduces the central question: What happens when stories are erased? Each following book acts as a case study, set in a different cultural context. As Karla explores each world, she gathers knowledge, meets cultural guides, overcomes challenges, and ultimately creates her own story. This mirrors the project-based learning arc, where students investigate real questions, build understanding, and express what they've learned through creative work.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2025: Vol. 12)
The Crystal Book: A Comic-Based Method for Cross-Cultural Learning
by Javier Gastón-Greenberg

79

Annotated Pages: Comics Grammar Guide

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

This panel invites students to closely examine the 19th-century Havana setting—its clothing, architecture, and landscape. Using VTS prompts like "What's going on in this picture?" and "What do you see that makes you say that?" students practice observation, build historical context, and construct meaning from visual details.
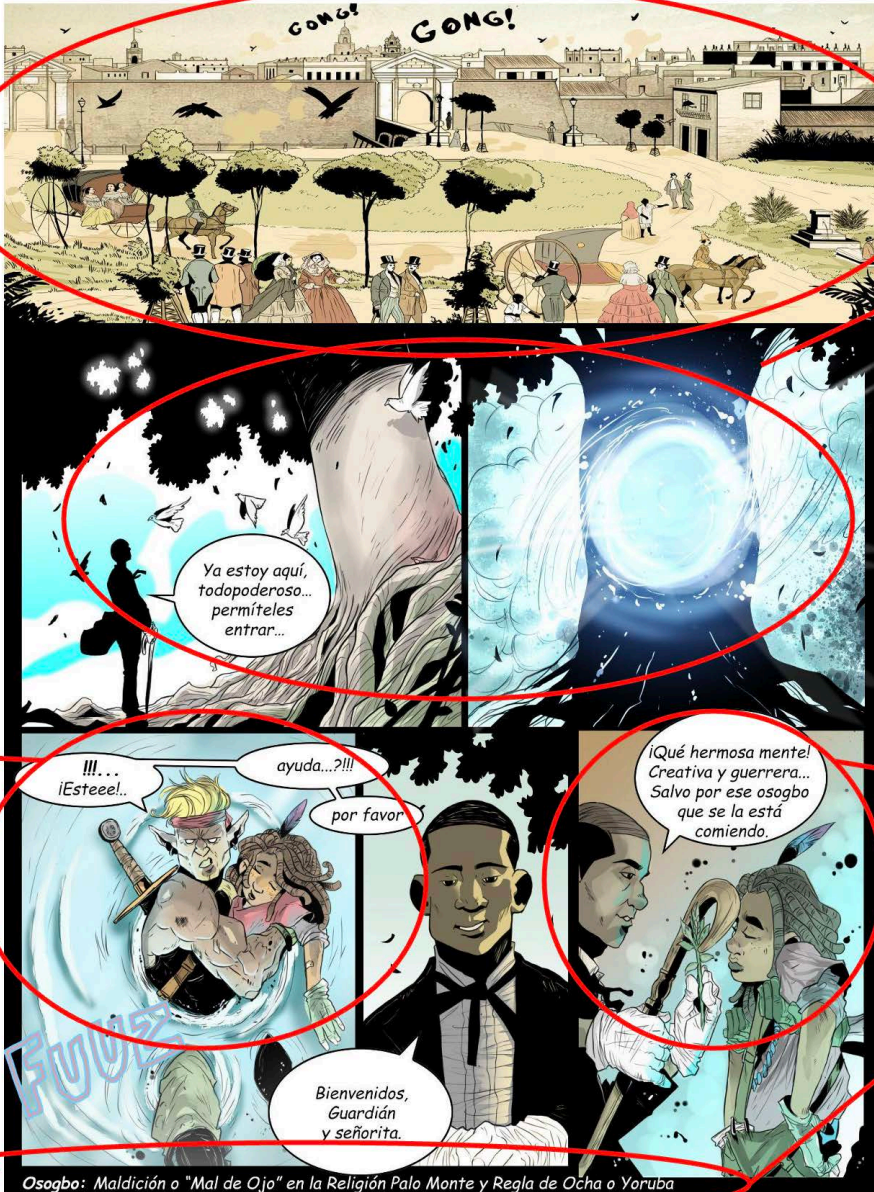
Comics Grammar

The portal opens through a ceiba tree, a sacred symbol in Cuban and Yoruba cultures. The side-by-side panels connect cultural tradition to the moment Karla crosses into another world. This layout shows how comics use visual structure to guide meaning and transitions across time, space, and culture.

Translanguaging + Cultural Knowledge

This panel blends Spanish with the Afro-Cuban spiritual term *osogbo***. Students can use visual cues across the full page, such as Karla's body language, Andrés's gestures, and the setting, to infer meaning. Teachers can guide discussion or translation using both English and Spanish, helping students explore cultural knowledge through language and imagery.

Comics Grammar + VTS

This panel draws the reader into the story by showing characters entering through a portal toward the viewer. Teachers can use this to discuss how comics use space, direction, and panel flow to show movement and transition, asking students where the characters came from and what it means to "enter" a new world.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2025: Vol. 12)
The Crystal Book: A Comic-Based Method for Cross-Cultural Learning
by Javier Gastón-Greenberg

80

Comics Grammar + VTS
This panel shows Andrés Petit holding a glowing blue plant. As the first panel on the page, it sets the tone and invites students to ask: Why is it blue? Why is it introduced first? Using VTS prompts, teachers can guide students to explore how its color, placement, and symbolism connect to other panels and events on the page.

VTS
The red eyes in black space signal danger and emotion. Teachers can prompt students to interpret mood, symbolism, and internal conflict using visual evidence from Karla's posture and expression.

**Comics Grammar + Translanguaging**
Empty speech and narration bubbles allow teachers to insert or scaffold dialogue in English, Spanish, or both. Students can create their own text based on character emotion and intent.

Comics Grammar + VTS
The monster's exaggerated size and expression build dramatic tension. For example, students can analyze how panel size and placement emphasize threat by tracking Karla's reaction across panels.

Comics Grammar + VTS
The red arrows guide visual flow but do not dictate it. Teachers can use this to discuss flexible reading paths and how panel arrangement shapes pacing and meaning.
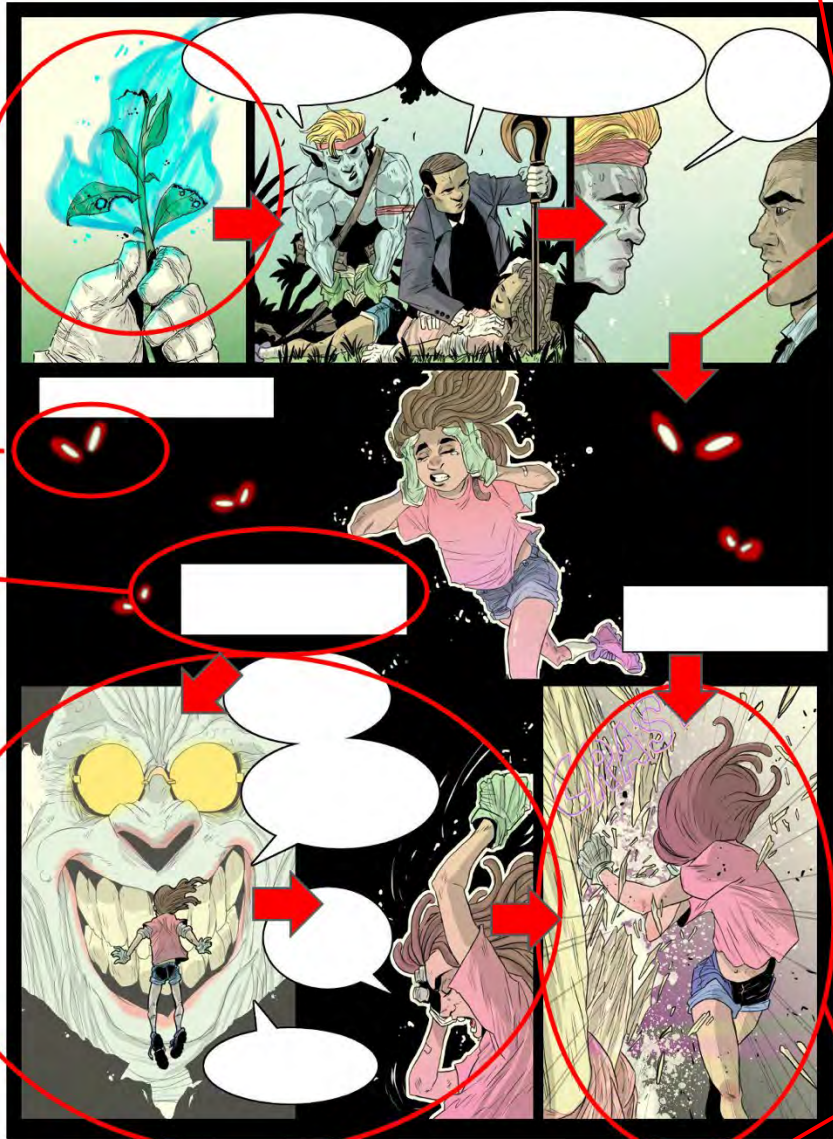
Comics Grammar + Cultural Knowledge
Karla bursts through a symbolic wall of images, suggesting she is breaking free from mental control. Teachers can guide students to connect this moment to the first panel, where a sacred plant is introduced. The sequence suggests that Andrés Petit's cultural knowledge may have helped her resist, reinforcing the idea that ancestral wisdom can empower transformation.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2025: Vol. 12)
The Crystal Book: A Comic-Based Method for Cross-Cultural Learning
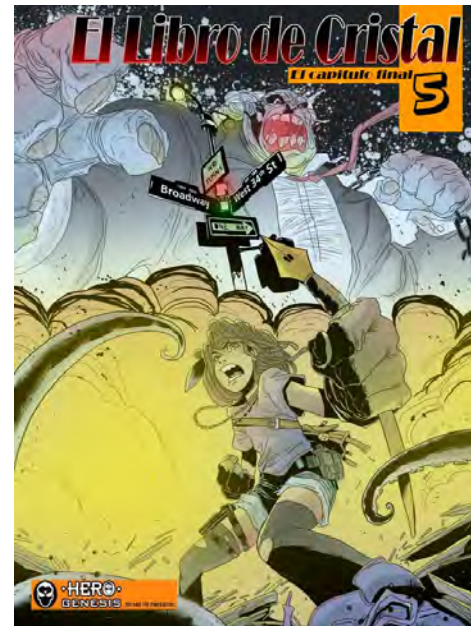by Javier Gastón-Greenberg

81

To support this learning, I created versions of the comic in Spanish, English, and bilingual formats. I adjusted the amount and complexity of text for different language levels while maintaining the visual narrative consistency to support differentiation. This allowed all students to follow the same story and engage with the same images, while being challenged in ways appropriate to their language proficiency. This structure supported a translanguaging approach, as described by Ofelia García, where students use all their languages as tools for thinking, expressing, and creating. In practice, they might read in Spanish, discuss in English, and write in both, drawing on their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning.

The comic format strengthens this approach by engaging students in visual storytelling. As Scott McCloud explains, comics operate through a distinct visual grammar—how panels are arranged, how time and motion are represented, and how images and words work together to create meaning (1993). In *The Crystal Book*, students learn to follow visual cues, interpret character emotions, recognize cultural symbols, and understand story flow across frames. This process builds multimodal literacy, helping students connect what they see with what they think and feel. Because the visual narrative remains consistent across all versions of the comic, it provides a shared foundation for all learners, regardless of language level. This consistent visual storytelling, paired with differentiated text, creates multiple entry points into the story and supports a wide range of learning needs.

To deepen interpretation and discussion, I integrated aesthetic development practices inspired by Abigail Housen (1999). I used strategies that kept students' "eyes on the canvas", asking them to describe what they saw, explain what made them say that, and build meaning through dialogue. This helped them move from personal reactions to more detailed, evidence-based observations. These habits—close looking, using language to support thinking, building shared understanding—strengthened their visual thinking and supported their growth as readers, writers, and critical thinkers.

The methodology embedded in the creation and structure of *The Crystal Book* empowers students to become both storytellers and critical thinkers. They learn to see their languages, cultures, and lived experiences not as obstacles, but as powerful tools for learning and expression. Just as Karla protects cultural memory by authoring her own story, students are challenged to do the same, crafting narratives that link their personal identities to broader histories and communities. As part of the project, students begin developing their own stories using the comic medium, applying the same visual and narrative tools they explore in the comic. Developed through cross-cultural collaboration, grounded in classroom practice, and shaped by student voices, *The Crystal Book* offers a flexible, creative model for comic-based learning, one that bridges language and culture through inquiry, imagination, and storytelling.

Javier Gastón-Greenberg *is a Curriculum Designer at Educurious, powered by NCEE, where they develop project-based learning Social Studies curriculum for middle and high school. They hold a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literature and have taught English and Spanish Language Arts in both secondary and higher education. As Co-Founder of Hero Genesis, they create empowerment programs that use comics and graphic novels to support literacy and critical thinking, collaborating with visual artists to design curriculum based on visual storytelling.*

The Crystal Book, cover art for Books 2-5.

Works Cited

García, Ofelia., and Li Wei. 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gastón-Greenberg, Javier. 2021. *Hero Genesis and Crisis: Comic Books and Identity Formation in Revolutionary Cuba*. Dissertation. Hispanic Language and Literature at Stony Brook University.

Housen, Abigail. 1999. Eye of the Beholder: Research, Theory and Practice. *Visual Understanding in Education*, https://vtshome.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/5Eye-of-the-Beholder.pdf

McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2025: Vol. 12)
The Crystal Book: A Comic-Based Method for Cross-Cultural Learning
by Javier Gastón-Greenberg

83