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**WONDER COMICS. REDRAWING GENDER IN IBERO-AMERICAN
GRAPHIC NARRATIVES**
**BD MARAVILHA. REDEFININDO O GÉNERO NAS NARRATIVAS
GRÁFICAS IBERO-AMERICANAS**

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE: WONDER COMICS. REDRAWING GENDER IN IBERO-AMERICAN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA: BD MARAVILHA. REDEFININDO O GÉNERO NAS NARRATIVAS GRÁFICAS IBERO-AMERICANAS

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Comics and graphic novels — or graphic narratives, as some prefer to call them (Chute & DeKoven, 2006) — are a growingly successful medium worldwide, both in popularity and critical recognition. In recent years, the emergence and spreading of the graphic novel, a format that is generally associated with “longer-length and adult-themed comics” (Baetens & Frey, 2015, p. 1) and with distribution channels (namely, bookshops) previously precluded the medium, allowed graphic narratives to enjoy a new renaissance in many areas of the globe. It also worked as a *laissez-passer* for comics to be recognised in areas of scholarly research that have traditionally proved reluctant towards the ninth art, such as that of literary studies. Moreover, the advent of what Manuel Castells (2004) has labelled “network society” to identify the constantly expanding influence that information technology and communication have in our daily lives has significantly widened graphic narratives’ spectrum of reception, and it continues to play a pivotal role in re-shaping comics’ affordances. Digital, internet and social media comics are, nowadays, a reality whose complex dynamics have been studied within a flourishing sub-field of research (Busi-Rizzi, 2023; Busi-Rizzi et al., 2023; Wilde, 2015) that is rapidly overcoming its disciplinary boundaries by gradually finding space and appreciation in other, broader, areas, such as those of cultural studies and communication sciences.

Both the graphic novel format and the digital comics phenomenon have significantly impacted the visibility assigned to gender non-hegemonic authors and the representation of gender-related issues. The graphic novel is a format that, as scholars have pointed out (Baetens & Frey 2015, pp. 10–13), provides a privileged platform for non-fictional narratives and, among these, for life stories such as graphic memoirs, graphic biographies and graphic diaries/journals. Being life narratives such as autobiographies and biographies a creative practice that women writers and other marginalised subjectivities have historically re-worked and re-appropriated (Kadar, 1992, p. 5; Henke, 1998; Cooke, 2020, pp. 7–8), it is not surprising that many outstanding authors experimenting with the graphic novel are women and queer artists. In this sense, it is enough to think of

prominent and already canonised names such as Julie Doucet, Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, Liv Strömquist and Jul' Maroh. Digital comics, on the other hand, have contributed to the democratisation of publishing processes by allowing categories of comics creators who have been historically excluded from the industry to experiment with platforms (like crowdfunding websites, membership platforms or social media) that break the hierarchical model cultivated by the traditional publishing sector, thus proposing more horizontal and accessible dynamics for comics' production, distribution and consumption. This "reduces the risk of exclusion for authors and promotes the inclusion of consumers by facilitating the creation of communities able to aggregate non-hegemonic social groups and give them a voice" (Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023, p. 110). Women and trans-creators are among the identity categories that, despite continuing to be discriminated against and harassed even in the digital space, most have taken advantage of and benefitted from the technological shift (Gandolfo & Turnes, 2020; Chakraborty, 2022; Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023).

As a result of these changes, the old reputation of comics as a medium where sexism is widespread, gendered discrimination is normalised, and disruptions to this sexist pattern can be found only in the niche field of the underground (Aldama, 2021, p. 1), is slowly abandoning the ninth art, and even comics mainstream giants are making an evident effort towards gender equality, often coupling this with a corresponding attempt to promote other types of inclusivity aimed at avoiding racial, classist and ableist representations. Studies on this matter have shown how women and gender non-conforming characters, while still underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed, are progressively gaining more relevance in publications distributed by major comics publishers like Marvel or DC (Billard & MacAuley, 2017, p. 233).

Even scholarly discussions have clearly reflected this positive trend by assigning more space to analysing comics-based cultural products authored by women and gender non-conforming creators or focusing on gender-related topics. Scholarly volumes have been dedicated to a diversified range of issues pertaining to the gender spectrum. The first mention is to Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010), a pillar in the study of women graphic novelists and an unavoidable reference for scholars interested in comics and gender in the Northern American context and beyond. Equally crucial is the work by the feminist comics historian and author Trina Robbins, whose *Pretty in Ink* (2013) retraces the history of women cartoonists in the United States from the XIX century to the present. Sara Zanatta, Smanta Zanghini and Eleonora Guzzetta's *Le Donne del Fumetto* (Women in Comics; 2009), Jennifer H. Prough's *Straight From the Heart: Gender, Intimacy, and Cultural Production of Shōjo Manga* (2010), Toku Masami's *International Perspectives on Shōjo and Shōjo Manga: The Influence of Girl Culture* (2015), Mel Gibson's *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood* (2015), Michelle Ann Abate's *Funny Girls. Guffaws, Guts, and Gender in Classic American Comics* (2018), *The Inking Woman. 250 Years of Women Cartoon and Comic Artists in Britain* (2018), edited by Nicola Streeten and Cath Tate, Julia Round's *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019), Nicola Streeten's *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics* (2020), *Comic Art and Feminism in the*

Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives (2021), edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten et al., and *Sugar, Spice, and the Not So Nice: Comics Picturing Girlhood* (2023), edited by Eva Van de Wiele and Dona Pursall are other additions to the set of scholarly books on girls, women and feminism in the comics world. Gender, comics and the superhero genre are other popular intersections of inquiry for contemporary scholars, as demonstrated by the recent publication of volumes such as *Elisa McCausland's Wonder Woman. El feminismo Como Superpoder* (Wonder Woman. Feminism As Superpower; 2017), *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (2018), edited by Michael Goodrum, Tara Prescott and Philip Smith, Carolyn Cocca's *Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film* (2020) and Esther De Dauw's *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (2021). More general book-length publications on the matter include the *Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comics Books Studies* (2021), edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, Sandra Cox's *Intersectional Feminist Readings of Comics: Interpreting Gender in Graphic Narratives* (2021), and *À Coups de Cases et de Bulles: Les Violences Faites aux Femmes Dans la Bande Dessinée* (Panel and Bubble Blows: Violence Against Women in Comic Strips; 2023), edited by Frédéric Chauvaud, Lydie Bodiou, Jean-Philippe Martin, Héloïse Morel. Special issues of internationally recognised academic journals have also addressed the topic. These include "Superheroes and Gender", edited by Peter Coogan, Mel Gibson, David Huxley, Joan Ormrod and Derek Royal for *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2011); "Wonder Woman Symposium Issue", edited by Vera J. Camden and Valentino L. Zullo for *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2018); "Feminist Comics in an International Frame", edited by Sally Munt and Rose Richards for *Feminist Encounters* (2020); "Feminist Discourse in Comics & Graphic Novels", edited by Houman Sadri and Anna Misiak for *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* (2023).

The clear Anglo-centered focus of most publications mentioned so far is not a coincidence. On the contrary, it mirrors the hegemonic role that Anglo-American culture had and continues to have in the production of scholarly research and criticism on gender-related issues and graphic narratives. As a consequence, much is left out in terms of comics productions arising from other cultural contexts and written in languages other than English. While it is true that feminist and queer comics authors exist in many geocultural contexts, a bigger and more consistent effort needs to be made so their work is not invisibilised or marginalised as a result of the strong heteropatriarchal imprinting of the societies where they belong and as an outcome of the shortcomings of the anglo-dominated international scholarly sector.

This thematic issue is titled *Wonder Comics. Redrawing Gender in Ibero-American Graphic Narratives*. It aims precisely at this exercise of critical redirection by investigating the role of gender in the production, consumption and circulation of graphic narratives created in the Ibero-American context, a vast and heterogeneous container of cultural spaces linked by common historical, linguistic and political traits. In Ibero-American countries (Spain, Portugal and the vast array of countries of Latin America), comics (otherwise called *cómic*, *historietas*, *historias em quadrinhos* or *banda desenhada*) have traditionally represented a significant share of the cultural productions and communication

modes. In recent years, graphic narratives' popularity has reached new heights in these countries, most of the times capitalising on an already existing propensity to treat comics as a crucial medium in the context of national cultural production (let us think, for example, at the historical importance of the Argentinian *historieta*, but also at the political relevance that *HQs* — *histórias em quadrinhos* — have had throughout the years of the dictatorship and post-dictatorship in Brazil). This is coupled with the emergence of advanced and, in some cases, globally successful feminist movements and theories on the issue of gender discrimination and violence, which have often found in the comics medium a friendly ally that has facilitated the dissemination of feminist and queer political messages. Examples here include the Argentinian movements for the legalisation of abortion and against femicide (*Ni Una Menos*): both were sustained by feminist graphic narratives that helped spreading the political messages on social and traditional media (Gandolfo & Turnes, 2020, p. 3; Alarcon & Rosa, 2016, pp. 73–79); similarly, in Brazil, comics and graphic novels have been recently used by a plethora of emerging transfeminist authors to denounce the violence of heteropatriarchal culture (Crescêncio, 2021; Mandolini & Busi-Rizzi, 2023; Lelis & Lima, 2023); in Spain, comics artists and cartoonists are among those who reacted to the minister Alberto Ruiz Gallardón's menace of limiting reproductive rights in 2014 by organising an online campaign called *Wombastic* (Márquez López, 2018; Bettaglio, 2023); in Chile a social mobilisation happened at the end of 2019 for which a graphic call was hosted by the Plataforma de Investigación, Discusión y Toma de Posición Colectiva Desde América Latina (RedCSur) with hashtags such as #No+ denouncing the sexual violence exercised against women protesters by the carabinieri; in Bolivia, also in 2019, RedCSur replicated the call with #Whipalazo organised among other groups by the publication *Matria* to denounce sexual violence against *cholas* in social mobilisations. Despite the abundance of interconnections between gender politics and the creation of comics in the Ibero-American context, only scattered articles or book chapters have been published on the subject. No systematic analysis, monograph or special collections have been dedicated to the topic. This special issue aims to provide a first contribution that will, we hope, stimulate research and methodical reflections on the matter.

The decision to explore gender issues in comics production and consumption concerning a wide conceptual container such as Ibero-American culture is not a neutral choice. It is, on the contrary, a decision that brings with it potential ethical and methodological problems, given the clear (and sometimes wide) differences that characterise both the societal approach towards gender in the countries that belong to the Ibero-American world and the relationship that the same countries entertain with the comics medium. The first substantial problem that needs to be mentioned is the inclusion, within the Ibero-American container, of countries belonging to antithetical geo-political paradigms, namely to the global north (Spain and Portugal) and to the global south (Brazil and the *América hispanohablante*). This divide, which is deeply connected to the colonial legacy that continues to create links and hierarchies between European and Southern or Central American countries, has shaped the theoretical efforts and the political practices

of feminist thinkers and movements. In this sense, Latin American feminists have demonstrated a propensity towards intersectional thinking aimed at analysing gendered discriminations in connection with the racial and classist inequalities that women and gender non-conforming subjects often experience in the global south. These reflections have been introduced in Spain and Portugal only through a derivative exercise that is still struggling to contaminate the mostly white and middle-class European feminist tradition. This is not surprising if, with Raka Shome (2016), we acknowledge “the importance of recognising how unequal global relations (of culture and economy) continually articulate the politics of gender in any local context, and how local relations are always at work in macro global processes” (p. 255). Another worth mentioning divide is the relevance of graphic narratives within the *milieu* of national cultural productions. In some countries, like Spain, Argentina and Brazil, mentioned above, comics have traditionally played a central role, as demonstrated by the fact that their distribution and consumption shaped the education of generations of readers (an example would be the historical *TBO* in Spain, where the impact of the national Catholic ideology of the Franco dictatorship on publications for girls with powerful indoctrinating messages about sexism and motherhood should not be ignored) and reached dimensions that went way beyond national borders (let us think about the transnational iconographic relevance of characters like Quino’s *Mafalda* or Mauricio de Sousa’s *Mônica*). In other countries, such as Portugal, graphic narratives have always struggled to reach popular and critical recognition, which relegated the ninth art to marginality or, in lucky cases, to the underground niche. Notwithstanding these dissimilarities, we believe that the concept of Ibero-America proves able to provide a functional critical category where the dialogue arising from historical and political connections can be taken into account, together with the set of transnational links that old and recent migration flows guarantee. Not to mention the common virtual sphere in which language-based networks overcome national borders and transatlantic distances. Comics and gender-related practices that demonstrate the strength of these links abound. To mention just a few, the transnational ethos that characterises feminist politics and movements since the 1990s (Baksh & Harcourt, 2015, p. 4) reverberated in the world of Lusophone graphic narratives in recent years in the editorial work such as that carried out Sapata Press, a transfeminist publisher of comics zines based in Lisbon but managed by the Brazilian comics artist Ciço Silveira and aimed at establishing a bridge between Brazilian and Portuguese comics productions by women and gender non-conforming authors (López Casado, 2021). In Spain, it is worth highlighting the work of the publication *Femiñetas*, promoted by Flor Coll, with a transnational, feminist and queer aim, and that of the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic that promoted, together with two Basque NGOs, the digital comic *Viñetas de Tortas y Bollos. Cómic Lesbicas Desde dos Orillas* (Panels of Cakes and Buns. Lesbians Comics From Two Margins; 2019), and also *Coordenadas Gráficas: 40 Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica*, a work reviewed in this volume by Moriano.

In light of this background, this thematic issue is a space to assign visibility and critical legitimisation to Ibero-American feminist and queer comics and graphic novels.

It is also a place to discuss in detail the strengths and limitations that characterise them, both in terms of adherence to the complexity of gender-related theorisations and their access to local and transnational dissemination. Not by coincidence, this is the very objective of the working group Autoras, Investigadoras y Editoras de Cómic that two of the editors of this special issue, María Márquez López and Nicoletta Mandolini, convene in the context of the Cost Action project *iCon-MICs*. The work undertaken for this publication is, in light of this, one of the outputs of the *iCon-MICs* project. Moreover, the inclusion of this special issue in the editorial work undertaken by *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* gave us the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the most neglected graphic narrative productions among Ibero-American criticisms: those arising from the Lusophone cultural space. The selection of articles and reviews that this thematic issue proposes reflect these choices.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS THEMATIC ISSUE

The first articles in the thematic issue explore genealogy as a starting point for re-appropriating gender comics in 20th-century print culture, particularly the pioneering Brazilian authors. They analyse the works of women and queer artists in 20th-century comics. Here, the umbilical link between comics and print culture is highlighted, given that the two articles that follow offer a detailed reflection on the contributions of women and members of the LGBTQ+ to two of the major fields within the illustrated print market: humour and erotica.

In “Patrícia Galvão: The First Brazilian Female Cartoonist”, Stella Avelino analyses two of the author’s works, the album *Pagu – Birth, Life, Passion and Death* and the eight strips published in the newspaper *O Homem do Povo*, entitled “Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda”. Galvão (São Paulo, 1910 — Santos, 1962) published her first work of an autobiographical nature at the age of 19, thus becoming the first comic book author in her country. Despite the feminist contribution of her works to the subsequent legacy of women authors, Avelino recovers her important figure, unfairly remembered only for her status as a modernist muse and for belonging to an intellectual and sentimental circle of men.

In “Women, Politics and Graphic Humor in the Press of the Early Twentieth Century: A Brief Look at the Brazilian Case”, Thaís B. R. Moreira studies the graphic humour produced by women in the Brazilian press in the early decades of the 20th century. Adopting a historical and comparative approach underpinned by the gender category, the author analyses Rian’s caricatures of women, the illustrations featured in the Feminism section of the newspaper *O Paiz* and the comic strips by Pagu (Patrícia Galvão). Moreira describes these creations as deconstructions of the prevalent misogynistic and sexist patterns in contemporary graphic humour, which reinterpreted visual culture challenging male and patriarchal authority.

The ensuing four articles focus on graphic novels and other comic book productions, which fall under narratives of the self and the body, recently produced by women

and trans- people in Brazil, Portugal and Spain. This set of articles includes analyses of comics typologies ranging from activist comics to graphic novels and anthologies that were distributed through different channels (both digital and non-digital) despite being clearly devoted to a common reflection on body politics and autobiographical stances.

Marina Bettaglio analyses the use of the uterus as a visual resource in activism in “A Womb with a (Political) View: Reclaiming Reproductive Rights in Spanish Graphic Narratives”. The author focuses on the Wombastic initiative, a Tumblr project organised by the Spanish collective Asociación Autoras de Cómic in response to the restrictive abortion bill that the Spanish Popular Party approved in December 2013. The bill was ultimately not implemented, thanks to protests like the one organised around Wombastic. Bettaglio’s analysis focuses on the claim of the female body represented through comics and illustration as a space of resistance to thwart neoconservative propaganda.

Silvia Valencich Frota and Marta Soares delve into a topic which appears to be deeply linked to bodily representation and self-expression. In their analysis of the Portuguese publication *Nódoa Negra* (2018), a volume organised by Dileydi Florez that collects graphic narratives authored by women, Frota and Soares address the portrayal of female pain. This theme functions as a *trait d’union* for the entire anthology of short graphic stories. Drawing on theories previously introduced by Marianne Hirsch to study graphic representations of trauma, the authors conclude that by saying what cannot be shown, showing what cannot be said, and promoting the creation of meaning in the interstices between text and image, graphic novels provide a more refined and expressive representation of pain in its abstraction and materialisation, between the utterable and the ineffable.

In “Webs of Self, Webs of Meaning. Three Female Fragmentary Portraits in Post-Digital Print Comics”, Pedro Moura delves into the graphic novels by three contemporary Portuguese authors: Hetamoé (2012-2020), Joana Mosi (2021-2023) and Ana Margarida Matos (2019-2023). Employing Peter Wollen’s counter-cinema strategies and Sianne Ngai’s concepts of cuteness and animatedness, the author analyses each work’s resistance strategies against the doxa or stylistic and narrative norm of comics. This analysis explores how these strategies challenge the conventional notions of identity and contribute to feminist interpretations of the self, exploring the multiple ways in which the self is formed and deformed within these narratives.

Camila Luiza Lelis and Marcus António Assis Lima, in their article “There Is a Monster in My Mirror. An Analysis of the Fraphic Novel *Monstrans: Experimenting with Horrormones*”, dig into the autobiographical effort undertaken by the Brazilian comic artist Lino Arruda, who draws on his own experience of FtoM (Female to Male) gender transition to build a disturbing autobiographical narrative where the paradigm of monstrosity is constantly evoked. Lelis and Lima contextualise Arruda’s work and recognise it as part of a plethora of queer autobiographical narratives, many of which have taken the form of the graphic memoir. Here, the author argues, a series of topoi (that of the mirror and the theme of monstrosity mentioned earlier) and practices (a vivid self-representation of physical characteristics) are systematically re-worked in order to assign symbolic space to dissident bodies.

In “Multiplicities, Narratives of Life and Collective Memory of Teaching in the Comic *Fessora!*”, Samanta Coan and Nara B. Lage analyse Alice Lemos’ graphic novel, published in 2021, which recounts the author’s experience as a history teacher in a Brazilian public school. Drawing inspiration from Argentinian theorist Leonor Arfuch’s concept of biographical space, the authors adopt this notion to explore how self-representation and the testimonial form shape the narrative of experiences that portray the school as an institution ill-equipped to embrace diverse gender and ethnocultural identities prevalent in Brazil.

Beatriz Moriano and Neus Lagunas are the authors of one of the two reviews of this themed issue whose focus is on comics, gender and transatlantic connections. The authors focus on analysing the Ibero-American anthology *Coordenadas Gráficas: 40 Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile, y Costa Rica*, published online in 2020. The project emerged from two exhibition initiatives curated by the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic (Spain) and by the Argentinian researcher Mariela Acevedo. The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation sponsored the anthology. According to Moriano and Lagunas, the work’s value lies in its transnational, intergenerational, inclusive and historical character of the contributions of participating women authors from the countries mentioned in the title of the publication.

The second review is Virginia Tonfoni’s contribution titled “Shared Coordinates: Writing Your Story in Ibero-American Comics”. Tonfoni talks about a “transnational sisterhood” based on exhibition and editorial projects that have occurred in recent years through the associative and research impulse. Specifically, it analyses the impact of the Spanish exhibition *Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy* (2016), the Argentinian exhibition *Nosotras Contamos* (2019) and the publication *Coordenadas Gráficas, 40 Historietas de Autoras de Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica* (2020), highlighting the common denominators and interests in this production and circulation of works of collective interest, aiming to recover the role of women in the history of comics.

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THEMATIC ARTICLES | *ARTIGOS TEMÁTICOS*

PATRÍCIA GALVÃO: THE FIRST FEMALE BRAZILIAN CARTOONIST

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ABSTRACT

Although many male names have been recognised in the history of Brazilian comics, only some female figures are remembered. As such, this article aims to analyse two works by Patrícia Galvão: the album "Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte" (Birth, Life, Passion and Death) and the series of eight strips published in the newspaper *O Homem do Povo*, under the title "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda" (Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda). Better known as Pagu, Patrícia Galvão is now acknowledged as the first woman to publish comics in Brazil. "Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte" was produced when the author was just 19 years old and is an autobiographical graphic narrative, considered the first Brazilian comic written and drawn by a woman. Moreover, Pagu pioneered the production of female-authored, feminist-themed strips in Brazil when she introduced two distinct female representations in "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda": the traditionalist wife and the young rebellious woman who defied conventional standards. Despite her innovation and prominent presence in the Brazilian cultural scene, Patrícia Galvão was — and sometimes still is — primarily recognised as a "modernist muse" or for her relationships with renowned writers. Thus, it is worth revisiting Patrícia Galvão's production since, as a woman and regardless of her connections, she produced highly relevant works communicating and disseminating feminist political messages and opposing gender discrimination and violence. It is, therefore, essential to acknowledge and reconsider the role of Patrícia Galvão/Pagu in the history of Brazilian comics.

KEYWORDS

Pagu, comics in Brazil, feminist strips, female cartoonists

PATRÍCIA GALVÃO: A PRIMEIRA QUADRINISTA BRASILEIRA

RESUMO

Embora muitos nomes masculinos tenham sido reconhecidos na história dos quadrinhos brasileiros, poucas figuras femininas são lembradas. Nesse sentido, este artigo tem por objetivo a análise de dois trabalhos de Patrícia Galvão: o álbum "Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte" e a série de oito tiras publicadas no jornal *O Homem do Povo*, intitulada "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda". Mais conhecida como Pagu, Patrícia Galvão é hoje reconhecida como a primeira mulher a publicar quadrinhos no Brasil. "Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte" foi produzido quando a autora tinha apenas 19 anos e configura-se como uma narrativa gráfica autobiográfica, a qual pode ser considerada como o primeiro quadrinho brasileiro escrito e desenhado por uma mulher. Além disso, Pagu inaugurou a produção de tiras de autoria feminina e com temática feminista no Brasil, ao trazer duas representações femininas diferentes em "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda": a esposa tradicionalista e a jovem contestadora e fora dos padrões convencionais. A despeito de sua inovação e importância no cenário cultural brasileiro, Patrícia Galvão foi — e, por vezes, ainda é — frequentemente reconhecida apenas como "musa modernista" ou ainda pelas suas relações pessoais com escritores renomados. Assim, reexaminar a produção de Patrícia Galvão é

necessário, uma vez que, enquanto mulher e independente de suas ligações, ela produziu obras de importância significativa na comunicação e na disseminação de mensagens políticas feministas e contra a discriminação e violência de gênero. Portanto, torna-se fundamental reconhecer e repensar o papel de Patrícia Galvão/Pagu na história dos quadrinhos brasileiros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Pagu, quadrinhos no Brasil, tiras feministas, mulheres quadrinistas

Expression with its pleasure component is a displaced pain and a deliverance. (Bellmer, 1949/2022, p. 10)

1. INTRODUCTION

Bellmer (1949/2022), in *Pequena Anatomia da Imagem* (Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious or the Anatomy of the Image), suggests that the different modes of expression, including drawing and writing, result from a reflex. On a more practical level, the author provides the example of the diversion of physical pain, such as a toothache, through the impulse of closing the hand so hard that the fingernails pierce the skin. Thus, in the artistic field, creating an artwork would stem from an attempt to divert another pain. From a female perspective, this pain can easily be identified as the marginalisation imposed on women throughout history. Countless female artists have been omitted from the artistic canon solely for being women, and many women have been relegated to secondary roles as wives, lovers, or companions by dominant male figures. Therefore, women's artistic creation is a liberation from the enduring constraints thrust upon them and stands as a testament to their resistance.

"I've always been seen as a sex. And I got used to being seen like that. (...) I only regretted the lack of freedom that came with it, the unease when I wanted to be alone", says Patrícia Galvão (2020, pp. 124–125), in *Pagu: Autobiografia Precoce* (Pagu: Early Autobiography), a lengthy confessional letter written to her husband Geraldo Ferraz at the end of the 1940s, while she was incarcerated. Belittled by a patriarchal tradition, the work of Patrícia Galvão — also known as Pagu — was condemned to oblivion until the 1980s, when an anthology, curated by Augusto de Campos (1982/2014), unveiled the multiple facets of the author. Emerging during a time when influential female figures in modernism — both Brazilian and international — hovered on the margins of male protagonists, Patrícia Galvão debuted in the modernist scene in 1929 as part of the anthropophagy movement. However, it was only with the publication of Campos' research that she achieved broad literary recognition. With a wide-ranging production, Patrícia Galvão first appeared in the anthropophagy¹ journals by initially contributing drawings, later expanding her involvement to include articles, illustrations, cartoons, and comic

¹ An offshoot of the "Modern Art Week", the *Revista de Antropofagia* was launched in São Paulo in May 1928 and ended publication in August 1929. The journal represented the cultural movement with the same name, which sought to create art and literature embodying national traits. Its issues can be accessed through the digital collection of the Biblioteca Brasileira (<https://digital.bbm.usp.br/handle/bbm/7064>).

strips in the pamphlet newspaper *O Homem do Povo* and its section “A Mulher do Povo” (The Woman of the People). Following the newspaper’s discontinuation, she authored the novel *Parque Industrial* (Industrial Park; Galvão, 1933/2022) and continued to publish articles, chronicles and reviews in various newspapers.

It is remarkable how much of her output has been overshadowed, which is why it is important to revisit Patrícia Galvão’s production and promote it, making her known not for her appearance or her relationship with renowned writers but for her intellectual contributions as an author, particularly as a pioneering female (and feminist) figure in the creation of comic strips.

2. FEMALE ARTISTS AND CARTOONISTS: PROSCRIBED FIGURES

In graphic narratives, much like in other artistic domains, women play a significant role, yet their involvement is frequently disregarded or underestimated. It is widely acknowledged that the origins of comics trace back to an evolutionary progression rooted in the rise of cartoons — humorous and satirical drawings that started gaining traction during the 19th century. As cartoons developed, they evolved from mere illustrations with comedic content to taking the shape of short sequences with captions or speech balloons. This movement gave rise to strips, short sequential stories published in newspapers and magazines. The strips played a pivotal role in expanding visual storytelling, allowing stories to continue and characters to develop over time. This evolution ultimately gave birth to graphic narratives, the “comic”. Featuring sequential panels that combine text and artwork to tell more complex and detailed stories, comics have allowed their creators to explore various themes, transforming the genre into a powerful tool for artistic expression.

In the Western context, despite the presence of female creators throughout the many stages of the graphic narrative’s origins, which can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was only during the 1960s and 1970s that women started gaining widespread recognition. This period saw the emergence of a feminist movement within the realm of comics, where artists and writers used this form of media to explore themes related to gender and social issues. Nonetheless, pioneering artists such as Rose O’Neill (1874–1944), an illustrator who ventured into comic strips and was the creator of *Kewpie* (1909); Fay King (1889–1954), a cartoonist who pioneered autobiographical comics; and Marie Duval (1847–1890), recognised as one of Europe’s earliest female cartoonists; represent names that are frequently overlooked in historiographical collections of graphic narratives.

This critical marginalization has an even greater impact when we move away from the North America–Europe cultural axis. On the Brazilian scene, female names are scarce and overdue when looking for literature that systematises or categorises the history of comics in the country. In her article featured in the *Revista Ártemis*, Cintia Lima Crescêncio (2018) points out that the book *Enciclopédia dos Quadrinhos* (Comics Encyclopaedia; 2011), a compilation of the most significant figures in the genre worldwide, authored by Goida

and André Kleinert, includes only 27 women. Among them, only nine Brazilian women are mentioned: Ciça, Chiquinha, Mariza, Erica Awano, Dadi, Edna Lopes, Maria Aparecida de Godoy, Adriana Melo, and Pagu. Apart from Pagu, all these artists are contemporary.

Very important names in the history and evolution of Brazilian graphic narratives have been left out, such as Nair de Teffé, who signed her cartoons as Rian and was the first Brazilian caricaturist (Campos, 1990), or Hilde Weber, a German artist who became a naturalised citizen after coming to Brazil and who in 1933 commenced publishing political cartoons in *O Cruzeiro* magazine. Crescêncio (2018) also points out that Pagu's inclusion in the encyclopaedia may be attributed to her being perceived as a "rare graphic expression" or for being "Oswald de Andrade's wife", as the entry for the author reads as follows:

in the sole issue of the comics magazine *Manga* (PressEditorial, no date), which featured stories illustrated by Alain Voss, Marcatti, Jaz, Luiz Gustavo, and Péricles (*Amigo da Onça*), a striking curiosity emerged. Among the contents, the editors discovered five comic strips drawn by Pagu (Patrícia Rehder Galvão) for the newspaper *Homem do Povo* (...). Pagu (also known as Oswald de Andrade's second wife), a journalist, writer, and activist, contributed this rare graphic expression to the history of Brazilian comics. (Goida & Kleinert, 2011, as cited in Crescêncio, 2018, p. 69)

Regardless of her category in Goida and André Kleinert's encyclopedia, Patrícia Galvão remains the first woman to have published a sequential graphic narrative in Brazil, earning her the distinction as the first Brazilian female cartoonist.

The evolution of comics in Brazil has followed a distinctive path. Their inception dates back to 1831, with publications of graphic humour in newspapers and magazines that satirised public authorities and the nation's social customs. In 1855, the Frenchman Sébastien Auguste Sisson published *O Namoro, Quadros ao Vivo, por S... o Cio* (Dating, Live Pictures, by S... o Cio) in the magazine *Brasil Ilustrado*, the first comic strip in the country. Following this, Angelo Agostini, renowned as "the best, most important and most entertaining graphic artist the country had in the 19th century" (Campos, 2015, p. 202), published the first sequential comic strip featuring a recurring character, "As Aventuras de Nhô Quim ou Impressões de uma Viagem à Corte" (The Adventures of Nhô Quim or Impressions of a Journey to the Court). Between 1869 and 1870, the newspaper *A Vida Fluminense* published 14 stories about Nhô-Quim. Since then, many male names have found their place in various encyclopaedias about Brazilian comics, but few female figures have received recognition.

Patrícia Galvão, for example, was only recognised as the first woman to publish comics in Brazil when, in the 2000s, a group of female cartoonists got together to publish the magazine *As Periquitas* (2005). From then on, the name Pagu became popular among graphic narratives' enthusiasts. Pagu became not only the namesake of a publishing label for female artists but was also honoured with the HQ Mix award, often described as the "Oscars of Brazilian comics".

However, it is worth noting that the editorial label Pagu Comics (Cândido, n.d.), launched on March 8, 2016, International Women’s Day, has been discontinued. Promoted by Editora Cândido through a partnership with Social Comics, a streaming service for reading digital comics, the imprint, created to house creations by women in Brazilian comics exclusively, has been cancelled. The imprint’s comics can no longer be found on the Social Comics website, and the imprint’s digital accounts on social networks such as Instagram, Twitter and Medium have not been updated since 2017. The HQ Mix trophy, meanwhile, paid tribute to Pagu in 2022. The award’s press release reads:

the 34th HQMIX Trophy honoured the 100th anniversary of the 1922 Modern Art Week. As such, the winners will receive the statuette of the character Kabelluda, by Patrícia Rehder Galvão, known as Pagu, one of the protagonists of the 1922 Modern Art Week movement. Pagu was a writer, poet, director, translator, illustrator, cartoonist, journalist and arts activist. She was the first woman in Brazil to draw comic strips. (...) Pagu became the muse of the modernists and even married Oswald de Andrade in 1930. Together, they launched the “O Homem do Povo” newspaper, where she published her comic strips. (Redação, 2022, para. 1)

Once more, the artist’s name alone does not suffice. Despite being the first Brazilian cartoonist and making substantial contributions to the country’s cultural scene throughout the 20th century, Pagu is constantly referenced as a “modernist muse” or as Oswald de Andrade’s wife². It is a fact that this invisibility and the tendency to associate women primarily with male figures stem from systemic structures of oppression that prioritise the male figure at the expense of the female. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1967), in *O Segundo Sexo: A Experiência Vivida* (The Second Sex), asserts that women are imposed on the condition of the “other,” meaning they are not viewed as subjects equal to men. According to her perspective, this is a mechanism of male dominance that dictates what roles are or are not appropriate for women in an attempt to limit their space, their role in society and their constitution as a subject. Beauvoir also emphasises that this role, while evolving throughout history, is still a role of submission and hinders women from occupying public spaces that do not conform to the expectation of what is feminine. Thus, Beauvoir (1949/1970) describes man as autonomous and transcendent, while women are seen as immanent and states that, for this reason, women “have no past, no history, no religion of their own” (p. 13).

However, as highlighted by Gerda Lerner (1986/2019) in *A Criação do Patriarcado* (The Creation of Patriarchy), Beauvoir was wrong to think that women had no history. Lerner, who dedicated nearly two decades to studying women’s history, speaks of a “hidden history of women” (p. 302). She argues that the male version of history, legitimised

² Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) was one of the protagonists of Brazilian modernism and the leading architect of the anthropophagic movement, which proposed a reinterpretation and assimilation of European culture by Brazilian artists to forge a unique cultural identity for the country. He was a journalist and author of poetry, prose, essays and theatre, whose work was characterised by experimentalism and social and political criticism.

as the “universal truth”, has depicted women as marginal to civilisation and victims of the historical process. The author states that “denying women their history reinforced the acceptance of the ideology of patriarchy and weakened the notion of individual women’s self-worth” (Lerner, 1986/2019, p. 304). Patriarchy, therefore, represents the silencing and concealment imposed on women in diverse artistic and cultural productions, including the medium of comics. Despite countless attempts to curtail their creative expression, many women have refused to take the historically assigned place of silence. Hence, it is essential to take a fresh look at the production and figures of these female artists, who should be appreciated for their creative contributions rather than their physical appearance or family associations.

3. THE PAGU ALBUM – *NASCIMENTO, VIDA, PAIXÃO E MORTE*

Patrícia Galvão was born in 1910, moved to São Paulo in 1912 and enrolled as a student at the Escola Normal do Brás in 1924. The following year, at 15, she began drawing illustrations for her neighbourhood newspaper, the *Brás Jornal*, under the pseudonym Patsy. During this period, Galvão started socialising with names that later became influential figures in Brazilian literature and the arts, including Guilherme de Almeida, Mário de Andrade and Raul Bopp³. The latter published the poem “Coco de Pagu” (Pagu Coconut)⁴ in 1928, which prompted the writer’s nickname. The nickname, however, originated from a misunderstanding by the poet, who mistakenly believed that the honoured woman’s name was Patrícia Goulart.

Immersed in Brazil’s flourishing modernist artistic and cultural scene, at the age of 19 in March 1929, Pagu published three drawings in the *Revista de Antropofagia*. During that same time, she *desenhescreveu*⁵ (drewrote) the album titled “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte” (Birth, Life, Passion and Death). This hybrid work combined drawings, texts and captions and can be considered the first Brazilian comic written and drawn by a woman. In its original form, each drawing filled a page within a frame, where text and image interacted to weave a fantastical autobiographical narrative, reflecting the modernist ideals of its era. Augusto de Campos (1982/2014) observes a sharp perception of reality in the language of the texts, which oscillate between poetry, prose and captions, “all tinged with malice and sensuality” (p. 59). Pagu establishes a close connection between the verbal and the non-verbal, incorporating elements from cartoons, adverts, comics, cinema, and the modernist visual universe. Symbolically divided into four stages, the album “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte” (Figure 1) anticipates the intention to organise the languages that, throughout her life and work, are not compartmentalised but engage in a continuous dialogue.

³ Guilherme de Almeida, Mário de Andrade and Raul Bopp were important organisers of the 1922 “Week of Modern Art” and distinguished poets and critics in the Brazilian cultural landscape.

⁴ “Coco de Pagu”, a poem by Raul Bopp, was published on October 27, 1928, with an illustration by Di Cavalcanti sketching Patrícia Galvão playing the guitar, in the magazine *Para Todos*, Year X, Number 515, Rio de Janeiro.

⁵ A neologism, created by Augusto de Campos (2014, p. 93) in *eh pagu eh* to define the artistic process developed by Patrícia Galvão.



Figure 1. Opening pages of “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte” (1929)

Source. From “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte”, by Pagu, 1975, *Código*, (2), pp. 25–26 (http://codigorevista.org/revistas/pdf/codigoo2_digital.pdf)⁶

Pagu’s album was dedicated to Tarsila do Amaral and remained in her possession for many years until it was discovered by José Luís Garaldi in the library of one of Tarsila’s nephews and then published for the first time in the magazine *Código*, Number 2 (1975), 45 years after its creation. Subsequently it was published in the magazine *Através*, Number 2 (1978); in the book *Pagu: Vida-Obra* (Pagu: Life-Work) by Augusto de Campos (1982/2004); and in the compilation *Croquis de Pagu e Outros Momentos Felizes que Foram Devorados Reunidos* (Pagu’s Sketches and Other Happy Moments That Were Devoured Collected), edited by Lúcia Maria Teixeira Furlani (2004).

An autobiographical production, Pagu’s comic shows how the author sees and portrays herself in the modernist spirit of the time bubbling up all over São Paulo. The daring attempt to combine text and image fitted in perfectly with the quest for originality imbued in modernism and put Pagu ahead of many since she was the pioneer of autobiographical comics in Brazil and also the first female cartoonist at a time when comics were not yet so popular in the country.

Based on her personal perceptions, “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte” is a feminist narrative that addresses gender issues and female empowerment in an acidic and reflective way. When analysing this aspect in Pagu’s work, it is important to remember that one of the consensuses around the term “empowerment” outlined by Sarah Mosedale (2005) is that empowerment is a self-reflective act and can be facilitated through enabling

⁶ The album was first published in the magazine *Código*, Issue 2, Salvador, 1975. Today, not only has the album been reproduced in various books about Pagu, but it is also available on the website <http://www.codigorevista.org/nave/>: a project to digitise and publish online the 12 issues of the magazine *Código*, published from 1974 to 1990, by Erthos Albino de Souza.

conditions. Thus, the album Galvão produced, portraying herself as a female figure with desires, is regarded as an act of her own empowerment since, within the work, she establishes herself as a woman with agency over her body and desires. At the same time, this affirmation lays the groundwork for the empowerment of other women, as it affirms the existence of female figures who “own themselves” and are capable of participating and innovating in the cultural environment they inhabit to make their voices heard and share their experiences.

Despite the simple lines, Patrícia Galvão managed to convey the profound anguish brought on by her yearning for freedom in a society that stigmatised her because of her gender. Throughout the pages, she delved into themes such as female sexuality, the pursuit of autonomy, and harassment. For instance, on Page IX, Pagu’s drawing alludes to Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Swing*. The French painting, which depicts the Baron of Saint-Julien in the company of his mistress, features a woman in the centre, sitting on a swing in motion. She mischievously tosses her shoe towards her lover, revealing her ankle. Sitting and leaning back in the lower corner of the screen is her lover, who is in the right place to see the young woman’s legs. However, the page drawn by Pagu (Figure 2) does not bear the euphemistic symbols of sensuality present in Fragonard’s painting. Patrícia Galvão shows a naked woman perched on a swing, and instead of a lover sneaking a peek in the lower corner, there is a sun. The swing is no longer an allegory of infidelity, as in the 18th-century paintings, but a symbol of freedom. The accompanying text on Pagu’s page makes it clear: “I want to go very high... very high... in a feeling of delicious superiority – because on the other side of the wall, there’s something I want to spy on”.

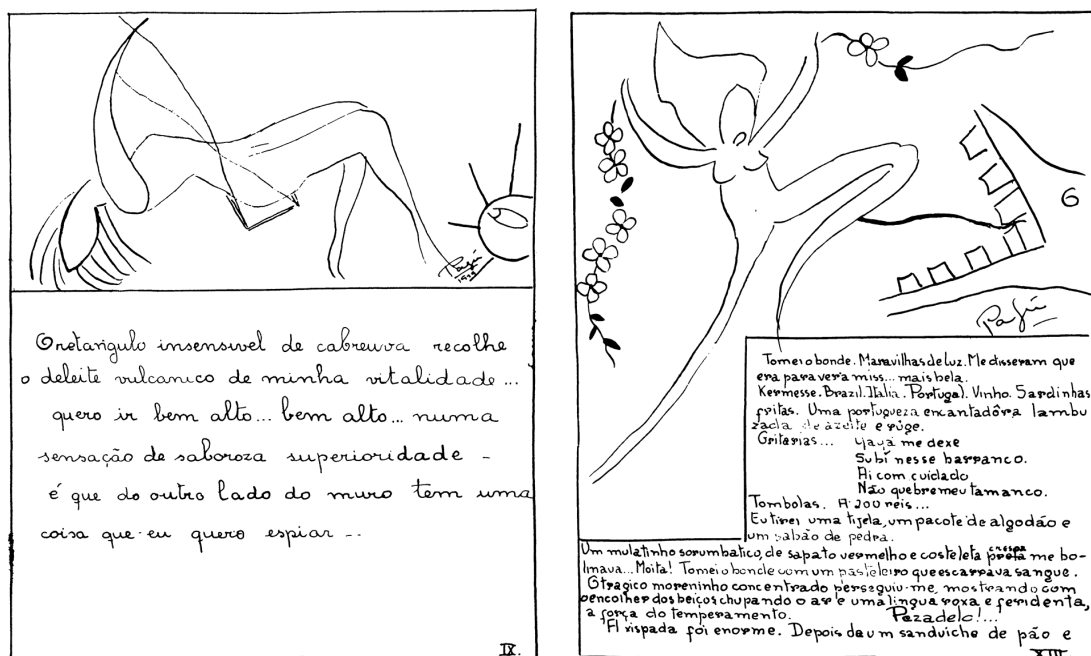


Figure 2. Pages IX and XIII of “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte” (1929)

Source. From “Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte”, by Pagu, 1975, *Código*, (2), pp. 27–28 (http://codigorevista.org/revistas/pdf/codigoo2_digital.pdf)

Page XIII is Pagu's depiction of a tram ride during which she is harassed: "I took the tram. Wonders of light. (...) The tragic young swarthy man fixated on me and pursued me, showing the strength of his temper with a shrug of his lips sucking in the air and a fierce purple tongue. Nightmare!". The drawing is significant: the protagonist is depicted naked, holding flowers and about to be bitten.

The body represented in the two figures and throughout the work is portrayed to convey a sense of female freedom. In the illustration on Page IX, the female figure surrenders to the swing, while on Page XIII, she seems to hover while an animalised figure tries to bite her. The entry on "Corpo" (Body) in the *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista* (Dictionary of Feminist Criticism; Amaral & Macedo, 2005) emphasises the growing awareness in contemporary feminism of the corporeality of the female body not as a "being", but as a "field of interpretative possibilities" (pp. 24-26). In this sense, the body represented throughout the album portrays the female figure not as a submissive being, as she was supposed to behave at the time, but as a being detached from the "good manners" to which women were supposed to be subject, and free to move wherever she wants.

However, it is worth noting that Galvão distanced herself from the feminist movements of her era, which were split between the more elitist bias of Bertha Lutz and the anarchist perspective of Maria Lacerda de Moura.

On the one hand, Bertha Lutz, leader of the *Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino* (Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress), advocated that including women in political participation would contribute to the nation's progress without compromising domestic responsibilities and the social roles they traditionally played. Furthermore, the federation never clashed directly and publicly with the Catholic Church nor supported or repudiated political parties. On the other hand, Maria Lacerda de Moura, a great exponent of Brazilian anarchist feminism, challenged the precepts of the Catholic Church and patriotism and openly defended free love and sex education. Patrícia Galvão, however, falls into what Larissa Higa (2016) calls "solitary feminism" since she both repudiates the well-behaved feminism of the Federation and associates feminism with communism, which makes it impossible for her to relate to anarchist ideology. This solitary feminism is evident in the articles and strips published in "A Mulher do Povo" (1931).

4. "A MULHER DO POVO"

In 1931, when she first started editing the newspaper *O Homem do Povo* with Oswald de Andrade, Pagu, besides contributing articles, drawing various cartoons and the letters of the title of the section "A Mulher do Povo", created a series of eight strips entitled "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda" (Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda).

Before Patrícia Galvão, Nair de Teffé and Hilde Weber were prominent women in Brazil in producing cartoons and caricatures. Yet it was Pagu who inaugurated the production of female and feminist strips. In "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda", the comic strip uses two types of female representation to symbolise the society of the time: the traditionalist wife and the young woman who challenges conventional norms. The strip has

a pamphleteering tone and tells the story of Kabelluda, an unsubmitive young woman. After her newspaper closes, she is taken by a stork to her aunt and uncle, Malakabeça and Fanika, a bourgeois couple. Kabelluda arouses the jealousy of her adoptive mother, as Malakabeça fulfils her niece every wish (Figure 3). She becomes a communist revolutionary and organises a gathering in a public square, where she is ultimately arrested and shot but resurrected on the third day (Figure 4). After being reborn, Kabelluda decides to create a new newspaper. However, Fanika forbids it. Kabelluda flees to Portugal and returns to Brazil with a child whom her moralistic aunt does not accept. Finally, Kabelluda rejects a political boyfriend, runs off with a man of the people, insults a reactionary teacher and ends up lynched (Figure 5).



Figure 3. The second strip of the sequence “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”

Source. From “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”, por Pagu, 1931, *O Homem do Povo*, 2, p. 6. (https://memoria.bn.br/pdf/720623/per720623_1931_00002.pdf)



Figure 4. The fourth strip of the sequence “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”

Source. From “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”, por Pagu, 1931, *O Homem do Povo*, 4, p. 6. (https://memoria.bn.br/pdf/720623/per720623_1931_00004.pdf)



Figure 5. The seventh strip of the sequence “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”

Source. From “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”, por Pagu, 1931, *O Homem do Povo*, 7, p. 6. (https://memoria.bn.br/pdf/720623/per720623_1931_00007.pdf)

Pagu’s sequence of eight strips exposes the violence against the women of her time, who were censored, beaten and humiliated when they did not behave as expected. Patrícia Galvão seized on comics for political purposes and emphasised the subversion of customs. It can be seen right from the title: Malakabeça, the uncle who does his niece’s every bidding and is submissive to his wife’s impositions, could only be *out of his mind*; Fanika, the intemperate aunt who is never satisfied and zealously represses her niece’s behaviour; and, finally, Kabelluda, the strip’s protagonist, is a young revolutionary who questions institutions such as the church and marriage. With feminist ideals of freedom, the protagonist’s name can be associated with the pejorative adjective commonly associated with more radical feminists.

The drawing is neither proportional nor detailed, typical of old comics. Furthermore, the text is in caption format, a feature inherited from the language of cinema, which, in silent films, often pauses to read the characters’ lines. It is also important to remember that cinema and its technical characteristics greatly inspired modernist literature, a movement that Pagu followed closely. The simple line emphasises the humorous and satirical aspect that the author gives to the customs and stereotypes of the characters. An example is in Figure 3, where Kabelluda is carried by the stork by the neck and not in a basket. A strategy for amplifying an image’s potential for meaning, Pagu’s simple strokes produce frames that remove excessive information and accentuate specific details that either characterise stereotypes or make acid references to symbolic representations, as in the first frame of Figure 4, where Kabelluda is on a platform, or in the last frame when she is resurrected.

The themes addressed by the strip were in line with the perspective of the newspaper *O Homem do Povo*, which, from the outset, was promoted as a pamphleteering publication. Therefore, Patrícia Galvão viewed the strips as a playful means of criticising social traditions. However, as Augusto de Campos (1984) noted in his article “Notícia Impopular de *O Homem do Povo*” (Unpopular News of *The Man of the People*), the newspaper was not read by the working class, but rather by some intellectuals, law students,

traditionalist mothers and the police, who eventually banned its circulation. Proudly playing her role in the newspaper, Pagu, besides her comic strips and cartoons, published feminist texts that satirised the traditional values and hypocrisy of the female bourgeoisie and São Paulo society. In “Maltus Alem”⁷, published in the newspaper’s first issue, Pagu expresses her indignation at the “elite feminists who deny the vote to labourers and uneducated workers” (Galvão, 1931b, p. 2). In the same issue, in *Confessionário Burguês* (Bourgeois Confessional), Patrícia Galvão (1931a) transcribes excerpts from a notebook belonging to a state school girl and concludes with the following comment:

while these empty-headed lunatics amuse themselves and openly spread their mentality by squandering on worthless and petty debauchery (...) the money extorted from the poor labourers and workers, the latter crumble from dawn to dusk – conceiving a new generation of sick and mistreated oppressed people in the eternal transformation of sweat into cocktails. (p. 2)

Pagu’s scathing writings earned her a letter from Walkiria de Souza (as cited in Andrade & Galvão, 2009) on April 14, 1931, reproaching the author’s language and her criticism of young women:

I have a daughter at the State School whom I was teaching to be anti-religious and communist, according to the teachings of the *Homem do Povo*. But since you’ve messed with the girls, I wonder if it’s worth it to be anti-religious and communist like this? (p. 53)

Walkiria also insisted on noting that the texts on communism written by men such as Hélio Negro, Raul Maia and Oswald de Andrade should be benchmarks for Patrícia Galvão. She went on to praise the newspaper, stating that “with the onslaught of the handsome young men, it gained popularity and became very well known” (de Souza, as cited in Andrade & Galvão, 2009, p. 53). Walkiria’s letter exposes exactly the hypocrisy that Pagu denounced in her strips featuring aunt Fanika and her writings in general. The newspaper had an atmosphere of bold provocation, marked by modernity and parody, which led to conflicts with law students and eventually resulted in the newspaper’s closure.

Following her journalistic pursuits, Patrícia Galvão authored the proletarian novel *Parque Industrial* (Galvão, 1933/2022) in 1933. She then wrote chronicles under the pseudonym Ariel for the newspaper *A Noite*. In 1945, Patrícia Galvão became part of the editorial team for the weekly *Vanguarda Socialista* and managed a section where she published articles connecting literary and political criticism. Additionally, she contributed a series of chronicles titled “Cor Local” (Local Colour) to *Diário de São Paulo*, which was part of the newspaper’s Sunday literary supplement. In this periodical, Pagu wrote studies and provided original translations of authors such as William Faulkner, Franz Kafka and James Joyce in the anthology section of foreign literature. She also produced some poems and contributed to *Fanfulla* and *A Tribuna* newspapers.

⁷ A pun on Methuselah, the old man of the Bible, and the celibate preaching of Pastor Maltus.

It is indeed astonishing that her substantial output has been neglected. Augusto de Campos (1982/2014), in his introductory text for the reissue of *Pagu: Vida-Obra*, emphasises that, despite her decisive, participatory and flamboyant role in the achievements of the literary field during the first decades of the 20th century, many women had their careers overshadowed by their female status.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Much of Patrícia Galvão's work remained inaccessible to the public for decades, either because her published texts were not reprinted or due to the existence of personal materials, such as the album made for Tarsila do Amaral, which only became public after Pagu's passing. Despite her active involvement in the early 20th-century modernist movement, Patrícia Galvão was often discredited as an author and primarily celebrated as a "modernist muse" for a long time. She — who employed various pseudonyms, including Pagu, Mara Lobo, King Shelter, Ariel, and Solange Sohl — faced a delay in receiving recognition from literary critics for her work.

After her acknowledgement in the 1980s, Pagu became an inspirational figure across various art forms: her life story inspired musicians Rita Lee and Zélia Duncan to compose the song "Pagu", released in 2000. There are also documentaries, films, plays, autofiction books and even a character in a miniseries inspired by Patrícia Galvão⁸. Her work has been extensively explored in academic circles regarding its political and feminist bias due to her militant work. However, research on her drawings — so dear to her work — is still scarce. As a result, Pagu's identity as a cartoonist is an ongoing discovery that deserves further study and dissemination.

Comics have clearly played a significant role in culture and communication throughout history. However, women's participation and contributions in this genre have often been neglected and made invisible. As such, this article sought to bring Patrícia Galvão to the fore, acknowledging her as Brazil's first female cartoonist and highlighting two of her emblematic works: the album "Nascimento, Vida, Paixão e Morte" and the strips "Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda".

The recent growing popularity of graphic narratives has helped dissipating the stigma that once classified them as mere children's entertainment, transforming them into a powerful platform for disseminating feminist political messages to combat gender discrimination and violence. Recognising Patrícia Galvão as Brazil's first female cartoonist is crucial for addressing a historical gap and appreciating women's vital role in culture and society. Furthermore, the historical retrieval of graphic narratives crafted by Brazilian women maps the diversity and complexity of the female experience over time, providing

⁸ In 1982, a 15-minute mini-documentary titled *Eh Pagu, Eh!* directed by Ivo Branco focused on Pagu's life. In 1988, the film *Eternamente Pagu* (Eternally Pagu; 110 minutes), directed by Norma Bengell, set out to tell the author's life story. In 2004, Pagu was depicted as a character in the miniseries *Um Só Coração* (One Single Heart), played by Míriam Freeland. In 2022, Adriana Armony released the book *Pagu no Metrô* (Pagu on the Subway), an autofiction that intertwines Armony's research with Galvão's time in France. The same year, the play *Pagu - Até Onde Chega a Sonda* (Pagu - How Far the Probe Reaches) premiered in São Paulo. The play draws inspiration from an unpublished manuscript by Pagu and delves into her thoughts and reflections during her imprisonment in 1939.

inspiration and empowerment for forthcoming generations of female artists. By showcasing and spotlighting the work of Patrícia Galvão, this article seeks not only to promote the author but also to amplify the voices of emerging female artists and foster research dedicated to recovering and disseminating the creations of other women who have defied patriarchy through comics.

In short, the history of comics in Brazil must encompass the contributions of women, beginning with the pioneering work of Patrícia Galvão. Acknowledging her legacy represents a pivotal first step towards correcting the invisibility of female productions and paying homage to the women who have enriched culture and society through this medium.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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WOMEN, POLITICS AND GRAPHIC HUMOR IN THE PRESS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: A BRIEF LOOK AT THE BRAZILIAN CASE

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the representation and presence of women in the graphic humor of the Brazilian press in the early 20th century. We take three distinct examples as the main sources of the analysis: the caricatures of women made by the artist Nair de Teffé (under the pseudonym Rian) in the 1910s, the illustrations the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino (Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress) used in the publications of the “Feminismo” (Feminism) section of the newspaper *O Paiz* in the late 1920s and, finally, the comic strips “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda” (Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda) by Patrícia Galvão (popularly known as Pagu), published in the periodical *O Homem do Povo* in 1931. In addition to analyzing the works of these women, the article proposes a comparison with the comics published in the magazine *O Malho*, a mass humor periodical from the early 20th century. The highlighted illustrations, authored by the caricaturists J. Carlos and Leônidas, are representative of the dominant production of the time, which evoked sexist conceptions of gender relations. Our goal is to discuss the particularities and similarities of the works envisioned by women, in which the critical and subversive gaze of these figures predominated in the face of the society of their time. The historical and comparative approach makes it possible to recover these little-known graphic narratives, and shed light on the gender and power relations that constitute the universe of the press and humorous publications then.

KEYWORDS

graphic humor, press, women, politics, feminism

MULHERES, POLÍTICA E HUMOR GRÁFICO NA IMPRESA DO INÍCIO DO SÉCULO XX: UM BREVE OLHAR SOBRE O CASO BRASILEIRO

RESUMO

O artigo visa refletir sobre a representação e a presença de mulheres no humor gráfico da imprensa brasileira no início do século XX. Tomaremos como fontes principais da análise três exemplos distintos: as caricaturas de mulheres feitas pela artista Nair de Teffé (com o pseudônimo Rian) na década de 1910, as ilustrações que a Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino utilizou nas publicações da seção “Feminismo” do jornal *O Paiz* no final da década de 1920 e, por fim, as tirinhas cômicas “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda” de Patrícia Galvão (popularmente conhecida como Pagu), publicadas no periódico *O Homem do Povo* em 1931. Além de analisar as obras dessas mulheres, o artigo propõe uma comparação com os quadrinhos publicados pela revista *O Malho*, um periódico humorístico massivo do início do século XX. As ilustrações destacadas, de autoria dos caricaturistas J. Carlos e Leônidas, são representativas da produção hegemônica da época, que evocava concepções sexistas das relações de gênero. Nosso objetivo

é discutir as particularidades e as similaridades das obras idealizadas pelas mulheres, em que predominaram o olhar crítico e subversivo dessas figuras diante da sociedade de seu tempo. A abordagem histórica e comparativa possibilitará recuperar essas narrativas gráficas pouco conhecidas, bem como lançar luz às relações de gênero e de poder que constituem o universo da imprensa e das publicações humorísticas do período.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

humor gráfico, imprensa, mulheres, política, feminismo

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in the visual culture is not a recent theme of academic studies, but it continues to provide relevant and interesting works. A deeper look into feminist theories is central to these new productions, which bring forward renewed critical aspects and a closer look at gender relations. Studying women as producers of artistic works is hardly a recent effort. In 1971, the American historian Linda Nochlin discussed these and other questions in her essay that would become a classic: *Por que Não Houve Grandes Mulheres Artistas?* (Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?; Nochlin, 1971/2016). Getting into this subject brings with it some challenges of its own: how can we recover the creations of artists erased from history? Where do we find those sources? What more detailed information can be discovered about these women? If, on the one hand, some artists have been consecrated and recognized, on the other hand, there are dozens who remain anonymous and ignored.

Such questions also underpin the paths of research in the area of women's history. The historian Michelle Perrot (2006/2016), a world reference in this field of studies, emphasizes the need to recover the accounts of the women themselves, breaking with the invisibility of their trajectories and with the silence of the sources. This intellectual effort to give voice to the women and their stories is part of a long process of institutionalization that began in the mid-20th century and was characterized by a continuous critical renewal. This is how the concept of *gender* as an analytical category (Scott, 1995) and the relational approach gain a place, bringing important issues to the debate, such as the tensions and negotiations between women and men, sexualities, notions of masculinities, and virility, among others. It is worth mentioning that, from the historiographical point of view, gender studies and women's history are generally presented with orientations linked more to social history — aiming to recover the experiences of women of the past — and trends that favor the analysis of representations and discourses (Franco, 2015).

With regard to the issue of humor, there are several other particularities that appear on the scene. It is worth remembering that the very history of studies on the subject is permeated by difficulties in their being considered a field of research, largely because of the lack of prestige and academic indifference that lasted for decades (Saliba, 2017, p. 3). When we think of the historical context of Brazil in the early 20th century, there are

also tensions regarding the humorists of the time and their self-images. Their trajectories were not always “uniform” or socially recognized, since society assigned the place of the humorist to the ephemeral, distant from the institutionalized circuits of culture and the Brazilian intelligentsia of that time (Saliba, 2002, p. 150).

In addition, bringing out the perspective of women’s history and gender relations implies adding new problems to the universe of humor: who are the women who produce humorous representations? What are the graphic characteristics of these works? How did they enter the professional environment? What relationships do their creations establish with feminist ideals? There are important reference studies to think about these issues in the Brazilian case. We highlight the doctoral thesis of Cintia Lima Crescêncio (2016), *Quem Ri por Último, Ri Melhor: Humor Gráfico Feminista (Cone Sul, 1975–1988)* (The One Who Laughs Last, Laughs Best: Feminist Graphic Humor [Cone Sul, 1975–1988]), as well as the works of Maria da Conceição Francisca Pires (2019, 2021a, 2021b), which focused on debating graphic humor in comics produced by women, the self-definition in comic books by black women, and transsexuality in comics. There is also the thesis *De Maria a Madalena: Representações Femininas nas Histórias em Quadrinhos* (From Mary to Magdalene: Female Representations in Comic Books) by Ediliane Boff (2014) and the dissertation *Um Panorama da Produção Feminina de Quadrinhos Publicados na Internet no Brasil* (A Panorama of the Female Production of Comics Published on the Internet in Brazil) by Carolina Ito Messias (2018), among others¹.

However, the literature review shows that the reflections that align the two perspectives — the historical period of the early 20th century and the graphic humor productions made and/or disseminated by women (especially feminists) — are much scarcer. Despite this, we cannot fail to mention that important studies were carried out on some Brazilian artists of that time, such as *Nair de Teffé: Artista do Lápis e do Riso* (Nair Teffé: Artist of the Pencil and Laughter; Campos, 2016), which deals with the trajectory of Rian (the pseudonym adopted by Nair de Teffé), and some published articles that reflect on the visual production of Patrícia Galvão². In any case, the scarcity of works stems from a number of factors, both historical and historiographical. Historically speaking, there are few women humorists and graphic artists known at the time, which possibly stems from a restriction that was imposed on the publishing and sociability networks of these media, dominated by men. Still, one cannot help but point out that forgetting and erasing women in the history of art, comics and graphic humor as a whole is also linked to historiography itself, as it is an arbitrariness perpetuated by studies, illustrated dictionaries and catalogs that gave prominence only to male artists³. In the case of Brazil, there

¹ Other references that we could cite are: Eugênio (2017), from the Center for Philosophy and Human Sciences, Graduate Program in Political Sociology, Florianópolis; Barros (2020).

² Among them: Nogueira (2017) and Ferrara (2019).

³ Author Jessica Kohn (2016) demonstrates in her study how this forgetting was perpetrated by some illustrated dictionary authors in the case of comic books in France and Belgium before 1970.

is also some evidence that the history of graphic humor present in several collections silenced a significant part of the production of women (Crescêncio, 2018, p. 71).

By distancing oneself from the specificities of graphic humor — but without losing sight of it — it is also possible to reflect on the presence of women in the visual culture of the early 20th century from the political and artistic manifestations of some suffragist groups. The main objective of these groups of women was to gain the right to vote, as they understood that direct political participation was essential for their emancipation⁴. The use of the image as a fundamental part of the militancy of these groups has been further studied in the cases of American and, in particular, British suffragism, as in Lisa Tickner's (1988) classic *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–14*. Even so, it is possible — and necessary — to recover the trajectories of suffragettes from other countries and regions that also used imagery resources. In Brazil, the conquest of women's suffrage dates from 1932 and was enshrined in the Constitution of 1934. For decades, the activism was spearheaded by figures such as journalist Josefina Álvares de Azevedo (1851–1913) and professor Leolinda Figueiredo Daltro (1859–1935). In the 1920s, however, the movement gained a lot of visibility with the tactical action of the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino (Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress; FBPF), led by biologist Bertha Maria Júlia Lutz (1894–1976). Little by little, the FBPF was able to disseminate its ideals in the mainstream press, until in 1927 it inaugurated the column “Feminismo” (Feminism) in the newspaper *O Paiz*, where they were able to publish texts linked to feminist militancy⁵. This column also included images, photographs, propagandistic maps, and cartoons (*charges*⁶), probably produced by the FBPF members themselves.

We therefore propose a brief reflection in this work that relates and connects the different artists and works mentioned above, taking into account their particularities, their different intentions, and political positions, without losing sight of their points of agreement and their common political and social environment: the period traditionally called by historiographers as the “First Republic”. By juxtaposing these creations with each other, we seek to emphasize the discussions arising from the studies of women's history and gender relations, in order to clarify the subversions and limits present in each narrative. The main sources addressed in this reflection are the three segments of visual productions: (a) the caricatures (more specifically the *portrait-charges*) by Rian (Nair de Teffé), published in the magazine *Fon-Fon!* in 1910; (b) the images — ranging from maps

⁴ New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902) and Finland (1906) were pioneering countries in women's suffrage. In Brazil, the conquest occurred in 1932 and became effective in the Constitution of 1934, a few years after the United States (1920) and the United Kingdom (1928). In Portugal, women's suffrage was realized in 1976, within the scope of political transformations after the Carnation Revolution.

⁵ A full analysis of the column is made by Beatriz Berr Elias and Mônica Karawejczyk (2021) in an article entitled “‘Always to the Woman, For the Woman’: The Feminism Column in the newspaper *O Paiz* (RJ) — 1927–1930”.

⁶ The word “charge”, derived from the French, meaning “charge” or “attack”, refers to a form of humorous satire widely prevalent in satirical magazines of the time. It uses illustrations or drawings with short captions to comment on current political, social or cultural issues. Typically, cartoons employ comedic exaggeration of features and situations to deliver criticisms and impactful messages.

to cartoons — that illustrate the column “Feminismo” of the periodical *O Paiz*; and (c) the satirical strips “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda” (Malakabeça, Fanika and Kabelluda) by Patrícia Galvão, published in 1931 in the newspaper *O Homem do Povo*. These works will be contrasted with the hegemonic male production, which dominated the circulation in the mass media, so that we can see the innovations—in graphic and narrative terms — that women’s works triggered⁷.

2. GENDER RELATIONS AND GRAPHIC HUMOR IN EARLY 20TH-CENTURY BRAZIL

Various authors, both men and women, agree on the difficulty of establishing an accurate story about the emergence of comic books. There are genealogies that point to the origin of comics (or their “aesthetic precursors”) in the cave paintings, in the *images d’Épinal* of 18th-century France, or in the cordel literature of 18th- and 19th-century Spain; but, beyond the disagreements, there is a consensus that comics were born in the late 19th century as a genre subordinate to the graphic medium, having its history associated with the press (Levín, 2015, pp. 44–45). Thus, when we analyze the early period of the 20th century, we find a convergence of different visual expressions in illustrated magazines: they reproduced photographs, prints, advertising images, caricatures, cartoons, and comics. Thus, by using the term “graphic humor” we are able to conduct a joint approach to these manifestations that are so closely aligned in the documentary *corpus* of the research. Historian Florencia Levín (2015) defines graphic humor as:

a particular type of social discourse that captures fragments of ideas, images and opinions that circulate in other spaces where social exchange takes place; it transforms them and puts them back into circulation through the mass media, thus feeding the production of what constitutes, at the same time, its own raw material: the flow of social representations. And it does so by interweaving these networks of collective representations under the imaginary scenes constructed by the humorists (whether these references are from reality or not). Because graphic humor necessarily conveys what we call “common sense. (p. 24)

From this definition, we can understand graphic humor as an aesthetic expression with very striking social implications: common sense circulates and reproduces itself in the mass media, the fragments of ideas and opinions take visual form, are transformed, but are still social representations. Adopting graphic humor in its various forms as a source of historical study allows us to seek, among its vestiges, marks of mentalities and sensitivities of the past that may or may not remain in the present. Gender relations and

⁷ It is important to emphasize that there is currently no robust survey of graphic humor productions made by women in Brazil in the early 20th century. The absence of data poses challenges for the field of study, which typically leans towards relying on the few names still known in the bibliography.

the idealizations and projections of “femininity” and “masculinity” are always present if they are observed analytically, both by the representation present in the images, as well as in their own authorship and conception.

The data from the press and the bibliography on the subject reveal to us, however, that the “game of representations” arising from graphic humor was not on equal footing in terms of gender: in this context, most of the main cartoonists of the mass humorous magazines were men, who very often produced narratives that gave preference to sexist⁸ humor in the different scenarios illustrated. On this point, before we move on to the graphic productions of women, it is worthwhile to briefly analyze some images that represent this most well-known and widespread current of graphic humor in the early 20th century. For this, we will briefly analyze two comics from the humorous illustrated magazine *O Malho*, published in Rio de Janeiro beginning in 1902 and which, within a few years, reached a wide circulation in Brazilian urban centers through a significant weekly circulation.

In various parts of the world, the laws regulating the right to divorce date back to the second half of the 20th century⁹. However, the debates on the subject go further back, as they had already been voiced by some feminists and were evidenced in the first attempts at bills that were presented in the early decades of the 20th century. In 1907, the topic was in vogue in Rio de Janeiro with the publication of the *feuilleton* “A Divorciada” (The Divorcée) in the magazine *Kosmos* (Guimarães & Ferreira, 2009), and it was a controversial subject at the meetings of the Institute of Lawyers, which the magazine *O Malho* said “approved by two-thirds” the “full divorce (...) apparently, by Dr. Myrthes de Campos¹⁰” (Bocó, 1907, p. 8). This statement appears in the same issue in which the comic “O Divórcio” (The Divorce) is found, signed by the illustrator J. Carlos (Figure 1).

⁸ Merrie Bergmann (1986) conceptualizes “sexist humor” as “one in which sexist beliefs, whether attitudes or norms, are presupposed and necessary for fun” (p. 63).

⁹ Uruguay is an exception in the Latin American context. In October 1907, after heated parliamentary and public debates, the country enacted the law that would regulate divorce from then on.

¹⁰ Myrthes Gomes de Campos (Macaé, 1875 – Rio de Janeiro, January 20, 1965) was a Brazilian lawyer, recognized as the first woman in Brazil to practice this profession. Myrthes was engaged in the cause of women’s emancipation, defended the right to vote for women and, in the 1920s, had close relations with the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino.



Figure 1. "Once the sacred marital harmony had been re-established, the happy couple went for a walk. It's interesting to watch. The commendatore's mistress knows a legion of kind gentlemen. Cornelio doesn't know them all and, if he dares to ask a question, his dear consort replies: — They're the husbands of my friends!"

Source. From "Guignol — O Divórcio" [Illustration], by J. Carlos, August 17, 1907, *O Malho*, 257, p. 11. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/116300/9838>)

The graphic narrative focuses on the mishaps of the protagonist "Comendador Cornelio Carneiro, an intransigent moralist" (Carlos, 1907, p. 11) who was outraged by

the possibility of recognizing the right to divorce. He is portrayed as a “naïve victim” of his own wife and the story outlines this idea by pointing out that, in the home, there were fights and discussions (represented in the first vignettes) and in the public space of social gatherings, the “embarrassment” of the “gallantries of countless D. Juans” — as shown by the outcome of the comic. Here we find a number of projections about femininity and masculinity, as well as sexist assumptions that govern humorous features of the narrative. The character that represents the wife of the protagonist has no name, is called “the commander’s lady”, “boss” and “madame Cornelio Carneiro”. She appears at the beginning of the story as an uncontrolled woman — which at the time was associated with the supposed feminine “emotional nature” — but as the story unfolds, she reveals her lascivious side, suggesting that she was having extramarital affairs. In addition, “the maid” is the other character who appears briefly in the story, portrayed in a stereotypical way as a naïve “faithful servant”. When communicating, she says “fava ó cloca” instead of *five o’clock* — a kind of parody of the foreign language used by many Brazilian comedians of the time to create comic effects¹¹, but also, to point out the stupidity to those who uttered them.

In view of this, it is important to note that the comic, while following the style of the “comedies of manners”, imputes an extremely negative charge to the figure of the wife for the morality codes of the time. The protagonist of the narrative, in turn, rouses the reader’s amusement by his own stupidity, by not understanding the hypocrisy of his ideas in the face of his own marital relationship. Thus, the mockery is intrinsically associated with the sexist and patriarchal assumptions of the “husband’s authority”, which, by not being upheld in the case of Cornelio Carneiro, culminates in the ridicule of this character “betrayed by a woman” and “unable to control her”. Exploring this “crisis of male virility” as an anti-feminist narrative¹² was a recurring theme in the press and graphic humor, gaining even more emblematic contours in the context of the First World War (Moreira, 2021).

In 1906, in Rio de Janeiro, there was a crime that resonated in the press: the robbery of Jacob Fuocco’s jewelry store, which ended in murders and the criminals being nicknamed “death gang”. This episode inspired the comic strip by the cartoonist Leônidas (Figure 2), which narrates an alternate version of what happened, in which “the ideas of feminism were already developed in Brazil”, resulting in a squad of women police officers who would have put a different end to the story. Thus, we can assume that the idea of the author and the publisher of *O Malho* was to mobilize popular curiosity about what happened (it is no wonder there was a novel, a play and two films based on the crime) while dealing with an equally controversial subject at the time: feminism and the feminist campaign.

¹¹ This kind of parody of foreign languages or exaggerated foreignisms is analyzed in more detail by Elias Thomé Saliba (2002) in *Raízes do Riso — A Representação Humorística na História Brasileira: Da Belle Époque ao Primeiros Tempos do Rádio* (Roots of Laughter — The Humorous Representation in Brazilian History: From Belle Époque to the Early Times of Radio).

¹² Such anti-feminist positions denied, in different ways, the legitimacy of claims for women’s political and civil rights. With regard to academic production, misogyny and antifeminist discourses have been studied from different interpretations, from those that point to a given “fear of women” and “fear of change” on the part of men, to those that analyze them as reactionary rhetoric or a manifestation of symbolic violence (Moreira, 2021, p. 264).

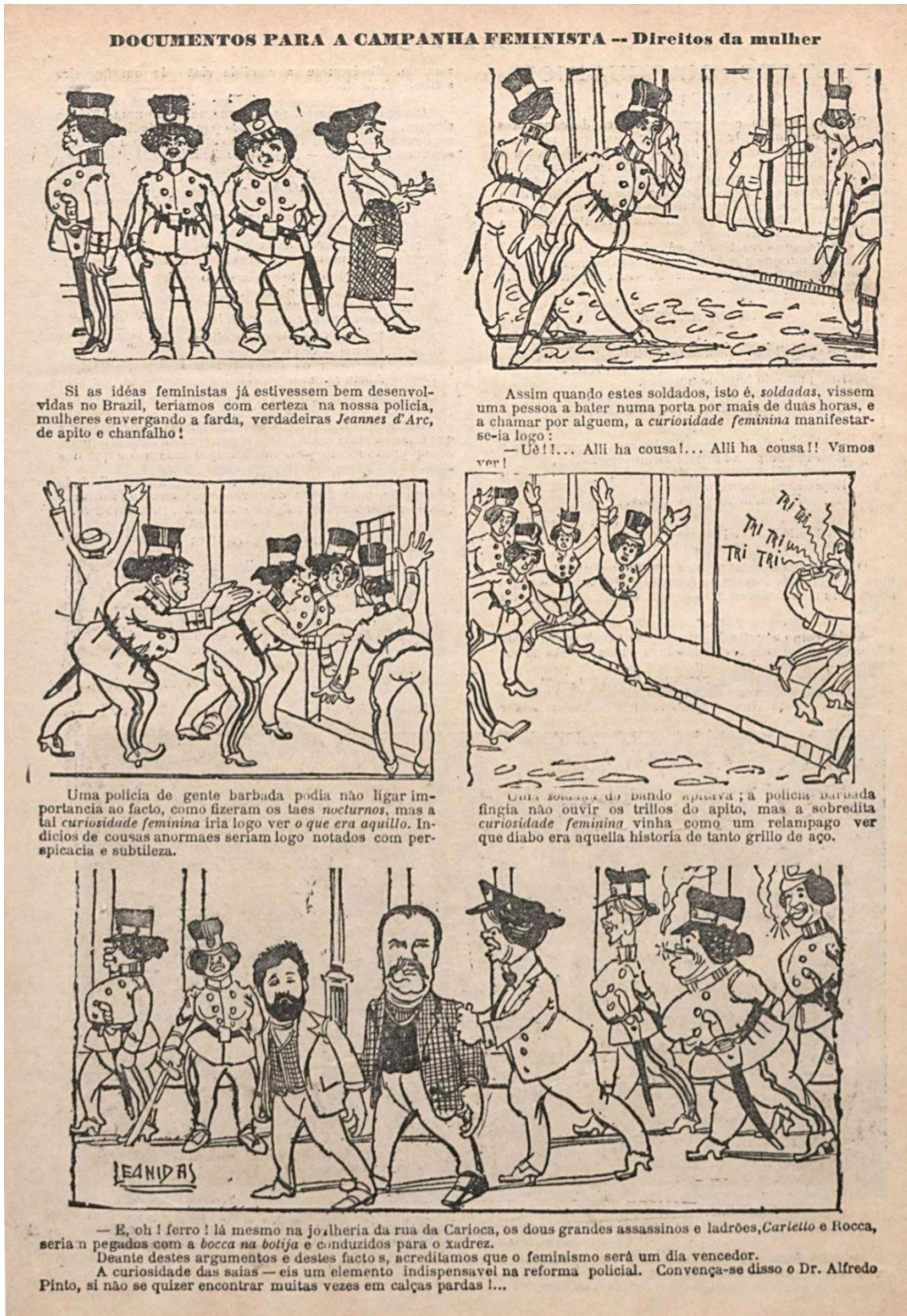


Figure 2. "If feminist ideas were already well developed in Brazil, we would certainly have women in our police force, real Jeannes d'Arc, with whistles and muzzles!"

Source. From "Documentos Para a Campanha Feminista — Direitos da Mulher" [Illustration], by Leônidas, November 3, 1906, *O Malho*, 216, p. 42. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/116300/8272>)

Irony, essentialist conceptions of women, and the ridicule of feminists are the main axes of the graphic narrative. The positive outcome of the crime — with the arrest of the guilty caught in the act — justifies the title of the vignette, since the good outcome could be used as a “document for the feminist campaign” (Leônidas, 1906, p. 42). In addition, the good performance of women would be the result of “feminine curiosity”, a euphemism for the meddlesome behavior widely associated with women. If the title exhibits a certain mockery of feminist efforts¹³, the content (written and visual) of Leônidas' comic (1906) demonstrates, from a sexist point of view, that feminism would be responsible for the “distortion” of female figures. Although the “feminine behavior” of the characters was not out of line with common sense, the caricatured representation of them is designed to be absurd and shocking, because they wear uniforms (male clothing) and have their faces and bodies misshapen and grotesque, contrary to the aesthetic standards of the time. The mockery thus consists of the alternate outcome of the crime played by “masculinized women”— a stigma all too often associated with feminist women.

Briefly analyzing the two previous comics allow us to visualize the hegemonic scenario of graphic narratives in which representations of women and issues dear to feminism appeared. Large numbers of comics, caricatures and cartoons of similar content are found not only in the pages of *O Malho* — a widely disseminated publication in Rio de Janeiro — but also in other similar and equally popular publications. Women who appeared in comics as significant characters are often the targets of moralistic criticism and ridicule. Graphically, distortions are used when the intention is to delegitimize the figure of feminist women, distancing them from the idealized image of women that filled the advertisements of these same pages. Thinking about the presence of women in the production of graphic humor of the time therefore means taking into account the hostile environment evidenced by the masculine mass productions.

3. THE PORTRAIT-CHARGES BY RIAN

Nair de Teffé von Hoonholtz was born to an aristocratic family in the federal capital, Rio de Janeiro, in 1886. She is recognized as Brazil's first female caricaturist, but above all she was a person who explored the art world in many ways, including experimenting with theater and music. In any case, Nair learned to draw during her stay in France and upon returning to Brazil she began her career as a visual artist in 1906, exhibiting weekly at Casa David and in the window of the millinery Chapelaria Watson (Campos, 2016). Beginning in 1910, Nair became known in the Brazilian mass media when she had a series of *portrait-charges*¹⁴ published in the illustrated magazine *Fon-Fon!*, in a session called “Galeria das Elegâncias” (Gallery of Elegances). By this time, she was already signing the illustrations as “Rian” (Nair backwards, which sounds like *rien*, “nothing” in French). The following are some illustrations (Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5).

¹³ Although in 1906 there were no feminist associations of greater projection in Brazil, as was the case a few years later, with the founding of the Partido Republicano Feminino (Women's Republican Party; 1910) and the Liga para a Emancipação Intelectual da Mulher (League for the Intellectual Emancipation of Women; 1919), we cannot fail to point out that some activists for the emancipation of women were already known in Brazil, and had acted through written publications, such as Nísia Floresta Brasileira Augusta (1810–1885) and Josefina Álvares de Azevedo (1851–1905).

¹⁴ Also called “individual caricature”, the genre focuses on the human figure, disregarding the background of the scene and the reference to the environment.



Figure 3. “The super-chic Mme S. L., or the victory of Matto Grosso over Pariz”

Source. From “Galeria das Elegancias” [Illustration], by Rian, 1910a, *Fon-Fon!*, 33, p. 15. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/259063/4999>)



Figure 4. “The ‘pétillant’ Mme S.S. or the evening star of select meetings”

Source. From “Galeria das Elegancias” [Illustration], by Rian, 1910b, *Fon-Fon!*, 34, p. 15. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/259063/5047>)



Figure 5. “The ‘charming’ Mme B. da S. or the singing grace of our salons”

Source. From “Galeria das Elegancias” [Illustration], by Rian, 1910c, *Fon-Fon!*, 35, p. 17. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/259063/5092>)

Graphically, we note the importance of the costumes and the fast strokes, which evidence exaggerations from synthetic figures. Rian’s caricatures evidence a certain critical mockery of the well-to-do women who frequented the social circles of the elites — of which she herself was a part (Boff, 2014, p. 221). On the other hand, there are certain subtleties in these depictions that are worth pointing out. The “ladies of Rian” gain a very different visibility than what was usually found in the graphic humor of the time, because there is no masculinization of their physiognomies or the suggestion that they were “morally deviant” women. They appear as protagonists of the visual narrative, with a name (albeit abbreviated) and the humor lies precisely in the authenticity of these figures, in their laughing expressions and in the exaggerated importance they attribute to fashion.

As Maria de Fátima Hanaque Campos (2016) well pointed out, Rian avoided the stereotypes of other caricaturists who represented women as *biscuit* or a sort of fragile adornments. In other words, when we compare the series with other hegemonic representations of women in the press, there are marked differences and a much less idealized view of femininity. Although she calls herself “nothing”, her images are *nothing* like naïve. Taking a new look at women and caricaturing even the male figures of the public scene and politics, as she would later do, are bold attitudes for a woman in that period. Although her social background granted her remarkable privileges, “modest” and “behaved” behavior was expected of women — especially bourgeois women, like her — and her works were a creative and subtle way of subverting gender projections that always fell on women too aggressively.

In fact, Nair experienced a moment of consecration between 1910 and 1912, receiving invitations for collaboration in the press, exhibiting her arts (Figure 6) and having her caricatures published not only in *Fon-Fon!*, but also in *Careta* and *Gazeta de Notícias*, equally important periodicals of Rio de Janeiro (Campos, 2016). In 1913 the artist married President Hermes da Fonseca and became the first lady of Brazil. The ceremony, as one might imagine, was a public event, reported and photographed by the newspapers and magazines of the time — including some negative comments by Fonseca’s opponents. According to Maria de Fátima Hanaque Campos (2016), the new marital status did not interfere with Rian’s career, but it was in the 1920s that the last caricature works of the artist are found in the illustrated press of Rio. In any case, it is worth noting that Nair de Teffé “lived between art and politics with the awareness that her modern and innovative artistic gestures had an extraordinary impact on a conservative and patriarchal political world” (Chagas, 2016, p. 62).



Figure 6. “A view of the Exhibition of works by Rian, the artistic pseudonym of Miss Nair de Teffé, whose caricatures of our grand-monde have always been a great success. This photograph shows Marshal Hermes chatting to a distinguished visitor”

Source. From “Notas Artísticas” [Photography], by Brun&Cia, 1912, *Fon-Fon!*, 24, p. 23. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/259063/10297>)

4. IMAGES AT THE SERVICE OF A FEMINIST IDEAL — FEDERAÇÃO BRASILEIRA PELO PROGRESSO FEMININO IN *O PAIZ*

Feminism and the ideals of “female emancipation” gained a lot of space in the press of the early 20th century, motivated above all by the intense political mobilizations of the suffragettes, both abroad and locally. A significant part of this repercussion was critical and derogatory, often through the publication of numerous anti-feminist caricatures, cartoons, and comics, which sought to ridicule and delegitimize the cause. This mass production of opposing images leads to the consideration that, for feminist militants, producing their own materials, whether texts or images, was a fundamental and necessary effort not only to garner public acceptance, but also to contend for their reputation, which was under constant attack by many widely circulated publications. In the specific case of English suffragism, especially that linked to the association Women’s Social and Political Union, historian Lisa Tickner (1988) demonstrated the vast arsenal of images mobilized by the militants, ranging from costumes for demonstrations, banners, accessories, photographs, propaganda postcards and periodicals of their own.

In the case of Brazil, the suffrage movement at the beginning of the century did not focus on organizing public demonstrations as recurrent and flashy as those of the English and American suffragism. Professor and feminist activist Leolinda Figueiredo Daltro, founder of the Partido Republicano Feminino (Women’s Republican Party) in 1910, even organized women’s marches and meetings in Rio de Janeiro, but there are no records suggesting that these acts were repeated very often or had many supporters. Beginning in 1922, the FBPF, led by the feminist biologist Bertha Lutz, began to prioritize, in turn, a performance focused more on conferences and political meetings. These events included the presence of guests (often foreigners) and were generally held in cafes or hotels, in other words, away from the streets and public squares. Instead of banners and posters, Brazilian feminists prioritized competing for space in the press for the public at large, as seen in the letter that Bertha Maria Júlia Lutz sent to the publisher of *Revista da Semana*, in 1918. According to Beatriz Berr Elias and Mônica Karawejczyk (2021, p. 14), periodicals, newspapers and magazines were one of the main tools for disseminating the acts of the FBPF, presenting its demands and arguments in favor of women’s vote as a way to expand its performance and increase its political alliances. It was especially in the newspaper *O Paiz* that the FBPF would find a privileged place to make its voice heard, in the column “Feminismo”, between the years 1927 and 1930.

In their analysis of the column “Feminismo”, Beatriz Berr Elias and Mônica Karawejczyk (2021, p. 15) put forth the hypothesis that the periodical *O Paiz* began to cede this space to the FBPR because of the renewed interest in women’s political rights resulting from the approval of the female vote in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, in October 1927, seen as an expressive feminist victory of the time. The first times the section was published there were images next to the content, as we observed bellow, with the publication of a map entitled “As Duas Correntes — A Qual Dellas o Brasil Deverá Filiar-se?” (The Two Currents — Which Should Brazil Join?); Figure 7). The image has a strong propaganda bias, as it alleges mass support for feminism in Europe (illustrated

by the countries that were not colored on the map) to convince Brazilian readers that it is a legitimate cause that deserves their attention. It is interesting to note that the same illustration was reproduced on April 20, 1930, in the *Diário Carioca*, under the title “Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino” — however, this time, with the corrected list of countries that admitted the female vote in Europe, since, in 1927, the map considered France as part of this “suffragist current”, but in reality the country only regulated these political rights for women in 1945.



Figure 7. “Women have voting rights throughout Europe, with the exception of Portugal, Switzerland and the Balkan countries”

Source. From “As duas correntes— A qual dellas o Brasil deverá afiliar-se?” [Illustration], by Carmen Velasco Portinho, November 11, 1927, *O Paiz*, 15727, p. 7. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/178691_05/31913)

Although this image is not the focus of our analysis, we call attention to the use of maps as a way to communicate ideas. There are sources that attest to how the suffragettes of the United States, as early as the 1910s, wielded this type of visual representation to defend their demands. Similarly, in the following decades there are other “suffragist maps” in political materials of the militants of South America, such as the one

we reproduced earlier and a map drawn up in 1929 by the Uruguayan feminist Paulina Luisi, who pointed out in her caption: “80 million women vote in the world – Uruguayan women have no rights”. It is worth noting that these women are using maps as propaganda at a time when such representations were very closely associated with the “world of men”, the expansionist/colonialist policies of some countries and the war tensions that exploded from the end of the 19th century until the First World War. They are thus appropriating these symbols to remark on the transnational and deeply political nature of women’s suffrage.

In 1929 the FBPF decided to publish in its column the article “Resistindo à Invasão Feminista” (Resisting the Feminist Invasion), also counting on the cartoon reproduced in Figure 8. The context of the publication is a controversy involving a Post Office report that opposed the admission of women in the postal service, claiming that women were “auxiliaries who did not offer advantages to the smooth running of bureaucratic work”, since their efforts were always “inattentive and flawed” (“Resistindo à Invasão Feminista”, 1929, p. 10). The FBPF reacted to the event, noting that the report “overflowed with anti-feminist prejudice”, that the director and author of the document “appeared to belong to a philosophical school of the past” (“Resistindo à Invasão Feminista”, 1929, p. 10) and that it violated a constitutional right of Brazilian women. The cartoon, in line with the criticism of the report’s statements, makes use of graphic humor to ridicule such anti-feminist men who remained resistant to female participation in certain areas and concludes: “in the 20th century, the broom of prejudice does not frighten women”. This mention of the 20th century can be understood as a tactic, recurrently employed by suffragettes, of associating feminism and women’s rights with the most modern practices of their time. In other words, “to be in the 20th century” is “to be in the time of the criticism of old habits”, so that resistance to changes in the condition of women in society appears as an appeal to the, archaic, past. Such an argument was highly likely to be forceful among readers at a time when modernist ideas were gaining ground, permeated by the eagerness to build new airs and paradigms.



Figure 8. “‘We need to raise a great levee against the devastating wave that is coming and that wants to swallow us up,’ says the worthy judge, Dr Esaú de Moraes. However, H.E. forgets that: ‘In the 20th century, the broom of prejudice does not frighten women’”

Source. From “Resistindo à invasão feminista” [Illustration], March 3, 1929, *O Paiz*, 16205, p. 10. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/178691_05/37515)

Concerning the graphics, the cartoon does not employ the usual approaches of antifeminist graphic humor, such as the use of grotesque features, absurdities or exaggerations in the physiognomies and bodies of the characters. The scene acquires a humorous and critical tone only by the analogy that is made with the “broom of prejudice”, wielded by the male character doubly ridiculed, both by the cartoon itself and by the women represented within the scene — laughing at the subject who tries in vain to “raise a big levee”. We can point out as a hypothesis that the relatively mild nature of the image stems from a conscious attempt to move away aesthetically from antifeminist cartoons, in addition to preserving a “polished” image of feminist criticisms. In other words, not resorting to the emotionally charged representations recurrent in the graphic humor of many antifeminist men may have been a convenient way of not linking themselves to a practice “as masculine” as were the political satires, since these militants lived under the continuous public accusation that they were “masculinized” for claiming political rights.

5. THE STRIPS OF PAGU

Patrícia Rehder Galvão was born in São João da Boa Vista, in the interior of the state of São Paulo, in 1910. Pagu, as she became known, led an intense life, continually breaking with many social standards and traditional expectations of “female behavior”.

She is publicly remembered as a communist militant and writer, but she also had a number of works linked to the visual arts that are not always mentioned. Pagu began to draw in the magazine *Antropofagia*, presenting an album of drawings and texts dedicated to the painter Tarsila do Amaral (Boff, 2014, p. 222). In addition, she produced sketches that were collected and published only in 2004 in the book *Croquis de Pagu: E Outros Momentos Felizes que Foram Devorados Reunidos* (Pagu's Sketches: And Other Happy Moments That Were Devoured Collected), organized by Lúcia Maria Teixeira Furlani (2004). For our analysis, we selected the strips “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabeluda” prepared for the weekly *O Homem do Povo*, edited in São Paulo in 1931 by her and Oswald de Andrade — her husband at the time.

The first point to highlight is that Patrícia Galvão's comics, like her novels and other writings, evidenced parts of the author's own experience and can be considered as autobiographical productions (Nogueira, 2017, p. 5). Kabelluda is the protagonist of her strips in *O Homem do Povo* and possibly has many things in common with Pagu herself, because the character is combative, participates in political actions and lives her sex life freely, which was considered a scandal by the moral standards of the time. In Issue 4, the narrative illustrates the protagonist's participation in a communist meeting in a public space, called “Praça da Lamparina” (Lamparina Square; Figure 9). She is immediately surprised by the police repression, expressed in a light and crude way, as Kabelluda “is arrested” and then “shot” (Galvão, 1931a). There is a rapid breakdown of expectation between the woman who vibrates, at the head of a demonstration, and her total opposite, when she is stopped and silenced. However, the expectation is again distorted with the reappearance of the character in the last frame — which, in turn, is a clear satirical allusion to the biblical passage that narrates the resurrection of Christ. Kabelluda's reappearance is celebrated by other characters who were already on the scene, among them, some women.



Figure 9. “Kabelluda held a communist meeting in Praça da Lamparina”

Source. From “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda”, by Patrícia Galvão, April 2, 1931a, *O Homem do Povo*, 4, p. 6. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/720623/24>)

Although it may seem a simple and rudimentary story to our eyes today, Pagu addresses a controversial topic for the 1930s: the participation of women in politics through militancy. The personalities who chose this path, regardless of their ideological bias, encountered strong opposition within and outside the movements. In addition, they faced harsh criticism from public opinion and some even suffered political persecution, as was the case with Patrícia Galvão. Kabelluda was brutalized and imprisoned, anticipating what the future of her own creator would be (Nogueira, 2017, p. 8). In addition, we can highlight how Pagu uses various comic elements with an acidity of her own, bearing in herself a message of self-affirmation of the woman who defends her political ideals: Kabelluda, on resurfacing, was external to the world: “now you pay me!”.

In turn, the vignette published in Issue 7 addresses a dimension of the character’s free sexuality, because she becomes involved with several men and in the end chooses, according to her own will (and without constraints), which one she wants to escape with — “the man of the people” himself (Galvão, 1931b; Figure 10), from which the newspaper takes its name. Kabelluda rejects “the sergeant” and “the politician in the top hat”, which also demonstrates her rebelliousness and her criticism of the bourgeois ideals of marriage, demonstrating that these figures, even if they had social prestige in the eyes of society, were of little interest to her. In graphical terms, the light and fun strokes are maintained, humorously contrasting the playful scenarios — clouds and stars — with the revolutionary and bold female protagonist.



Figure 10. “Kabelluda flirts with the sergeant. The card-carrying politician appears, phoning. Kabelluda thinks he’s a páu. And runs off with the Man of the People [Homem do Povo]”

Source. From “Malakabeça, Fanika e Kabelluda” [Illustration], by Patrícia Galvão, April 9, 1931b, *O Homem do Povo*, 7, p. 6. Available in the digital collection of the National Library. (<http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/720623/42>)

If we compare it to the comic “O Divórcio” (The Divorce), analyzed earlier herein, there is a significant change in the way this character is seen in the face of her own sexuality. The woman is not portrayed from a conservative and sexist morality. Kabelluda owes no explanations to the men she abandons and is not judged by the narrative, as in the case of “Madame Cornelio Carneiro”. In Pagu’s other strips, the gender dimensions are equally present: she addresses the theme of unrecognized motherhood (and

the public repudiation generated by it), female rivalry and the reproduction of sexism by women themselves, as well as the issue of rebellion and political subversion when driven by a woman.

6. WOMEN WHO ILLUSTRATE, WHO MAKE PEOPLE LAUGH, WHO DO POLITICS

In the first three decades of the 20th century Brazil went through intense political transformations, ranging from the consecration to the withering away of the so-called “First Republic”. This is the common context of these different groups of sources that we have mentioned so far, which demonstrate, in a way, how the perspectives of changes in the relations between men and women were also part of this scenario of quarrels and tensions. In this context, observing the plurality of representations present in women’s graphic production, in particular, allows us to consider how greatly these initiatives, among other things, sought to break with the current sexist conceptions. Thus, what is evident in all their works, be they comics, cartoons, or caricatures, is the yearning (and daring) of women who assume the voice of narration about themselves, placing themselves as women producers and women who communicated to other women.

Whether to give visibility to their compatriots in the salons, to criticize and laugh at anti-feminist men or to make the hypocrisies and elitism of bourgeois society abundantly clear, what they all have in common is the gesture of taking away the authority of men to make discourses about them, about their rights and about their behaviors. It is always worth remembering that this masculine authority was enshrined in patriarchal laws still in force at that time — such as the Civil Code and the Constitution itself, which, for example, did not provide for the vote of women.

In the creations of Rian, FBPF and Pagu, there are also changes in the patterns of the current graphic humor (generally, as we have seen, of sexist and/or anti-feminist content). This time it is men who are the targets of laughter and mockery — not because they are men, but because they are irrelevant and old-fashioned for the purposes of the female characters. There is also the presence of female laughter, portrayed as a natural gesture of women, and not some kind of moral innuendo about their own behaviors. As Cintia Lima Crescêncio (2016) highlighted, we can draw attention to the difference in the humorous approach of feminist bias, which starts from assumptions and themes distinct from those of hegemonic and antifeminist humor. The author even demonstrates that, between the activists of the 1970s and 1980s, the theme of feminism itself was uncommon in her productions (Crescêncio, 2017, p. 88), which is symptomatic, because it is at odds with the mass antifeminist humor that usually did not miss any chance to make jokes about the social movement and its representatives. The works of women that we analyzed earlier, on the contrary, feature figures permeated by the desire for self-determination — which is, after all, a pillar of feminism, even if some of these illustrations were not produced with this explicit bias.

Thus, briefly observing the trajectory of comics and graphic humor from a perspective that privileges *gender* as a category of analysis shows us that, despite the scenario of

disputes, the feminist perspective of valuing the subjectivity of women is imposed from a very early age in the productions they made and/or disseminate. In this sense, it is not a question of reaffirming an essentialist point of view about women artists and their works. The question posed is that Rian, the columnists of FBPF and Patrícia Galvão evidenced, through different forms and approaches, that the graphic medium could also be a means for expressing counterpoints and criticisms to the sexist trends of female representation. Female characters did not always have to be the butt of the joke “for being women” or for “behaving like women”. They could be the protagonists of the stories; they could laugh at the other figures on the scene; they could deal with political matters — all without going through the cynical moral judgment of ironic humor or grotesque traits they aimed to ridicule. In this sense, they are innovative works from the point of view of gender.

The relationship between women, politics, and visual representations by comics is not a connection that is restricted to the past. On the contrary, the subversion expressed in the illustrations of the early 20th century is still reflected in the most current works that deal with the same themes. An example of this is the graphic novel *Bertha Lutz e a Carta da ONU* (Bertha Lutz and the UN Charter; Amma & Kalil, 2021), published by Veneta in 2021.

The comic tells the story of Bertha Lutz’s stint as a representative of the 1945 “San Francisco Conference”, where the United Nations Charter was drafted, which aimed to create a postwar global pact of peace and international cooperation. In this important episode of international politics, the Brazilian feminist played a central role in incorporating gender equality into the official document. According to the authors of the comic, Amma and Angélica Kalil, the account very faithfully follows the *Reminiscências da Confederação de São Francisco* (Reminiscences of the Confederation of San Francisco) that Bertha had written in the 1970s, and the project ensured that “the narrative would remain in Bertha’s hands, she herself would be in control” (Amma & Kalil, 2021, p. 120).

The challenge of bringing the feminist perspective to the representations remains perennial, linking the past and the present, because women with the political importance of Bertha Lutz remain unknown to the general public. Contemporary productions such as *Bertha Lutz e a Carta da ONU* (Amma & Kalil, 2021, p. 120) therefore continue the exercise of women artists and writers to re-signify their own images, especially when it comes to the world of politics. After all, the pejorative stereotypes of women in politics and feminists are numerous, still marked by misogynistic images and associations that, until now, have stood the test of time.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Studying women in comics and graphic humor, whether as authors or as representations, is not just a gesture of recognition. Incorporating them into the analyses is a fundamental step in understanding more fully the whole universe of these visual expressions: after all, women have always appeared in the narratives and have always been part of the societies in which those representations were created. Highlighting the

feature of gender relations is a theoretical option not to make invisible the extent to which those power conflicts permeate the different groups that produce and consume material culture at different times. One purpose of this brief look at the Brazilian case was to go beyond the historical retrospect of women cartoonists of the early 20th century. Through the contrast with the hegemonic sexist productions, we were interested in highlighting how gender issues and female self-image are transformed in the works idealized by Nair de Teffé, by the FBPF militants who worked on the column “Feminismo” and by Patrícia Galvão, Pagu.

Despite the persistent sexism, by the beginning of the 20th century there were differentiated and protesting representations produced by women. In their features, we see new ways of portraying characters in the comics, understanding these figures as subjects of their own history and their own wills, without becoming targets of ridicule. These women laugh at men, but they also laugh at themselves. They demonstrate, through images, the importance of continuously building their place in politics and the public sphere and of defending their ideals with the widest range of strategies. Although their works may have fallen into oblivion or marginality, they made contributions to graphic humor itself, since their perspectives on female representation put stress on the flow of ideas, images, and opinions current in the press. With this, they began to occupy spaces historically denied to them, leading the public discussion on political issues, behaviors, and the female condition. As summarized by Carolina Ito Messias (2018) at the conclusion of her master’s degree:

the world of comic books has always featured talented women, since the early days of the printed press. Bringing women’s production to light means recognizing the agency of women as creators and enriching the public debate with other narratives and looks at reality, other ways of approaching (and, above all, questioning) what it is to be a woman. (p. 99)

Translation: Traversões, Serviços Linguísticos, Lda.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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A WOMB WITH A (POLITICAL) VIEW: RECLAIMING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN SPANISH FEMINIST CARTOONS

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ABSTRACT

Drawing attention to the ways in which art activism can be mobilized “with the objective of achieving social and or political change” (Serafini, 2018, p. 3), in this article, I attend especially to the image of the womb as a powerful visual metaphor for political intervention. Analyzing the transformative potential of an embodied medium such as political cartoons, the present article focuses on Wombastic, a Tumblr-based initiative organized by the Spanish collective Autoras de Cómic in response to the restrictive abortion bill that the Spanish right-wing Partido Popular approved in the Council of Ministers on December 20, 2013. While right-wing legislators have turned women’s bodies into battlefields in their attempt to reinstate heteropatriarchal gender norms, feminist graphic interventions reclaim the body as a site of resistance to disrupt neoconservative propaganda. Studying the sociopolitical context in which it was launched, this article underlines the connection between the “repoliticization of Spanish social life” (Herrero, 2019, p. 127), and the resurgence of powerful feminist activism, centering on reproductive rights. Steeped in the post 11M social climate, this study reveals the discursive power of political cartoons at a time of renewed politicization of the body, increased social mobilizations, and powerful feminist activism. Socially engaged comics and cartoons such as the ones uploaded to Wombastic display feminist agency, reclaiming women’s creativity and ownership of their own sexuality and reproductive choices.

KEYWORDS

reproductive rights, Spain, feminist activism, graphic narratives

UM ÚTERO COM VISÃO (POLÍTICA): A REIVINDICAÇÃO DOS DIREITOS REPRODUTIVOS NOS CARTOONS FEMINISTAS ESPANHÓIS

RESUMO

Neste artigo, destaco o uso da imagem do útero como uma metáfora visual poderosa no ativismo artístico, chamando a atenção para as formas como este pode ser mobilizado “com o objetivo de alcançar uma mudança social e/ou política” (Serafini, 2018, p. 3). Este artigo, concentra-se no potencial transformador dos cartoons políticos, com ênfase na iniciativa Wombastic. Esta iniciativa foi criada no Tumblr pelo coletivo espanhol Autoras de Cómic, com o objetivo de contestar um projeto de lei restritivo sobre o aborto aprovado pelo Partido Popular espanhol, a 20 de dezembro de 2013. Enquanto os legisladores de direita tentaram impor normas de género heteropatriarcais usando os corpos das mulheres como campo de batalha, as intervenções gráficas feministas recuperaram o corpo como um local de resistência para desafiar a propaganda neoconservadora. Estudando o contexto sociopolítico em que foi lançado, este artigo sublinha a ligação entre a “repoliticização da vida social espanhola” (Herrero, 2019, p. 127) e o ressurgimento de um poderoso ativismo feminista, centrado nos direitos reprodutivos.

Mergulhado no clima social pós-11M, este estudo revela o poder discursivo dos cartoons políticos num momento de renovada politização do corpo, aumento das mobilizações sociais e poderoso ativismo feminista. A banda desenhada e os cartoons socialmente empenhados, como os que foram carregados no Wombastic, revelam uma agência feminista que reclama a criatividade das mulheres e a propriedade da sua própria sexualidade e escolhas reprodutivas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

direitos reprodutivos, Espanha, ativismo feminista, narrativas gráficas

Art is one of the domains in which, in recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the need for re-politicizing life — Marina Garcés, *Un Mundo Común*, p. 68

It's a visual world, and people respond to visuals. — Joe Sacco, *But I Like It*, p. 107

Feminism is a collective adventure for women, men, and everyone else, a revolution well underway. A worldview. A choice. — Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, p. 137

1. THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL COMICS

In Spain, the synergy of the emergence of socially engaged graphic narratives, known as “comic social” (Gallardo & Roca, 2009), the rise of collective forms of physical and virtual social engagement during the 15M Indignados protests, and the irruption of feminist activism have created a fertile ground for new forms of activism. The publication of Paco Roca’s (2007) *Arrugas* (Wrinkles), Miguel Gallardo’s *María y Yo* (Mary and I; 2007), and Cristina Durán and Miguel Ángel Giner Bou’s (2009) *Una Posibilidad Entre Mil* (One Chance in a Thousand) demonstrated that the sequential art could be a powerful vehicle to discuss sensitive subjects such as disability, aging, and mental deterioration, and opened the way for innovative visual-verbal narratives and illustrations that mobilize the embodied nature of the ninth art to draw attention to neglected social problems. In a politically engaged vein, they created new kinds of graphic narratives that give visibility to traditionally silenced subjects and minorities that do not fit the ableist and productivist mold promoted by neoliberal biopolitical regimes. At a time characterized by “a dizzying re-politicization of Spanish social life” (Herrero, 2019, p. 127), increased social mobilizations, powerful feminist activism, and a vibrant graphic and illustration sector, the gendered aspect of social and political struggles was reflected in sequential as well as single-panel illustrations. From daily newspapers to satirical magazines to online

publications, the world of graphic narratives and political cartoons has enjoyed renewed vibrancy, becoming a valuable tool for activism.

As such, it has heralded new forms of social interventions that reflect the spirit of grassroots organizations, whose origin can be traced to the 15M Indignados movements that transformed the Spanish political and social landscape¹. While growing social mobilizations advocated for communal forms of activism, configuring an “ecosystem of the commons”, as Palmar Álvarez Blanco (2021, p. 31) terms it, women graphic illustrators were quick to respond to right-wing attempts to curtail hard-earned reproductive rights. When, in December 2013, the leading conservative Spanish party, Partido Popular (PP), crowned its unrelenting efforts to curtail gender equality by passing the most restrictive abortion bill in Spanish democratic history, the Spanish collective Artistas de Cómic launched “Wombastic, imágenes por la libertad de expresión” (Wombastic, images for freedom of expression), a Tumblr-based initiative that called for the submission of illustrations and graphic strips to fight back. Graphic artists demonstrated the power of an “embodied” narrative form like comics and graphic humor (Szép, 2020, p. 2) by organizing to defend women’s rights, sanctioned by the 2010 organic law decriminalizing abortion². In doing so, they joined hands with numerous feminist organizations whose public protests shook the country³. Mirroring the climate of the intense social mobilizations known as the Indignados or 15M movement, which changed the Spanish social and political landscape in 2011, feminist collectives combined to defend hard-earned reproductive rights.

Focusing on the visual motifs, iconographies, and visual metaphors (El Refaie, 2019) employed in the cartoons and strips uploaded to Wombastic, I propose to analyze how art activism can be mobilized “with the objective of achieving social and or political change” (Serafini, 2018, p. 3). In doing so, I place this initiative within a discursive context that posits a renewed politicization of the body (Garcés, 2013) as an antipatriarchal and anticapitalistic alternative to neoconservative attacks on women’s bodies. In my bi-political analysis, I provide a brief genealogy of feminist graphic humor and art activism in the fight for reproductive rights, paying particular attention to the iconography of the womb as a site of political intervention in a country in which women’s relationship with reproduction continues to be fraught with difficulties.

Recognized as an important artistic intervention and included in the Museo Reina Sofía’s recent exposition “¡Mujercitas de Todo el Mundo, Uníos! Autoras de Cómic Adulto (1967-1993)” (Little Women Around the World, Unite! Adult Comic Book Authors[1967-1993])⁴, Wombastic has been analyzed as a response to a form of State-sanctioned

¹ On the impact of the 15M movement on Spanish society, see Pereira-Zazo and Torres (2019).

² Titled “Organic Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy”, it framed contraception and abortion in terms of human rights and women’s dignity. As the text of the law indicates, it was a step towards legislation that would be in line with other European states in that it would no longer consider abortion a crime subject to the penal code (Ley Orgánica 2/2010, 2010).

³ On the chronology of the proposed abortion bill, see “Cronología del Antiproyecto de Ley del Aborto” (Chronology of the Anti-Abortion Bill; 2014), published in the right-wing newspaper ABC.

⁴ Several illustrations uploaded to Wombastic were included in this exposition, from January 24 to June 9, 2023. For further information on the exposition, see Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (n.d.).

gender-based violence. In her seminal article “*Wombastic, la Batalla Gráfica por la Reapropiación del Cuerpo Femenino Frente a la Amenaza de Gallardón*” (Wombastic, the Graphic Battle for the Reappropriation of the Female Body in the Face of the Threat of Gallardón), María Márquez López (2018) provides a detailed study of the abortion bill’s discursive qualities as well as an in-depth reading of three important images that “highlight the keys to the infringement of rights sought by former minister Gallardón” (p. 278). Instead, I place *Wombastic* within a genealogy of feminist artistic interventions as well as social movements originating in the late Franco period — when illustrators such as Núria Pompeia, Montse Clavé, and Elsa Plaza, among others, created posters, illustrations, and visual narratives in support of women’s reproductive rights. Aware of the ways in which graphic humor has proved to be an influential ally in political struggles⁵, I draw attention to the socio-cultural context in which a collective initiative such as *Wombastic* emerged, underlining the visual aspects of a corpus of images that mobilizes the body as a site of political activism while exposing the paradoxical rhetoric of Spanish former Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz Gallardón. In doing so, I explore the ways in which cyberactivism and activism successfully join hands in fighting back against right-wing legislators’ attempts to turn women’s bodies into battlefields in order to reinstate heteropatriarchal gender norms.

2. RECLAIMING A FEMINIST GENEALOGY IN COMICS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Inspired by the French Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée Contre le Sexism, the collective Autoras de Cómic was created to support gender equality in a predominantly male medium, to support women illustrators, and to recover a forgotten feminist lineage⁶. In line with their effort to foster a more equitable space in the publication industry and to fight structural sexism that marginalized and invisibilized women artists, they promoted initiatives to bring to light the rich genealogy of Spanish illustrators. Their feminist intervention revitalized a tradition dating back to the 1970s and 80s, when “the naked female body acquires strong political meanings and comes to symbolize abstract ideas such as democracy and freedom” (Garbayo Maeztu, 2016, p. 13). In an attempt to subvert the androcentric gaze that characterized graphic narratives and feminist political cartoons of the Transition period, feminist artists and illustrators, such as Núria Pompeia, Montse Clavé, Elsa Plaza, and Marika Vila, among others, problematized the corporeal aspect of the comic medium, in which the body was held prisoner to the male gaze. Fighting for women’s empowerment, they tried to break free of the prevailing ways of depicting women as objects of male desire while attempting to develop new pictorial languages that could

⁵ While considerable attention has been paid to political cartoons and graphic novels centering on the 11M protests: Torres (2013), Catalá-Carrasco (2017), Dapena (2015), among others, feminist humor deserves further investigation.

⁶ To support women graphic artists, “this collective’s main aim is to fight together to make the comics market an egalitarian space, in which women authors are recognized for their work and merits without mention of their gender or supposed ‘sensitivity’” (Sobre el Colectivo AUTORAS DE CÓMIC, n.d.). The author wishes to thank Joseph Grossi for his editorial assistance with this article.

put an end to what comics illustrator and theorist Marika Vila (2021) has termed “el cuerpo okupado” (the occupied body). Freeing the female body from the effects of a male symbolic order, several illustrators attempted to display women’s agency while exposing the need for key reproductive rights.

In their political cartoons and illustrations, which appeared in political posters, underground and feminist magazines (such as *Butifarra*, *Vindicación Feminista*, and *Dones en Lluita*), and political publications such as *Triunfo*, the Catalan illustrator Núria Pompeia carried out an intense campaign to support much-needed social rights for women, who, under Franco’s legislation, were not only forbidden from accessing contraception, but were kept under male tutelage till the age of 25 if unmarried or under marital control if they were wedded. With her impactful though seemingly simple style, Pompeia spotlighted the adverse side effects of the Francoist rhetoric that chained women to reproduction. In her books, in particular in *9 Maternasis* (1967), *Y Fueron Felices Comiendo Perdices...* (And They Were Happy Eating Partridges...; 1970), and *Mujercitas* (Little Women; 1977) as well as in her illustrations accompanying Eugeni Castell’s medical book *El Derecho a la Contracepción* (The Right to Contraception; 1978), she used simple black and white lines to display the need for sexual education and legalized contraception. In the many cartoons interspersed throughout the book, she sought to expose the effects of unplanned pregnancies on middle-class women. Through quickly drafted outlines, the main character, a young, unremarkable woman, reveals her surprise and incredulity at the proliferation of newborn children surrounding her. In a visual composition reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s lilliputians, the woman is immobilized by the newborns, who continue to erupt out of her body. Throughout this book, as well as in political posters and illustrations, Pompeia never ceased to expose women’s contentious relationship with mandatory reproduction. As a mother of five, she exposed the essentialistic views that held women hostage to domesticity and motherhood, thus supporting the notion that reproduction needed to be chosen freely, a theme that made frequent headlines in the years leading up to Spanish democracy.

While the road to the decriminalization of contraception and abortion was a long and complicated one in Spain, as right-wing and religious organizations such as Opus Dei exercised pressure to limit women’s self-determination in reproductive matters, Gallardón’s attempt to turn back the clock on abortion rights was met with significant resistance and massive mobilizations. Among them, Wombastic was intended as a “graphic platform and poster support for the next manifestations and mobilizations against a retrograde abortion law” (“¿Qué Es Wombastic?”, 2014, para. 2). Launched in support of initiatives aiming to defend the 2010 abortion law against conservative attacks, this kind of art protest reflects the social conditions of Spanish women at a time of increased precarization. As founders Susanna Martín and Clara Soriano emphasize: “Wombastic arises at a time in which we, like many people, especially women, are living (badly), in

which financial support, salaries and even fundamental rights such as the right to decide upon our own bodies are being scaled down” (Gràffica, 2014, para. 3). A profound economic crisis had plunged the country into a severe recession, and the effects of the austerity measures implemented since 2010 resulted in a deeply antimaternal climate. Specifically, by December 2013, Spanish society had already witnessed overall impoverishment, a high unemployment rate among both men and women, a lack of stable employment prospects, cuts to the welfare state, a paucity of state-funded daycare centers, the overall sense of precarization of life expectancy, and the unrelenting erosion of hard-earned rights. Amidst a series of misogynistic reforms that affected women more severely than men, the proverbial last straw was the curtailing of women’s access to the voluntary interruption of pregnancy.

3. MOBILIZING FEMINIST ICONOGRAPHY

Graphic artists and illustrators enthusiastically responded to the call for submissions, exploiting the expressive affordances of illustrations — with their mix of visual-verbal elements — to provide a critical intervention in support of online and in-person mobilizations. Their feminist political illustrations rely on specific iconographic choices that hark back to a feminist tradition that is chromatically characterized by the use of purple, challenging the paternalistic language of the anti-abortion bill. In order to subvert the paternalistic rhetoric and pseudo-logic of the Bill of Organic Law for the Protection of the Life of the Conceived and the Rights of the Pregnant Woman (Ministerio de Justicia, 2013), many of the images articulate a counterdiscourse to dismantle state intervention in reproductive matters (Mayans & Vacas, 2018, pp. 22–39). As a result, most images reflect “broader debates within feminist literatures regarding ‘choice’, agency, and autonomy over one’s body” (Jackson & Valentine, 2017, p. 222). Confronting the sense of entrapment elicited by the proposed State intervention in women’s reproductive health and rights, two of the most common responses oscillate between an exposition of the violence of State-mandated reproduction and an empowered reclaiming of one’s own body. While the former is visually signified by the use of chains, handcuffs, and restraining devices, the latter articulates a counterdiscourse by turning female anatomy into a canvas onto which the right to self-determination finds verbal expression.

Due to the lack of sequentiality in single-panel illustrations, the economy of signification is particularly stringent. Since “a picture has to say it all” (Barbieri, 1991/2013, p. 22), allusions to Gallardón and his bill of law are often present using his face, which is frequently satirized or caricatured. Creating impactful images that speak directly to the audience, these visual compositions provide a critical commentary on the political situation in Spain and the possible consequences of the proposed legislative changes. As is to be expected, the over 250 images mix a variety of recognizable feminist signs, such as the clenched fist enclosed in the women’s symbol as a reference to feminist struggles for gender equality and empowerment. The image of the womb, as we will see in this article,

is also featured in many of the illustrations, together with religious iconography, revisited in humorous and radical tones.

Considering the fact that, as Daniele Barbieri (1991/2013) indicates, unlike comics, a single illustration “should give as much commentary information as possible” (p. 22), many illustrators employ stylized images and basic colors. While others include more elaborate pictorial images, some tend to be very direct in their use of visual references with short, direct punchlines that reiterate women’s rights to choose. “I decide” is thus displayed as a commentary on a plethora of images in which female anatomy is reinterpreted in creative ways. Relying on “the essentially embodied nature of both drawing and reading comics” (Szép, 2020, p. 2) and illustrations, many contributors reclaim and reshape images of the uterus.

In keeping with the spirit of social justice that fueled the creation of the association⁷, a growing number of people joyfully shared their creativity in an attempt to block a draft law that, if passed, would have turned the clock back 30 years on reproductive rights. Their initiative made an impact. Because the fight for self-determination in reproductive matters, as well as ownership of women’s bodies, had been key issues of Spanish feminist movements since the 1970s, an overwhelmingly large segment of the democratic society firmly rejected the attempts to increase State control in reproductive matters.

In their illustrations, the artists recall an iconography steeped in philosophical and feminist traditions. In dialogue with the contemporary theorization of the political nature of the body, they foreground the power of images as a vehicle for political action. In this kind of collective mobilization, authorship of the posters becomes secondary to a collaborative initiative that allows all contributions to be freely downloaded, shared, printed, and circulated in the physical and virtual squares in Spain and around the world. Against the neoliberal repressive policies that over the years have extended from the productive to the reproductive spheres of society, Wombastic urges “an emotional choreography”, that is, “the construction of an emotional narration to sustain their gathering in the public space” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 12), thus encouraging forms of art activism aimed at fighting against restrictive government intervention in reproductive matters.

4. RECLAIMING A WOMB OF ONE’S OWN

Rooted in the spirit of collective activism, Wombastic reflected the Butlerian notion that “for politics to take place, the body must appear” (Butler, 2011, para. 5) and thus participated in a series of feminist initiatives that aimed to support offline protests in Spanish streets and squares. In particular, *El Tren de la Libertad*, with its slogan “I decide”, inspired many posters created for Wombastic. Organized by the feminist collective

⁷ As one of the founders, Carla Berrocal, observed, “it began especially as an initiative of social justice. We live in a society in which we have the false concept that ‘culture’ is democratic and egalitarian, and that is a lie. In the world of comics, there is still a lot to be done, starting with recovering the work of the authors who have lived the longest” (Vaquero, 2015, para. 2).

Les Comadres in the northern town of Gijón, it created a bridge between seasoned and young activists by bringing thousands of women and men from all corners of Spain to the doors of the Congress of Deputies in Madrid on February 1, 2014, to protest the new anti-abortion bill⁸.

Problematizing the notion according to which *tota mulier in utero* (woman is a womb), Wombastic signals an attempt to reclaim the womb as a site of political action against misogyny and patriarchy. As a result, it represents female anatomy in such a way as to send clear messages and mobilize citizens in protests. The posters, uploaded to the online platform within days of the campaign's launch, draw attention to the corporality of women's bodies in an attempt to reclaim ownership of the uterus as a space of feminist expression. In doing so, they confront a long misogynistic tradition that assigns a fundamental role in women's existence to this organ.

In intertextual dialogue with a *corpus* of philosophical, medical, and psychoanalytic writings that interpret the uterus as a key determinant of women's physical and mental health, the contributors to Wombastic reshape its meaning in myriad forms. While some artists reinterpret medical representations, thus subverting the scientific gaze, others adhere to authoritative representations of women's inner organs only to deploy them against patriarchal norms. Through various visual metaphors, numerous artists challenge the idea that anatomy is a destiny predicated upon subordination to repressive State-mandated reproductive laws. Inspired by Femen's protests, some posters envision women's bodies as canvases onto which their authors can project their own subject position, thus challenging the male gaze that objectifies them and asserting their rights to self-determination and self-representation.

In line with the title of the Tumblr project, many contributors thus focus on the womb in an attempt to reconceptualize women's anatomy. Working within a predominantly binary conception of gender differentiation, the images uploaded to this platform enter into dialogue with one another and reflect a variety of feminist stances regarding the female body. As will become evident through a close reading of some of these illustrations, they turn to bright colors, oscillating between a joyful reappropriation of women's sexuality and a denunciation of the impending dangers of a repressive bill of law. As María Márquez López (2018) underlines, "the government aimed to deprive gestating women of their voices so that they would depend exclusively on medical tutelage" (p. 279). Against the wording of the new anti-abortion bill, which grants rights to the unborn at the expense of the gestating woman, many artists decry Gallardón's attempt to degrade women to the role of mere incubators, whose task is to "produce" children for the nation, as it had been under the Franco dictatorship when control over women's sexuality was particularly stringent. Maite Garbayo Maeztu (2016) notes, "the regime knows that controlling women's bodies and sexuality is the necessary mechanism to

⁸ Les Comadres comprises a generation of political activists that had taken to the streets as far back as the 1970s.

ensure that women continue with their role as biological and symbolic reproducers of the nation” (p. 11). Given the long shadows of the Francoist regime, reproduction has been a vexing issue in Spain, one that feminists considered particularly problematic given that regime’s identification of women with motherhood.

In response to a long and painful history of control over women’s bodies, Wombastic’s images challenge deep-rooted ideas concerning women’s own corporeal realities, rejecting the notion that the female body should be considered a potentially reproductive one. In order to convey this message, they turn to various visual metaphors that “are more directly inspired by our physical experience” (El Refaie, 2019, p. 7). The images stored on its website often employ a chromatic palette of pink and purple to reveal tensions with a long history of thought for which “the specificities of the female body, its particular nature and bodily cycles—menstruation, pregnancy, maternity, lactation, etc. — are (...) regarded as a limitation on women’s access to the rights and privileges patriarchal culture accord to men” (Grosz, 1994, p. 15). Reflecting the suspicion with which egalitarian feminists responded to French and Italian feminism of difference, many artists involved in this initiative mobilize ideas that aim to dispel the outdated equation of femininity with maternity.

As in the 1970s and 80s protests, several artists insist that reproduction should be a freely chosen option for women, not an imposition antithetical to women’s life goals. As in the famous distinction made popular by Adrienne Rich between motherhood and mothering, any form of mothering — according to Spanish activists — should be the result of a personal decision, not of a State-sanctioned obligation. Moreover, in opposition to Simone de Beauvoir’s notion that motherhood is a castrating role antithetical to any kind of emancipatory discourse, artists like Paulapé (2014) support a pro-choice message with an image that shows a pregnant woman saying, “being a mother is a right, not an obligation”. Allusions to de Beauvoir’s antimaternal stance appear in what looks like a book cover featuring the image of a fetus inside a black bubble linked by a chain to a handcuff, which stands beside the silhouette of a faceless gestating woman (Figure 1). Surmounted by the quote, “freedom starts in the uterus”, attributed to the French thinker, it points to the need to make reproduction a choice, an idea signified by the open handcuff.



Figure 1. *La Libertad empieza por el vientre*

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Manada de Lobxs, 2014, March 2. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/78322849138/manada-de-lobxs>)

In opposition to a regime in which women are deprived of a way out of the imperative to reproduce, the image, signed by Manada de Lobxs, rejects a punitive, disciplinary, and alienating relationship with reproduction.

Given the influence of the Catholic Church on Gallardón's attempts to change the abortion law, references to religious imagery are intertwined with representations of women's reproductive organs in several feminist posters. As is to be expected, in some of them, the crucifix, rosary beads, and other religious symbols are deployed to challenge Church dogmas towards sexuality and reproduction. Among the over 250 images uploaded to the platform, the well-known slogan "get your rosary out of our ovaries" accompanies several images that utilize a string of beads to configure stylized drawings of women's reproductive apparatus⁹.

Reclaiming the uterus as a space of her own, Sara Catalina turns the womb into a flowery creation that playfully asserts its own rights (Figure 2). In a vibrantly colored pencil crayon illustration, floral imagery is deployed to assert women's rights over their own reproductive organs. Making the uterus bloom, the artist visually underscores

⁹ The images selected here include those in which the womb acquires particular prominence and those that offer the most poignant critique of the anti-abortion bill.

women's control of their own fertility. In opposition to the biblical and medieval trope of the *hortus conclusus*, which enclosed female sexuality within a repressive male social order, Catalina's image, titled "Mi Jardín" (My Garden), mobilizes fecundity and reproduction as feminist attributes.

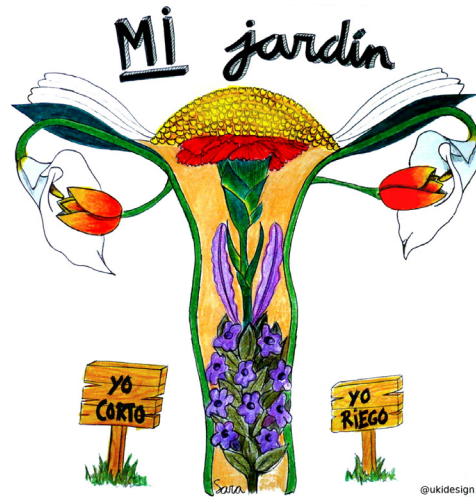


Figure 2. *Mi jardín*

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Sara Catalina, 2014, February 11. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/76315543982/sara-catalina>)

The joyful colors of the floral composition, comprising calas, tulips, carnations, and violets, support the notion that female anatomy does not sentence women to a life of drudgery. At the same time, resorting to vivid shades of yellow, red, and purple recalls the colors of the Republican flag, thus building an ideological bridge with the short-lived left-wing progressive government of 1931–1936 that the Francoist troops had overturned during the Civil War. Whereas during the Second Republic, women achieved unprecedented legal rights, including the right to vote, divorce, and have an abortion, Francoism placed women under male jurisdiction, sanctioning motherhood as women's natural destiny in the shadow of repressive discourses darkened by the most reactionary parts of the Catholic hierarchy¹⁰. The image is accompanied by two small wooden signs asserting women's right to either prune their own gardens or provide them with necessary nutrients: reading "I cut" and "I water", the signs summarize women's autonomy in reproductive matters. The flowery composition overturns the notion that anatomy is a cruel destiny subject to patriarchal laws.

Undoing the misogynistic undertones of the "queen bee syndrome", which symbolizes women's lack of empathy in professional settings, Alba Blanco's (2014) vignette is titled "The Importance of Being a Queen Bee" (Figure 3).

¹⁰ On the Francoist rhetoric on reproduction, see Morcillo (2000) and Roca i Girona (1996). Among the extensive bibliography on feminist struggles in the 1970s, see in particular Moreno (1977), Folguera (2007), and Nash (2007). Monserrat Roig's (1978) reflections on women's relation to sexuality and reproduction, included in E. Castells' *El Derecho a la Contracepción* (The Right to Contraception), with illustrations by Núria Pompeia, continue to be of key importance to understanding the arduous struggle to achieve reproductive rights in post-Franco Spain.

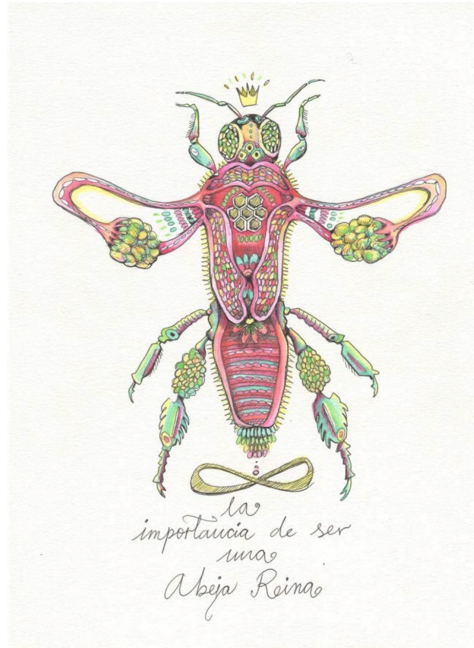


Figure 3. *La importancia de ser una abeja reina*

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Alba Blanco, 2014, February 12. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/76411132274/alba-blanco>)

The vignette features a pastel pink and green crayon pencil drawing of a queen bee whose wings are shaped in the form of ovaries, while the lower body of the insect clearly resembles the female reproductive organs. The metamorphosis of women's anatomy plays on the function of this insect, whose sole role in the hive is reproduction. The drawing, merging the social and biological functions attributed to this creature, foregrounds women's creativity by reappropriating a figure whose attributes seem antithetical to women's liberation. The metamorphosis of women's anatomy with shades of pink, light green, yellow, and aqua blue creates a sense of serenity more akin to Hallmark cards than radical feminist imagery. Conveyed by this harmony is the drawing's message that women will be their own queen bees and fly away from normative reproductive imperatives. Reconceptualized and reappropriated for a feminist cause, the "queen bee" trope aims to undo the insect's negative connotations while fighting against the Kafkaesque metamorphosis that Gallardón's anti-abortion bill seeks to impose upon women.

Drawing attention to the dire effects of Church dogma on women's existence, Virgulilla Ilustración (2014; Figure 4) configures a somber image that showcases the weight of religious doctrine in constricting women's lives.



Figure 4. Without title

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Virgulilla Ilustración, 2014, February 12. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/76466034834/virgulilla-ilustraci%C3%B3n>)

Presenting a woman who, much like a penitent during a Holy Week procession, drags a heavy crucifix shaped like a bloody uterus, the image evokes the Catholic teaching that all human beings have to bear their own crosses. In doing so, the poster shows how, in the hands of right-wing politicians, women's biology becomes the site of Church-mandated suffering. As the caption of the image points out, Gallardón's political views stigmatize women: "your ideas transform my body into a cross that I have to carry". It is against rhetoric that aims to subjugate women and make them hostages of the State and of misogynistic religious thinking that many of *Wombastic's* artists express their dissent.

Creative responses to the role of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the crusade against women's rights can be seen in several of the posters uploaded onto the platform in February, a month in which feminist protests were more intense. Among them, one of the most striking images shows a young, headless, naked female torso that has been hollowed out, as in a medical atlas (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Without title*

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Kali Motxo Amb Gel, 2014, February 15. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/76727373367/kali-motxo-amb-gel>)

The image makes the inside of the woman visible, recalling canonical texts of obstetrical science. Nonetheless, as if in a work of dystopian science fiction, the woman's womb is occupied by technology at the service of the Church. Rather than revealing a fetus or the inner organs, the image displays the uncanny scene of a bishop extending his hands over a complex control panel as if commanding a spaceship. With a devious grin, the high prelate intends to push a button with his right hand while clutching a joystick, a phallic symbol, with his left. Lacking a phallus himself (the image implies), the prelate derives pleasure merely from directing the woman's body to function according to his will. Alluding to the medical gaze that heralded the emergence of a new form of control over reproduction, the image stages the return of ecclesiastical power over women's bodies.

While the display of the female torso creates a link with the Femen protests that were being orchestrated in several Spanish churches at the time, the presence of a bishop with a mitre programming the functioning of a woman's uterus clearly acknowledges the regressive influence that the Church prelates were aiming to achieve. Disturbing and forceful, this

work, by a Catalan artist identified as Kali Motxo Amb Gel (2014), is accompanied by the clear, direct message, “get out of here, lizards”. Against the creeping power of the Church, with its will to dominate and shape women’s lives, imprisoning and condemning them to procreate against their will, several artists’ slogans, drawn onto women’s abdomens, convey counter-hegemonic messages against the appropriation of women’s generative power.

In the same vein, many artists superimposed images of women’s reproductive organs onto Gallardón’s face to draw attention to how the minister of Justice attempted to silence women. Mixing caricaturesque representations and parodic imagery, these powerful pictures “hit you, touch deep nerves” (Olías, 2014, para. 1), as graphic artist Susanna Martín points out¹¹. Displayed on the streets, shared over the internet, and pasted onto street lamps and city walls, they sent strong messages against an anachronistic legal reform that Spanish society had rejected. A large segment of the population had taken to the streets to demonstrate against waves of budget cuts that had left the Spanish middle class largely impoverished; such people were unwilling to cede further rights. Several posters, engaging that widespread sentiment, display clearly recognizable references to current events, especially the anti-life policies supported by the PP. In “Backstabbing in the PP”, the single-panel visual narratives demonstrate how xenophobia goes hand in hand with concrete attempts to eliminate women’s rights to self-determination in reproductive matters (Jesús AG, 2014). In fact, as Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Ziarek (2018) have argued, even in liberal democracies, xenophobic sentiments often accompany politics aiming to control women’s reproductive rights. The policies put in place by this right-wing Government amounted to “attempts to restrict women’s reproductive self-determination” that were concomitant with “the intensification of hostility towards immigrants and refugees” (Diprose & Ziarek, 2018, p. 1). The same rhetoric of protection employed in the anti-abortion bill is employed in the anti-immigrant bill, which invokes citizens’ safety in order to demonize immigration. Exposing the vacuity of Gallardón’s pro-life stance, the poster presents an imaginary dialogue between former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and his minister of Justice. This dialogue reveals the necropolitics of their right-wing Government in deciding which lives are worth saving and which are deemed dispensable. From their conversation, we learn that one abortion has been provoked by the institutional forces in charge of patrolling the border crossing in the city of Melilla, a Spanish territory in northern Africa where razor wire fences are installed to prevent people from gaining entrance to Europe (Jesús AG, 2014). A woman has lost her unborn child while trying to cross that border. Reflecting Mbembe’s (2019) theorization concerning the death practices stipulating “who may live and who must die”, the image exposes the false defense of human life inherent in Spain’s anti-immigration laws.

Extremely critical of the deceitful rhetoric of support for human life expressed in the anti-abortion bill are graphic artists Cristina Duran and Miguel Giner Bou (2014), known for their socially engaged comics. Authors of the graphic memoir *Una Posibilidad Entre Mil*,

¹¹ Interview with Susana Martín in Laura Olías (2014), “Ilustraciones que Abanderan la Lucha Contra la Reforma del Aborto” (Illustrations Leading the Fight Against Abortion Reform).

which narrates their daughter Laia's struggles to survive cerebral palsy, they know intimately the challenges of bringing up a child affected by a serious medical condition that requires constant attention and daily physical therapy in a country that has systematically cut funds for healthcare and disability. With their well-known style, made up of thick, almost geometrical lines, Cristina and Miguel deliver a powerful image with strong autobiographical overtones in which a child in a wheelchair wearing an oxygen mask is aided by a caregiving figure, who resembles Cristina herself. Whereas the graphic novel that chronicles Laia's first years of life leaves off when Laia is still a toddler — making progress in her journey towards regaining her mobility, diminished by the stroke she suffered hours after she was born — this image shows a much older child, and thus her wheelchair is much heavier (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Without title

Source. From *Wombastic*, by Cristina Durán/Giner Bou, 2014, February 1. (<https://wombastic.tumblr.com/post/75250204757/cristinaduranginerbou>)

The mother-daughter image is accompanied by a question that problematizes Gallardón's supposed defense of unborn life. The maternal figure, bent over in her attempt to push a heavy wheelchair, asks: “why so much concern for the unborn if then they abandon and despise the one who is already born?”. Given the cuts implemented by the PP Government to support care work to dependent and disabled people, cuts that left families to shoulder the burden of support, the claim to “protect” unborn life

appears rather incongruent and insincere. The party that claimed to champion the protection of the life of the unborn condemned its citizens to a life of misery. The right-wing Government's hypocritical stance on life, ruthlessly capitalist measures, and cuts to gender equality caused a wave of feminist responses that exposed the duplicity of Gallardón's conservative legislative proposal.

The duplicity of the PP Government concerning social policies also finds expression in other posters that condemn highly suspicious discourse in a country whose peculiar path to democracy and gender equality is characterized by a lack of State support in child-care policies. While the right decries the so-called "demographic winter", sociologists and demographers maintain that, much like Italy, this southern Mediterranean country has been "short on children and short on family policies" for a long time (Delgado et al., 2008, p. 1059). Paradoxically, instead of addressing structural obstacles, right-wing policies favored a return to traditional gender roles. Esther Vivas (2012) underlines, "the current solution to this crisis tries to bring women back home, resurrecting outdated family and gender roles. It constitutes a full-blown offensive against economic, sexual, and reproductive rights" (para. 12). Add to this the impact of the austerity measures implemented since 2010 in response to the economic crisis, and the result is a deeply antimaternal climate.

Blind to this social reality and amid an economic recession, Gallardón shamelessly stated that the new abortion bill would actually grant women the right to have children. "I think about women's fear of losing their employment", he declared with great paternalism as he claimed that his proposed legislation would safeguard women's rights, yet he forgot how much his own party had contributed to dismantling all the mechanisms that might prevent a company from firing a woman when she was pregnant (Gutiérrez Calvo & Morán Breña, 2012). This was the party that had shown no mercy towards single mothers and families who could not pay their mortgages and so were evicted, left without any legal or economic protection. In allusion to the ruthless eviction policies that left thousands of women and children homeless while allowing banks to expropriate the property of those who lost their jobs and could not pay their mortgages, well-known graphic artist Susanna Martín composed a visually striking poster. Famous for her social engagement and co-author with Isabel Franc of graphic novels such as *Alicia en un Mundo Real* (Alicia in a Real World; 2010) and *Sansamba* (2014), and coordinator of Wombastic, she drew a politically significant message. Against a dark gray background, the torso of a woman dressed in a white t-shirt is ready to participate in a boxing match and displays the slogan: "not even God will expropriate my uterus". In her exposure to the extraction policies enacted by Mariano Rajoy's Government, Martín, like other illustrators, shows an empowered female subject intent on defending her rights.

Many of Wombastic's pictures foreground messages that insist on the right to self-determination by asserting women's ownership of their own bodies. In doing so,

they mobilize images of the womb, the belly, and the vagina to show that women are unwilling to abdicate their corporeal sovereignty. Women's abdomens thus become the surfaces onto which the rejection of the new anti-abortion bill finds expression. Between January and September, when Gallardón resigned as minister of Justice, women's anatomy was mobilized in various forms, all of which were united in condemning reactionary politics. Thanks to Wombastic, the world of illustration and graphic narratives saw the womb become a powerful site of political activism in defense of women's rights, an embodied form of revolt, which successfully contributed to "aborting" Gallardón's attempts to restrict women's reproductive rights, as indicated in the last image uploaded to the Tumblr on September 13, 2014. As a constellation of powerful images, Wombastic successfully implements feminist humor to spur communal action. In doing so, this digital network stands in opposition to the institutional backlash orchestrated by the Spanish right wing and effectively challenges patriarchal structures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The afterlife of this collaborative enterprise, still available online, continues to attest to its significance. The inclusion of several of the illustrations uploaded to Wombastic in the context of the recent art exhibition "Mujercitas de Todo el Mundo, Uníos! Autoras de *Cómic* Adulto (1967–1993)" (Figure 7), held at the Biblioteca y Centro de Documentación of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid (February 24–June 9, 2023), further affirms the artistic, political and social value of this initiative. Although the museification of political protests might be perceived as problematic, placing these images side by side with work by key artists and illustrators such as Montse Clavé, Núria Pompeia, and Marika Vila, among others, inserts them into a genealogy of feminist creators, whose significance is being "rediscovered" by key Spanish cultural institutions. As the selection of illustrations exposed in the library indicates, women's bodies are resignified and mobilized following a feminist visual tradition that reflects women's struggles of the 1970s as well as the online and collective social movements of the 15M Indignados protests. From the digital domain to the public squares and thence to the walls of a progressive museum, this kind of collective feminist action proves the centrality of feminist creation in effecting social changes. In the end, feminist political cartoons open the doors to a new imaginary aiming "to be able to collectively create and transform our conditions of existence" (Garcés, 2013, p. 22). In creating a collectivity united in its attempt to preserve reproductive rights against State intervention, Wombastic activated the creative potential of political illustration, bridging the gap between academic feminism and popular culture in a virtual medium ripe with possibilities for street interventions.



Figure 7. Wombastic images included in “Mujercitas de Todo el Mundo, Uníos! Autoras de Cómico Adulto (1967–1993)”, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, July 9, 2023

Credits. Marina Bettaglio

The illustrations here studied establish a dialogue with several strands of feminist thinking that span from Simone de Beauvoir’s theorization to a more joyful and playful “vibrant” feminism, to use Ana Requena’s (2020) notion. As a result, many of the visual-verbal compositions suggest a ludic approach to sexual and reproductive health,

reclaiming pleasure. Foregrounding a multiplicity of empowered subjects who are unafraid of enjoying their sexuality, these feminist interventions attest to the effervescence of the Spanish comics scene and its potential for political intervention.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marina Bettaglio is a full professor in the Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies at the University of Victoria (Canada). She investigates issues of representation and self-representation in various media, centering on the discursive construction of maternal figures in contemporary Spain and Italy. Exploring how images of motherhood constitute powerful ideological tools that have shaped women's identity throughout history, her research has focused on how maternal narratives respond to patriarchal notions of proper maternal conduct and neoliberal self-branding in post-Franco Spain and Italy. Her recent publications include the special issue of the *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* coedited with Elizabeth Montes Garcés and María Elsy Cardona (2019), devoted to women-authored graphic novels, and several articles on feminist graphic narratives. Her current book-length project, under contract with Wilfred Laurier University Press, is titled *An Intimate Public for Mothers: Drawing (on) Maternal Experiences in Contemporary Spanish Graphic Narratives*. A special issue of the *Revista ALCESXXI* coedited with Olga Albarrán Caselles and titled *Maternidad, Reproducción Social y Cuidados en la Época Neoliberal: Descolonizando el Imaginario Patriarcal* (Motherhood, Social Reproduction and Care in the Neoliberal Era: Decolonising the Patriarchal Imaginary) is forthcoming.

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GRAPHIC NARRATIVE'S POTENTIAL FOR REPRESENTATION: NÓDOA NEGRA AND FEMALE PAIN

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ABSTRACT

Graphic narratives' success and popularity in the late decades make them powerful communication and expression media objects. Closely associated with popular and mass culture, entertainment and easy reading, it is interesting to realise their ability to address complex issues, such as the representation of pain in women, which is often culturally and scientifically neglected. Thus, the analysis of *Nódoa Negra* (Bruise; Lopes et al., 2018), a comic book volume curated by Dileydi Florez featuring graphic narratives by women around the theme of pain, is particularly relevant here. This article explores the potential of graphic narratives to represent female pain based on several narratives included in *Nódoa Negra*. The dual semantic code of text-image, typical of the graphic narrative language, allows for the multiplication of discursive resources, promoting a broader range of representations. By saying what cannot be shown, showing what cannot be said, and encouraging the construction of meanings in the interstitial space between text and image, the graphic narrative allows for greater detail and expressive depiction of pain in its abstraction and materialisation between the sayable and the unsayable. The theoretical-methodological framework adopted focuses on culture and communication studies, critical discourse studies and medical humanities.

KEYWORDS

graphic narrative as communication, graphic narrative as language, representation, gender issues, female pain

O POTENCIAL DE REPRESENTAÇÃO DA NARRATIVA GRÁFICA: NÓDOA NEGRA E A DOR NO FEMININO

RESUMO

O sucesso e a popularidade que as narrativas gráficas têm alcançado nestas últimas décadas fazem delas um poderoso objeto mediático de comunicação e expressão. Fortemente associadas à cultura popular e de massas, ao entretenimento e à facilidade de leitura, interessa perceber a sua aptidão para a abordagem de temas complexos, como a representação da dor no feminino, frequentemente negligenciada cultural e cientificamente. Nesse sentido, a análise de *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018), volume de banda desenhada coordenado por Dileydi Florez e que reúne narrativas gráficas criadas por mulheres em torno da temática da dor, mostra-se aqui particularmente relevante. Neste artigo, propomo-nos a explorar o potencial da narrativa gráfica para representar a dor no feminino, tomando como exemplo várias narrativas incluídas

em *Nódoa Negra*. O duplo código semântico texto-imagem, característico da linguagem das narrativas gráficas, permite a multiplicação de recursos discursivos, promovendo maior amplitude de representações. Ao dizer o que não pode ser mostrado, mostrar o que não pode ser dito, e promover a construção de significados no espaço intersticial entre texto e imagem, a narrativa gráfica permite um maior refinamento e expressividade da dor na sua abstração e concretização, entre o dizível e o indizível. O enquadramento teórico-metodológico adotado incide sobre os estudos de cultura e comunicação, os estudos críticos do discurso e as humanidades médicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

narrativa gráfica como comunicação, narrativa gráfica como linguagem, representação, questões de género, a dor no feminino

1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, the growing success of graphic narratives appears beyond debate, as Chute (2008), among many others, already highlighted over a decade ago. The abundance and diversity of titles available in the market, the introduction of collections by mainstream newspapers, the growing trend of adapting classic texts or even the emergence of transmedia processes, which take the universe of graphic narratives to the cinema or even to video games, for example, reinforce this perception.

This article focuses on exploring the communication potential of this medium, which encompasses both traditional comic strips, popularised mainly in printed newspapers, and graphic novels, often published in deluxe editions. In today's global media market, what is the reach and strength of this genre? Considering its basic features — the link to popular culture, the blend of visual and textual elements, its accessibility with a supposedly low literacy threshold, and its rapid and widespread circulation — how well-suited is the graphic narrative medium for tackling controversial issues of contemporary societies, like advocating human rights and combating inequality and prejudice?

The comic book anthology *Nódoa Negra* (Bruise; Lopes et al., 2018), curated by Dileydi Florez and published in 2018 by the Portuguese publisher Chili com Carne, is the basis for our reflection. It aims to explore the graphic narrative's potential to represent themes as difficult, complex and ambiguous (Williams, 2012, p. 21) as the experience of pain, specifically female pain.

After a brief overview of the volume under analysis, we explain the concept of graphic narrative as a communication and language form/strategy to explore its capacity for constructing narratives on complex and often conflicting topics. Among these topics, our particular focus lies on female pain, a subject that is frequently rendered invisible or even negated, both within cultural and medical contexts. These issues are illustrated in the last section, where we analyse a set of narratives in *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) that have female pain as their main theme, looking at how language (text and image) is used to represent the physical and emotional experience of pain.

By intersecting graphic narrative, representation, and female pain, we hope not only to contribute to a better understanding of the place and impact of graphic narratives in culture and communication studies but also to demonstrate their potential in the medical humanities, a multidisciplinary field that intersects art, literature, and medicine to improve healthcare practices (Bleakley, 2015).

2. NÓDOA NEGRA: BRIEF OVERVIEW

The initiative of *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) is credited to Dileydi Florez, who took on the challenge launched by the association Chili com Carne during their annual competition “Toma Lá 500 Paus e Faz uma BD!” (Take 500 Quid and Make a Comic) and coordinated the production of the work, winner of the 2017 edition, and published in 2018 by the publisher of the same name.

As described in the back-cover blurb, the anthology was driven by a “desire to explore the plasticity and different interpretations of pain as a theme” (Lopes et al., 2018), contemplating not only physical but also emotional pain. There were 11 artists (some renowned, some emerging) who accepted the challenge, as did the journalist and literary critic Sara Figueiredo Costa (2018), who authored the introductory text “Escala Sem Dó” (Scale With No C), the only one written in prose; at the time, all 12 authors were working in Portugal (Moura, 2019). All the stories are graphic narratives — more specifically, comic strips — and are all single-authored, which means that they are the outcome of individual projects by the respective creators, who take up the challenge of representing pain — a particularly complex and difficult experience to express, as explained below — through images and/or text, in a personal and/or fictional tone.

Nódoa Negra (Lopes et al., 2018), entirely authored by women, can be seen as a statement in response to the prevalent male authorship within the realm of comics and graphic narratives, a pattern that extends to Portugal. It is worth noting that the world of graphic narratives, especially commercial comics, is consistently linked to the male universe: both in creation, with a predominance of authors and illustrators, and in consumption, particularly among readers of different age groups. For example, in *Variantes: Uma Homenagem à BD Portuguesa* (Variations: A Tribute to Portuguese Comics), published in 2022, among the 35 authors honoured, only two are women.

Florez, the driving force behind this collaborative project, endorses this intention to claim a female space as she expresses her affinity for comics created by women and highlights the influence of authors such as Power Paola or Julie Doucet (Ribeiro, 2018). Sara Figueiredo Costa underscores the significance of this project being exclusively created by women, considering the historical invisibility of female authors in comics: “It has mainly to do with a space that is not claimed, and that is often denied” (Ribeiro, 2018, para. 7).

However, according to Costa, this trend has been changing (Ribeiro, 2018). This ongoing change was evident in the 2022 edition of Festival Amadora BD, where efforts were made to provide greater visibility to comics created by women. Moura (2019, p. 109) further highlights a movement of openness, particularly at the start of the 21st century, with the

emergence of new female authors and illustrators, including the work under analysis here. These developments build upon earlier efforts to create female spaces in comics, such as the fanzines *Gasp* from 1992 or *All-Girlz* from 2011–2012. However, a quick browse through commercial bookshops is enough to notice the blatant gender imbalance in the authorship of the works displayed on the shelves. Notwithstanding the relevance of the theme of gender representation in the context of graphic narratives, it will not be the main focus of this reflection.

Despite being entirely created by women, *Nódoa Negra* is not limited to depicting female pain. It offers a comprehensive perspective of an experience that, as Florez recalls, is “common to every human being (...) and it must come to light” (Ribeiro, 2018, para. 1). While some narratives address pain more broadly or metaphorically, others are anchored in the physical and cultural experience of the feminine (namely “Pequeno Almoço com Sísifo” [Breakfast With Sisyphus] by Marta Monteiro, “Distímia” [Dysthymia] by Inês Córias, “Bons Costumes” [Good Customs] by Sílvia Rodrigues, “Siento y Sangro” [I Feel and Bleed] by Dileydi Florez, and “O Castigo” [The Punishment] by Bárbara Lopes), portraying experiences such as childbirth, menstrual pain, or the pain caused by the weight of patriarchy. For our purposes, our analysis will focus on these five stories, defined here as graphic narratives.

3. GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION STRATEGY

In this reflection, we adopt the concept of *graphic narratives*, aligning with Chute (2008) and Davis (2019), among others, to encompass the wide variety of media that can thus be classified, including comics. Such narratives adopt a hybrid format, involving verbal and visual resources in a given spatial and time context, involving two forms of reading: textual and visual (Chute, 2008, p. 452).

Comics, in particular, are characterised by the juxtaposition of images and text in a specific sequence, aiming to tell a story or elicit an aesthetic reaction in the recipient, as described by McCloud (1994, p. 20). The author, however, emphasises the open and unfinished nature of such a definition, always in the process of revision, transformation and reinvention (p. 23).

According to Groensteen (1999/2007), the basic and essential characteristic, although not sufficient, of graphic narratives would be the “iconic solidarity”, that is, the existence of a set or sequence of interdependent images that can exist independently yet co-exist through their association with one another. Hence, the notion of graphic narratives as a communication system becomes highly relevant. It is important to note that the author advocates the prevalence of images over text, asserting that graphic narratives function as a language by encompassing a collection of mechanisms for creating meaning.

Like Groensteen (1999/2007), Davis (2019) analyses the perspective of graphic narratives as communication. However, he does not argue for the predominance of image over text. Drawing from Halliday’s approach to the concept of language, which refers to the coexistence of three metafunctions — ideational, interpersonal and textual — the author argues that graphic narratives play these same roles.

Accordingly, the idea of language does not entail the definition of its own syntax, that is, defined grammatical rules, but rather the ability to construct representations of the world and values (ideational metafunction), identities and relations between

subjects (interpersonal metafunction) and the organisation and production of meaning (textual metafunction). This approach forms the basis of the so-called systemic-functional linguistics (Gouveia, 2009).

This description of graphic narratives alone highlights the communicative potential of the genre but does not exhaust it. From the standpoint of culture and communication studies, such media objects are closely associated with the field of entertainment and popular or mass culture, but without neglecting the perspective of humour, satire, criticism and social intervention since they became popular in the pages of newspapers (Round, 2014).

Concerning their reception, there is a prevailing perception that graphic narratives, especially in their mainstream iterations, are designed for a lower literacy level and are easily understandable to a broad audience — which characterises, in a way, popular and mass culture, strongly anti-elitist. This perception is further reinforced by resorting to images, easy-to-read texts, straightforward and linear narratives, and the construction of recognisable stereotypes, where roles of heroes, villains, and victims are readily apparent (Chute, 2008).

Furthermore, associating such objects with entertainment may reduce readers' resistance to their content. This dimension will be resumed later as we analyse the graphic narratives' potential to discuss fracturing social issues where consensus is difficult to reach. Before moving forward, it is worth emphasising the significance of the concept of literacy in its broad sense and digital and media literacy, in the strict sense, which requires the acquisition and/or development of analytical and communication skills necessary for life in society in this 21st century (Hobbs, 2010).

McCloud (1994) believes that the essential element of graphic narrative language is the panel, dividing space and time. It forms the first unit of meaning. The sequence and the relation between panels, with the necessary empty spaces built between them, are the thread of the reading — here in the broad sense. Keeping that in mind, Groensteen (1999/2007) emphasises the active role of the reader, who is encouraged to participate and collaborate in constructing meaning, bridging gaps, and filling in absences within the narrative.

Based on the perspective of social semiotics, as defined by van Leeuwen (2005), the relation between image and text, which forms a double semantic code, is an intrinsic element in the process of meaning construction. Taken out of its context — that is, analysed separately and regardless of image resources — the text has its meaning potential changed (Miodrag, 2011). Davis (2019) proposes an alternative approach that acknowledges the combination of text and image, highlighted by the use of the term “image-text” as the focus of the analysis, reintroducing the concept of “utterance” (pp. 278–280), which seems to us the most suitable to encompass the enormous variety of communication strategies compatible with the universe of graphic narratives.

In addition to the commercial versions, there is a large supply of alternative narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, with the release of autobiographical, historical or journalistic works. Examples of such works include Marjane Satrapi's (2000/2007) *Persepolis*,

Art Spiegelman's (1991/2014) *Maus*, and Joe Sacco's (2020) *Paying the Land*. In Portugal, the newspaper *Público*, which regularly publishes graphic novels, recently launched the Coleção Novela Gráfica VI (VI Graphic Novel Collection), which includes works such as *Ao Som do Fado* (To the Sound of Fado) by Nicolas Barral (2021/2020) and *As Paredes Têm Ouvidos* (The Walls Have Ears) by Giorgio Fratini (2008/2020). These works address, each in its way, the period of the Portuguese civil dictatorship, with an emphasis on the repressive and violent role of International and State Defence Police.

This random selection of disparate references briefly illustrates Chute's (2008, p. 460) claim as he ponders on the acknowledgement of graphic narratives as an influential cultural vehicle in contemporary times. Moreover, at least partially, it subverts the narrow notion that the literacy level required by this media object would be elementary.

It is well-known that the media field is currently experiencing a period of rapid and profound changes. In this ever-evolving landscape, which increasingly operates in global spaces characterised by the proliferation of languages, cultures, experiences, and sensibilities, graphic narratives seem to adapt remarkably well as a language and a communication strategy (Grossberg et al., 2006; Hall, 1992/2014).

The accessibility of graphic narrative, common to popular and mass culture, coupled with the relative ease of translation to overcome language barriers, the form's versatility — which encourages innovation — and the speed and ease of reading, all contribute to making graphic narratives an apt and compatible communication strategy in the present day.

The fast pace of life, the need for constant innovation, the rapid obsolescence of everything (people, products, ideas, values), and the adoption of a somewhat superficial notion of authenticity are some hallmarks of this contemporary world, where attention has become a valuable commodity. In this universe, graphic narratives seem to circulate with a certain ease and captivate a broad and diverse audience, including the younger generation already used to the hybrid and multimodal language of social networks, which combine text and image and incorporate sound and movement.

While graphic narratives' potential for communication seems indisputable, their ability to promote debate on controversial and complex social issues, including gender issues, namely the representation and recognition of female pain, the focus of this reflection, remains unexplored. To reflect on this theme, we draw on the concept of representation and explore some recurring strategies in graphic narratives. Our interest lies not in exhausting their possibilities but in ascertaining the existence of such an ability.

According to Chute (2008, p. 459), consistent with McCloud's observations (1994), the language of graphic narrative effectively juxtaposes the past and present, thereby challenging traditional and dominant modes of narrative construction. Add to that its ability to blur the boundaries between what can be said and what can be shown, in other words, the possibility of showing what cannot be said and saying what cannot be shown.

Our starting point is acknowledging that any interaction with reality is inevitably mediated. This mediation occurs through language, which is understood here comprehensively to encompass the diverse communication methods that characterise the present day. Thus, based on cultural studies, all language consists of some form of representation, and representing implies the double movement of selecting and cutting (cf. Hall, 1992/2014; Potter, 1996; Thompson, 1995/2004).

That said, the direct corollary of such a statement is that this representation has no possible neutrality. Putting the ontological universe aside and adopting a pragmatic perspective, we are not interested in discussing the existence of an a priori reality, which cannot be apprehended except through representation. We speak here of the socio-discursive construction of reality (Potter, 1996).

Hence the relevance of representation: identifying which representations are constructed, by whom and with what value involves analysing issues of agency and submission and power relations that structure our societies (cf. Castells, 1997/2007; Hall, 1992/2014). The power to represent and be represented, and our ability to participate in these processes, shows our social position in this stratified and unequal world we call our own. Indeed, it is not coincidental that Castells (2009/2013) emphasises the potency of communication in the network society. Nevertheless, this reflection does not align with the current context of the discussion.

The construction of identities, stereotypes, and stigmas is significantly influenced by the communicative context in general and the media in particular — and graphic narratives are part of this universe. The lack of representation of women in commercial versions has already been pointed out, as well as the sexist bias of many of these representations (Brown & Loucks, 2014), but this is only part of the story. Once again, it is crucial to consider the immense diversity of published works. The object selected as a case study in this analysis serves as an exemplar of this vast diversity.

In her research on the representations of gender-based violence in Italian graphic narratives, Mandolini (2020) explores such possibilities and warns of the risks inherent in representation. The primary challenge is twofold: firstly, how to represent trauma while adhering to an ethical framework that avoids gratuitous depictions of sexist violence; and secondly, how to steer clear of constructing rigid and inflexible roles for victims and perpetrators, women and men, which could perpetuate the notion of women as victims and male violence.

Another notable perspective is the growing use of the language of graphic narratives due to their “recognised narrative and didactic abilities” for disseminating science and academic discourse, as Mandolini and Mookherjee (2022, p. 3) rightly point out. For instance, they refer to the work of Mookherjee and Najmun Nahar, who published *Birangona* in 2019. This work compiles a series of guidelines on how to collect oral testimonies related to sexual violence in war situations. In this sense, analysing the comic book *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) to explore the representation of pain in women underscores the didactic qualities of this narrative genre in the field of science, namely medicine, where there are several discrepancies regarding the recognition and treatment of pain.

4. FEMALE PAIN: CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES

When discussing pain, we are referring to an experience that, despite its transversality and universality, remains a polyvalent concept that is challenging to define, as pointed out by Boddice (2014, p. 1): while, on the one hand, pain represents an inner state (physiological and neurological), on the other hand, it requires recognition from others. Not only

does pain fall into different typologies (physical and psychological), but it also entails a certain experience, expression and recognition, which, in turn, differ according to gender¹.

Regarding the experience of pain, it is estimated that women are more affected by pain compared to men: according to Barbosa and Cardoso (2022, p. 17), apart from having a higher risk of chronic pain, women are more prone to developing clinical pain conditions such as endometriosis, dysmenorrhoea, among others.

As for the recognition of pain, it is worth noting the gender disparities observed in the healthcare context. In the United States, for example, Banco et al. (2022, p. 5) note differences in the urgent hospital treatment of women and men with chest pain: women experience longer waiting times and are prescribed fewer tests or drugs. Chen et al. (2008, p. 415) reported the same type of disparity in acute abdominal pain, namely in the prescription of analgesics, where women are less likely (up to 25%) to be prescribed and administered painkillers.

In the context of Portugal, where approximately 28% of women live with chronic pain, Barbosa and Cardoso (2022, p. 17) present a comparable situation, as women report experiencing belittlement of their complaints on multiple occasions. Barbosa and Cardoso (2022) also refer to women's tendency to accept discomfort and normalise suffering, as they find that pain treatment is inadequate for several reasons: "either because women and some health professionals still neglect pain, or because it is difficult to act on its cause" (p. 20).

This point aligns with Bartley and Filligim's (2013) perspective, as they suggest that the disparities between women and men in their recognition and treatment of pain are due not only to biological factors but also to gendered psychosocial processes, including, as Bever (2022) emphasises, the absence of women from scientific research over time.

It is worth mentioning that the prevalence of distinct gender norms in how pain is experienced and perceived can be one explanation for these discrepancies. Samulowitz et al. (2018, pp. 5–6) suggest that in the case of chronic pain, these norms are entrenched in an andronormative hegemonic paradigm, whereby male pain is associated with characteristics such as strength, endurance and stoicism, while female pain is understood as emotional and hysterical.

The pervasive influence of gender stereotypes in the recognition and treatment of pain has detrimental effects on both genders, as Barbosa and Cardoso (2022, p. 17) point out: in men, the assumption of stoicism causes them to belittle their own pain, while women being associated with supposed physical and psychological fragility, risk having their pain undervalued.

Because of this stereotypical approach, female pain is often linked to psychological causes (even when the underlying cause is purely physical) and is therefore discredited. Hossain (2021) underscores this aspect and states that there is a gap between men and women in recognising pain and that female pain is often negated.

¹ While acknowledging that gender is a fluid category, we adopt a binary distinction for the sake of necessary conceptual clarity, and because of both the literature on this subject and the corpus under analysis (which, despite offering an inclusive representation of pain, portraying female and male figures, does not critically address sexual and gender binarism). Tackling the experience and perception of pain in the non-binary sphere is undeniably crucial and urgent. However, we are unable to incorporate it into our current reflection.

In fairness, the distinction between physical and psychological pain has been widely contested. Based on a study by Eisenberger, Lieberman and Williams, the neuroscientist Panksepp (2003, p. 237) argues that psychological pain resulting from loss or social exclusion activates the same brain circuits as physical pain. This acknowledges the legitimacy of psychological pain and places it on an equal footing with physical pain.

Meanwhile, Biro (2014, pp. 53–54) challenges the extent to which certain affective states (such as rejection, grief or loss) might trigger pain similar to that caused by physical injuries. Despite the prevailing interpretation of pain as solely a physical phenomenon, heavily influenced by Cartesian dualism, Biro (2014, p. 54) emphasises the shift that occurred in the mid-twentieth century when the influence of psychological factors on pain modulation started to be observed.

Hence, the conventional definition of pain has been revised to accommodate its inherent complexities. According to the website of Associação Portuguesa para o Estudo da Dor (Portuguese Association for the Study of Pain; n.d.), translating the definition presented by its counterpart in the United States of America, the International Association for the Study of Pain, pain is described as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (para. 3). However, as Biro (2014, p. 55) points out, even though this redefinition includes the emotional and subjective dimension, it remains anchored in physical pain. It does not directly account for psychological pain. In fact, in the current scientific discourse, psychological pain is referred to another category (Biro, 2014), that of “suffering” and “anguish” (p. 55), which makes it an oxymoron or a metaphor.

The complexity of pain is expressed in the volume under analysis, namely in the attention that *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) devotes to its different manifestations, including a reference to the neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp in the introductory text, “Escala Sem Dó”, by Sara Figueiredo Costa (2018), who at one point states:

a few reflections later, the blow comes; what hurts us really hurts us, whether there is physical trauma or not (...). No one asks us to quantify the other pains that do not derive from the cut, the physical shock or the damaged organs. “From 0 to 10, how much does feeling completely alone and lost hurt?” If it were asked, and if we tried, we would stumble over the impossibility of the answer and the imprecision of the words. (pp. 7–8)

Besides recognising the legitimacy of psychological pain, Costa (2018) points out a fundamental aspect of pain by referring to the “impossibility of answer” and the “imprecision of the words” (pp. 7–8): its challenging relationship with verbal language. Thus, referring specifically to severe physical pain, Scarry (1987, p. 4) argues that, rather than resisting verbalisation, pain destroys language by causing regression to a pre-linguistic state, to the sounds and cries emitted before language learning.

While Scarry (1987) argues that pain is not only ineffable but also annihilates language itself, Boddice (2014, p. 1) states that it is possible to express pain but that this expression is inevitably imprecise because it is emotional and subjective. For Boddice, this indefinite translation of physical experience into words, gestures, and art is a way of converting our subjective experiences into metaphors. This process allows us to understand what we feel.

Schweizer (1997, p. 2) also upholds the possibility of representing pain, stating that art and pain are analogous as they both exist in a pre-linguistic space, and their meaning is present in their non-referential dimension, in their subjective temporality and their irreducible specificity. The artistic expression of pain, according to Schweizer (1997, pp. 3–4), is inherently paradoxical, as it is as impossible as necessary, which aligns with the words of Costa (2018) in *Nódoa Negra* regarding the attempt to represent pain:

that may be where the urge to tell stories comes from, with words or pictures or both. And perhaps the will is almost always the need, but the choice of words tends to fall towards the cliff where we best pretend to balance. “From 0 to 10, how much better does it feel to put the pains you cannot bear into a narrative?”. (p. 8)

This brief reflection on pain underscores the magnitude of the challenge embraced by the group of authors, including Costa: to represent pain in its many different manifestations through the hybrid language that characterises graphic narrative.

5. NÓDOA NEGRA AND THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE PAIN

As a collaborative project that includes several explorations of pain, *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) naturally has some common points. Besides the theme, the absence of colour in the entire volume (except for the front and back covers) stands out graphically, which gives it visual coherence. The choice of black and white also creates a certain sobriety and refinement, suggesting as well a connection with the title — *Nódoa Negra* translates to “bruise” — as if the narratives were bruises on the skin of the paper.

Another shared aspect is the setting of these narratives, which often take place in indoor and domestic spaces, with a prevalent focus on life’s everyday and mundane aspects. While on the one hand, the preponderance of the domestic, the common, and the everyday refer to the conventional sphere of the feminine, which is here reconfigured into a place of experimentation, on the other hand, and according to Moura (2019), it creates a space suitable for the representation of pain, a “platform for exposing pain, in its most diverse aspects and implications” (p. 111).

The narratives in *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) adopt an inclusive perspective by representing not only different genders but also various age groups and different types of pain. However, given the purpose of our reflection, we have selected five specific stories to analyse the use of the double semantic code text-image to express pain — physical and/or emotional — in women.

The first story under analysis, “Pequeno-Almoço com Sísifo”, by Marta Monteiro, is marked by non-referentiality, not addressing a particular typology of pain directly. Yet this vagueness is not visually matched, as the graphic style is linear and the strips have a symmetrical and sequential pattern (two panels per strip, same size, text and image above, image below; Figure 1), with alternating focus on a bowl of food and a human figure. Although this figure is somewhat androgynous, the upper panels portray a different visual representation of a female body.

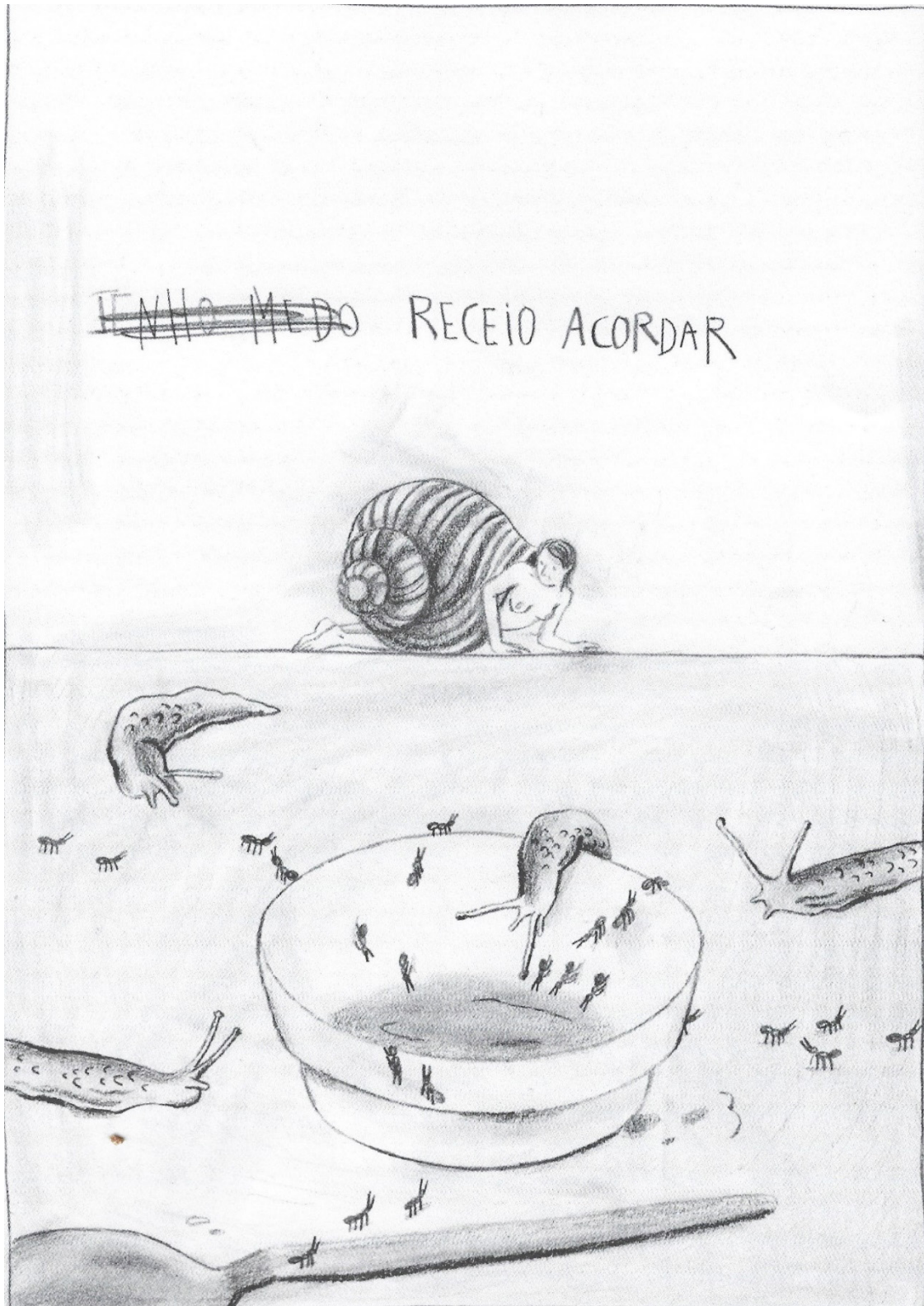


Figure 1. Excerpt from “Pequeno-Almoço com Sísifo”

Source. From “Pequeno-Almoço com Sísifo”, by M. Monteiro, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Caria, I. Córias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoa Negra*, p. 28. Copyright 2018 by Marta Monteiro.

Note. “I’m scared I’m afraid to wake up”

There is a tension (and fusion) between the human and animal dimensions, where ants and snails gradually invade the everyday activity of breakfast until ants cover the human figure and the bowl is filled with snails (which, in the meantime, have come out of their shells). Both ants and snails can be interpreted as visual metaphors evoking discomfort, dehumanisation, and a certain sense of repulsion, reflecting Boddice's (2014, p. 1) observation regarding the translation of the subjective experience of pain into metaphor.

Among the eight upper panels, six have very brief sentences, almost all of which are erased, and show us the path of a snail. The sentences transcribed here ("Everyday moment"; "I wait impatiently"; "for you to leave."; "In the morning"; "I'm scared-I'm afraid to wake up"; "and have you back."; pp. 23–29) refer to a repeated and uncomfortable cycle, reinforced by the reference to the mythological figure of Sisyphus. For its part, erasure suggests a struggle to express and hesitation, creating different layers of meaning. This strategy refers to Derrida's (1967/1997) use of this term to emphasise the impossibility of closure, that is, of determining a single and final meaning. Furthermore, the elision refers to the challenges inherent in the representation of pain, in line with Scarry (1987).

As for the sequential images of the snail in the upper panels, the movement and the transformation cycle they represent are worth mentioning. Initially, we see the snail moving, slowly carrying its shell, to at one point abandon it and make room for a female figure, who now carries it (Figure 1). The shell, a symbol of body and home, is here a heavy burden that is (un)burdened daily.

For its part, "Distímia" (pp. 31–37), by Inês Córias, refers to psychological pain, as the title suggests, which is a persistent depressive disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 168). The central character is female, visible in both images and text. Unlike the previous story, "Distímia" is visually more diffuse, following a less symmetrical pattern, with variations in the inclusion of text; the relationship between text and image is nevertheless complementary.

The story portrays memories of a previous experience when it (dysthymia) imprisoned the character, isolating her in a world apart, marked by emptiness, loneliness and anxiety, with music as her only companion. The suffering is not explicit but suggested by the struggle for expression ("the things I couldn't tell were buried somewhere else", p. 35) and the trail of physical violence ("like the hole in the door opened with a hammer that the mother later covered with adhesive paper imitating wood"; p. 35).

As it follows the thread of memory, the narrative is fragmented and episodic, with no clear order of events but several episodes interspersed with analepsis and prolepsis: we begin in college, go through childhood, and end up in the present moment. In this kaleidoscopic journey, there is a deliberate distortion of events, made explicit in words ("the episodes are staged and relived, in an entangled thread of situations that multiply and unfold"; p. 36) and in images, namely in the distorted television at the beginning (as if what follows was a film, also unclear).

Although the story does not follow a diachronic narrative line, there is a closure in the visual circularity created by the repetition of the same organisation of the strips at the beginning and end and by the repeated presence of the eyes. While in the beginning, the

eyes appear half-closed, closed in on themselves and the character's inner world, in the end, there is a metamorphosis in which the eyes are not only open but transformed into an autonomous entity, with leaves and roots that turn out to be wings and allow it to fly freely, suggesting change and liberation (Figure 2) — as if our gaze, what we see and how we see, could set us free.



Figure 2. Excerpt from "Distímia"

Source. From "Distímia", by I. Córias, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Caria, I. Córias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoa Negra*, p. 37. Copyright 2018 by Inês Córias.

Note. "Only then, she spreads her invisibility cloak over me and gently hands me over to yet another little death"

Also, “Bons Costumes” (pp. 69–80), by Sílvia Rodrigues, focuses on psychological pain, but in a different order. While dysthymia is a disorder resulting from biochemical, genetic and environmental factors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 170), the psychological pain portrayed in “Bons Costumes” is caused by the corset of patriarchal tradition.

Unlike “Pequeno-almoço com Sísifo” and “Distímia”, “Bons Costumes” follows a clear narrative line, guided by the vision of an omniscient narrator. The story focuses on the character L. (using initials is significant here, referring to anonymity but maximising the potential for identification), a conventional housewife responsible for the household and family chores that take up all her time. However, L. carves out a subversive place of freedom in this domestic space of blurred features, full of grotesque figures (very suggestive of the aesthetics of the painter Paula Rego; see Figure 3): the little room of plants, which she calls a “jungle” (p. 72).



Figure 3. Excerpt from “Bons Costumes”

Source. From “Bons Costumes”, by S. Rodrigues, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Caria, I. Córias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoa Negra*, p. 78. Copyright 2018 by Sílvia Rodrigues.

Note. “This attraction began to take hold of her; these winged beings confined around the city revived childhood memories/
The search for a physical pain that would move her away from this constant numbness was nothing new”

L. received a conventional education, as the narrator reports, based on a rigorous attribution of roles (the woman as altruistic, selfless, “the heart of the family” and of the house, both of which are her sole responsibility; p. 73); however, L. has resisted through plants since her childhood, collecting cacti behind her mother’s back. Later, after she marries, L. takes up this space of freedom. Still, her husband, M., is equally condemnatory of his wife’s idiosyncrasy, criticising her for devoting herself to something that is of no use, that is, to a task that, as a woman, should not interest her.

This subversive need to appreciate the pointless continues when L. moves to the city, now expressed in an obsession with caged pigeons. Like the little plant room, synonymous with domesticated nature, the pigeons represent imprisonment with which L. identifies: “L. photographed the pigeons incessantly like someone taking selfies (...) Maybe it was because, despite all the comforts, they too had no escape” (p. 80). L.’s domestic space is a prison, a cage that keeps her immobile and numb and from which she wants to get out, purposely pricking herself on the cacti to remind herself that she has a body that feels: “the search for a physical pain that would move her away from this constant numbness was nothing new” (p. 78; Figure 3). Imprisoned and voiceless (in fact, the narrator speaks for her), L. resists by projecting herself onto plants and pigeons, also living bodies deprived of freedom.

While “Bons Costumes” focuses on the psychological pain caused by the weight of patriarchy, the following two stories — “Siento y Sangro” by Dileydi Florez (pp. 81–94) and “O Castigo” by Bárbara Lopes (pp. 95–106) — deal explicitly with physical pain in women, namely polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and labour.

Among the narratives in the volume, “Siento y Sangro” is the least ambiguous, using a more referential language underpinned by a linear graphic style and a consistent organisation of four panels per strip. Unlike “Bons Costumes”, this story is narrated in the first person, with abundant use of subtitles and speech, noise and thought balloons; in this story with women and about women, they all have a voice and a speaking space.

“Siento y Sangro” recounts a situation in the past where a mundane social episode — cooking with friends — is interrupted by intense pain caused by PCOS. Despite the prevailing atmosphere of everyday routine, there is an effort to infuse the narrative with seriousness. By setting a specific date (“in November 2017, Nata and Tere agreed to make pizzas and invited me”; p. 82), the author bestows significance upon this occurrence, elevating it beyond the mundane and making it worthy of attention.

Incorporating medical information about PCOS (depiction of the female reproductive system, causes, aggravating factors, and mechanism of action; refer to Figure 4) imparts educational value to the narrative. This transforms it into a conduit for disseminating scientific knowledge, offering an innovative approach to teaching and learning about the disease (Williams, 2012, p. 21).



Figure 4. Excerpt from “Siento a Sangro”

Source. From “Siento y Sangro”, by D. Florez, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Caria, I. Córias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoo Negra*, p. 93. Copyright 2018 by Dileydi Florez.

Note. “Over time, I have realised that these pains happen at times of increased stress, frustration, and tension. So, I have been trying to lead a more mindful and calm life. But anyway... Sometimes is not enough. / well, I'll get dressed and be out in a minute. / Okay! We are in the kitchen. During the early stages of the menstrual cycle, the uterus prepares to receive a possible pregnancy. / When pregnancy does not occur, the body needs to rid itself of this previously made preparation, known as the endometrium. / As a result, some cells in the uterus release chemical substances which can cause menstrual cramps due to the excessive production of prostaglandins”.

Moreover, the intersection between first-person narrative and medical information contributes to making female pain more credible, exemplifying the potential of graphic narrative to represent and recognise a painful but often overlooked experience, as stated at one point: when one of her friends asks the main character if she wants to go to the emergency room, she replies: “no, thanks... They won’t do anything but prescribe pills” (pp. 87–88).

Thus, “Siento y Sangro” is likely to raise awareness among healthcare professionals, as it creates a bridge between knowledge about the disease (in this case, PCOS) and understanding of the subjective experience of that same disease (Williams, 2012, p. 21), thus aligning with the purpose of medical humanities: the humanisation of healthcare (Bleakley, 2015). Hence, besides emphasising the potential of graphic storytelling in health, “Siento y Sangro” meets the recent popularity of the concept of “graphic medicine” in the production of graphic narratives, as outlined by Czerwiec et al. (2015). By materialising a female body that feels and bleeds, intersecting art and medicine, Florez’s narrative contributes to the acknowledgement and knowledge of PCOS, making this experience valid and worthy of attention by those who read it.

In “O Castigo”, this intersection between artistic and scientific language is further pursued, exploring the various dimensions — religious, historical and medical — of labour. The combination of art, culture, medicine, and history stems from using different languages that, nonetheless, do not clash. Lopes provides historical and scientific information through quotations from the Bible (p. 97) and factual references (pp. 98, 102), which not only lends legitimacy to the narrative but also creates cultural resonance.

Of all the narratives, “O Castigo” is the one that includes the most text, which sometimes covers a free space on the page and sometimes is inside the panel. The strips present a variable and organic organisation, interspersing sequential tiers with panels that cover the entire strip. Furthermore, the strong and fluid lines and textured images are open to multiple interpretations. There is, for example, a sequence of various representations of the vulva at different stages of cervical dilation (Figure 5). The sequence, composed of two vertical tiers, each with three panels of dark and light images, shows us various stages of cervical dilation and a gradually intensifying light, which refers to a more poetic designation of labour: giving birth (translated from “dar à luz”, a Portuguese phrase that means “giving birth”, but literally translates into “giving light”).

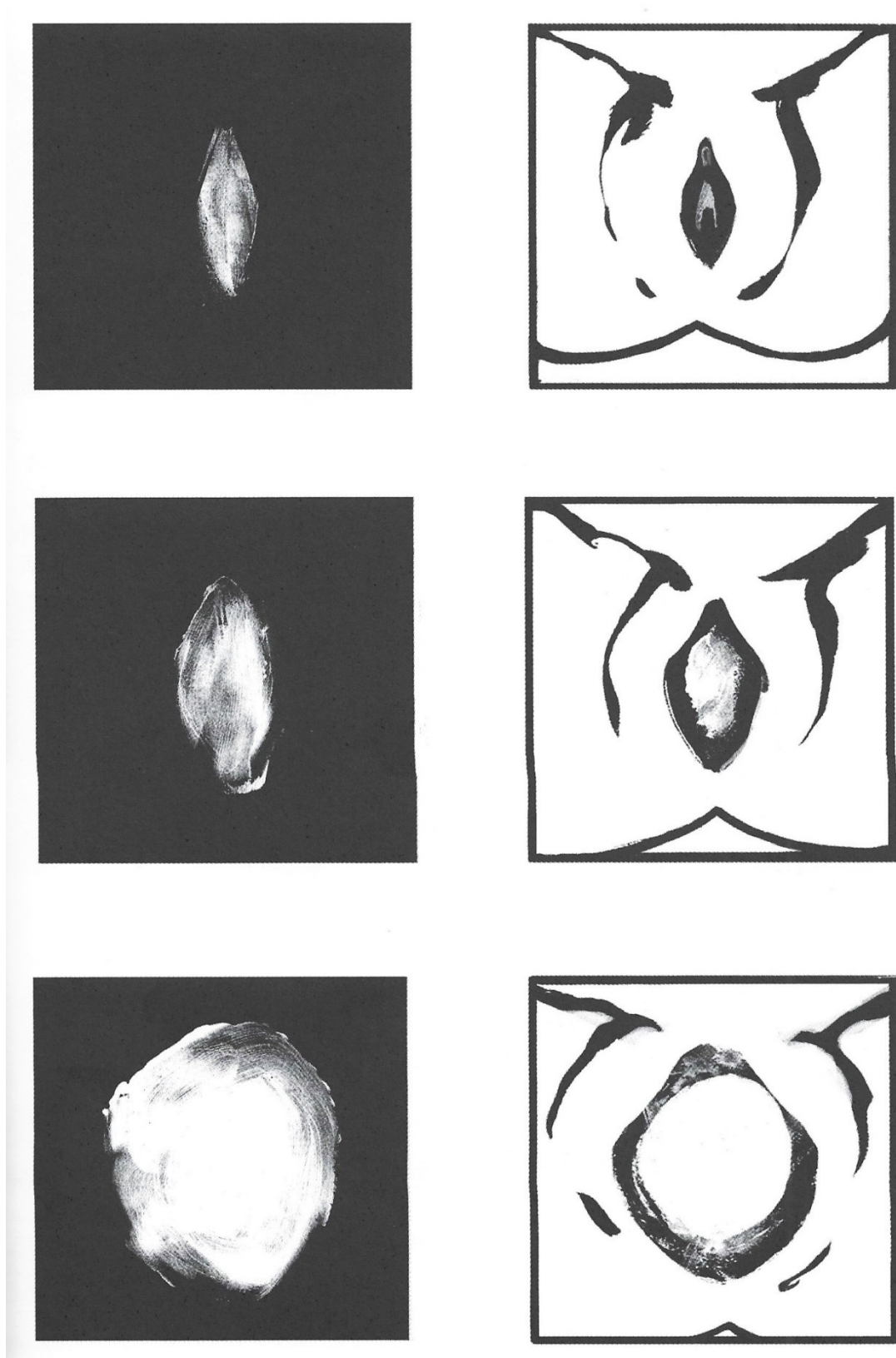


Figure 5. Excerpt from "O Castigo" (I)

Source. From "O Castigo", by B. Lopes, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Caria, I. Córias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoa Negra*, p. 103. Copyright 2018 by Bárbara Lopes.

This alignment between aesthetics, medicine, and history creates a favourable environment for reading the account of a particularly painful experience, labour, and the attempts, over time, to alleviate this pain. As the title suggests, childbirth is seen as a deserved punishment in Judeo-Christian cultures. Drawing on the religious validation of female pain, the narrator lists various attempts to alleviate this suffering over time, from ancient times, with herbal remedies and placebos, to the 18th century, with the use of forceps and substances such as ether and chloroform — attempts that were opposed by the Church, which was averse to the possibility of painless childbirth.

In this timeline, the author highlights Queen Victoria, dedicating two full strips to her, since in 1853, the Queen used sedatives for the first time, administered by a doctor, thus encouraging women to seek medical assistance when giving birth. This episode is depicted in theatre style, as if it were a “story within a story”, using speech balloons in direct speech and English, interspersed with the narrator’s subtitles, as if involving the reader.

However, even in medicine, it was a minefield, evident from the use, at the beginning of the 20th century, of a combination of morphine and scopolamine, which made women aggressive — and, consequently, the target of aggression (pp. 102–103). Consider the image of a woman in labour (Figure 6), flooded with light and pain in the centre of the panel, surrounded by dark and frightening figures (a doctor in the middle, several nurses around) as if they were supernatural (or inhuman) entities.

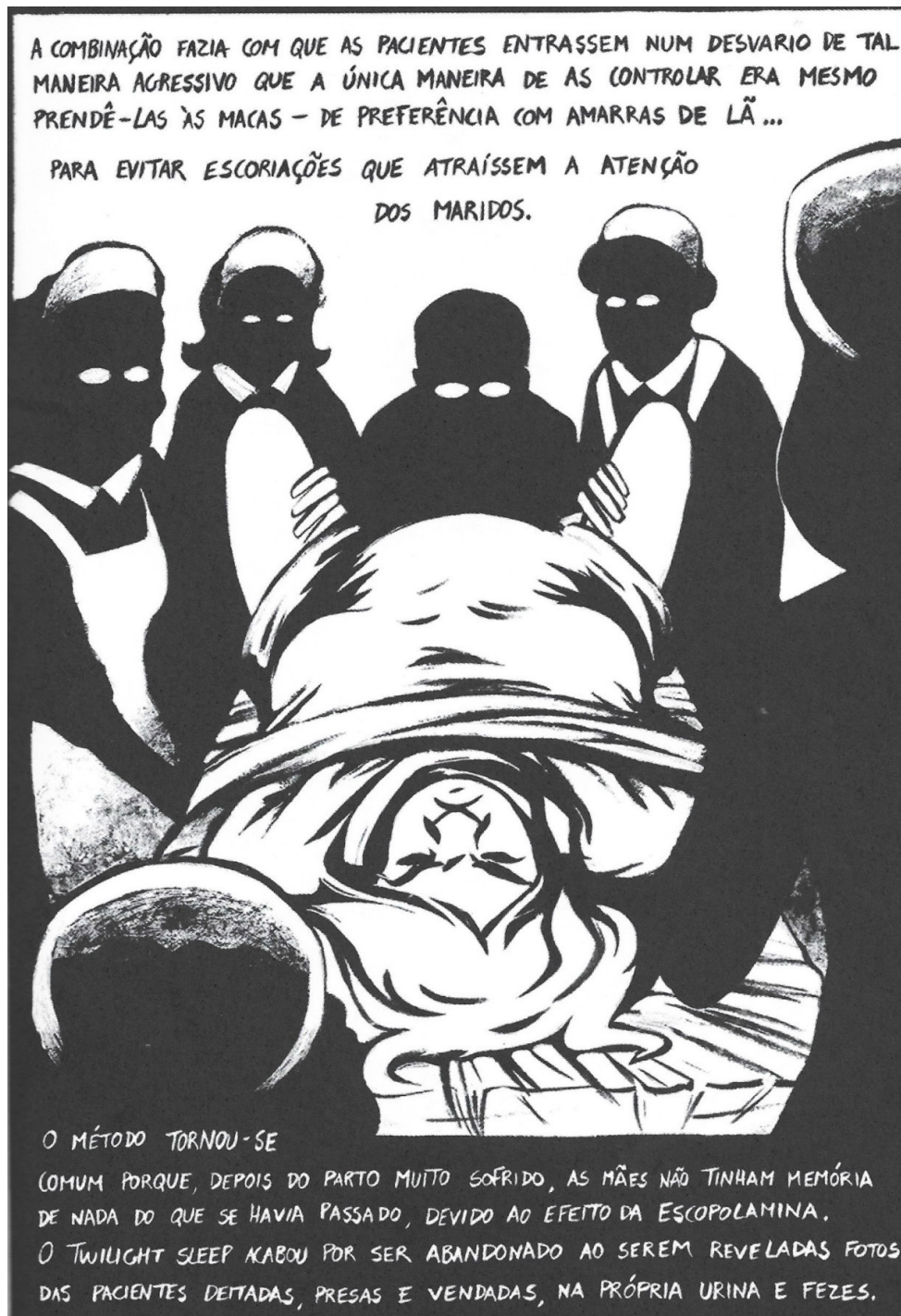


Figure 6. Excerpt from “O Castigo” (II)

Source. Retrieved from “O Castigo”, by B. Lopes, 2018, in B. Lopes, C. Silveira, D. Florez, Hetamoé, I. Cária, I. Cóias, M. Monteiro, Mosi, P. Guimarães, S. Costa, S. Rodrigues, & S. Monteiro (Eds.), *Nódoa Negra*, p. 105. Copyright 2018 by Bárbara Lopes.

Note. “The combination made the patients fall into such an aggressive frenzy that the only way to control them was to strap them to the stretchers — preferably with woollen ties... to avoid abrasions that would attract the attention of their husbands./The method became common because, after a very distressing birth, mothers had no memory of anything that had happened due to the effect of the scopolamine./Twilight sleep was eventually abandoned when photos of patients lying restrained and blindfolded in their own urine and faeces were exposed”

This landscape has gradually changed, as procedures such as epidural or caesarean sections now allow for less painful childbirth. In the final strip, we come across a more

personal reflection: “my grandmothers didn’t have access to these options — no one even asked them whether or not they wanted to contribute to the multiplication of man on earth. It is great to see how much things have changed since then for Eve’s descendants” (p. 106). This caption and the image of a serene woman cradling a baby on her lap bring the narrative to a positive conclusion, contrasting with the initial harshness.

Besides expanding the spectrum of representation of the experience of pain, transcending narrative linearity, the intersection between text-image, personal narrative, medicine, and history in “O Castigo” provides context to the (physical and cultural) childbirth experience. This demonstrates the potential of graphic storytelling for health professionals and, above all, for society at large, as Williams (2012) argues, by allowing readers to identify with the narrative and encouraging learning.

Despite the shared focus on pain, none of the five examined narratives perpetuates patterns of victimisation or assigning blame. Within these narratives, there are neither heroes nor villains, but women who feel, respond, and navigate different — physical, cultural, and historical — spaces. Drawing from the personal as (inevitably) political, the various experiences represented transcend the limits of the private space of the body by entering the public sphere, serving, in the words of Moura (2019), as “a scalpel for analysing systemic violence in our societies” (p. 112).

Rather than conforming to the often narrow spaces of comic books for children, the narratives of *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) provide a sphere of experimentation and expression, involving the reader in this endeavour. On the one hand, we have the comic book format itself, which calls for an active collaboration from the reader in creating meanings, sequencing panels and filling empty spaces, as Groensteen (1999/2007) describes. On the other hand, the theme of pain suggests openness and vulnerability, which calls not only for an active reading but also for an ethically conscious reception of the experience of the “other”, as emphasised by Scarry (1987, p. 6). Hence, it is a responsible reading, in Attridge’s (2004) conception, a way of reading that, besides calling for action, is welcoming and receptive to the “other” (pp. 130–131). At a time when, as Sontag (2003) points out, overexposure to the suffering of others creates “compassion fatigue” (p. 111), it is urgent to look at pain with empathy in an essentially creative and imaginative work.

6. CONCLUSION

The ability and flexibility to construct representations — whether of spaces, characters and/or ideas — provided by the graphic narrative, based on the combination of its language features (“image-text”) and its communication potential, was here demonstrated by the diversity of strategies adopted by the different authors, as well as by the spectrum of interpretations open to readers.

Our reflection contributes to the variety of perspectives on the work under analysis, which has predominantly focused on the issue of the all-female authorship of *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) since twelve women seize the power to represent and be represented. It is also important to consider the themes they explore — in this case, female

pain — and, as such, to foster the reflection on the (often restricted) position women hold in a patriarchal society.

We hope our interpretation of *Nódoa Negra* (Lopes et al., 2018) from a multidisciplinary perspective has contributed to a deeper understanding of its texture. Firstly, it illustrates the graphic narrative's cultural and communicational relevance, emphasising its ability to address issues as complex and difficult to express as grief. Secondly, it demonstrated the potential of graphic narrative in the field of health by opening a forum to debate different perceptions of the body in society. Finally, the specific focus on pain in women brought to light gender inequalities around the recognition, treatment, and perception of pain, thus calling for greater (and necessary) awareness by health professionals and society.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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WEBS OF SELF, WEBS OF MEANING. THREE FEMALE FRAGMENTARY PORTRAITS IN POST-DIGITAL PRINT COMICS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses the work of three contemporary, independent women artists active in the Portuguese comics scene: Hetamoé, Joana Mosi, and Ana Margarida Matos. It provides a close formal reading of their work by following Peter Wollen's seminal article on counter-cinema. Despite the caveats of adopting whole cloth and in a clearcut manner notions from different media, there are enough commonalities and narratological features that provide stimulating comparisons. As in cinema, comics also have a broadly accepted normative understanding of comics' way of creating meaning, against which these three authors present what one can call, after Wollen, resisting formal strategies. Portuguese comics have had a troubled history, which entails a difficult economic development and the lack of wider social recognition (as a culturally relevant field). However, its most independent realms and sub-cultures have provided ample proof of engaged, informed, and inventive individual creators. Women creators are no exception to this, and this particular group shows three potentialities of opening up the field, both politically and aesthetically. Moreover, these same de/re/constructive strategies broach issues associated with identity, self-portrait, bodily matters, memory, and the very meaning-making processes at the core of their work. The feminist dimensions of their work, albeit quite varied, allow one to detect intense interpretations of the self and the role of womanhood in a broader process of self-actualization and social life. Thus, I will use Sianne Ngai's notions of "cuteness" and "animatedness" to understand the three author's specific manners of doing so, as depicted and constructed within the medium of comics.

KEYWORDS

experimental comics, counter-strategies, cuteness, animatedness, heteropathic identification

TEIAS DO EU, TEIAS DO SIGNIFICADO. TRÊS RETRATOS FRAGMENTÁRIOS FEMININOS NA BANDA DESENHADA IMPRESSA PÓS-DIGITAL

RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa o trabalho de três artistas contemporâneas, independentes e ativas no panorama da banda desenhada portuguesa: Hetamoé, Joana Mosi e Ana Margarida Matos. Faz uma leitura formal detalhada do seu trabalho, seguindo o artigo fundamental de Peter Wollen sobre contra-cinema. Apesar das ressalvas quanto à adoção de noções absolutas e inequívocas de diferentes *media*, há suficientes pontos em comum e características narratológicas que proporcionam comparações estimulantes. Tal como no cinema, também na banda desenhada existe um entendimento normativo amplamente aceite do modo de criação de sentido da banda desenhada, contra o qual estas três autoras apresentam aquilo a que se pode chamar, a exemplo de Wollen, estratégias formais de resistência. A banda desenhada portuguesa tem uma história conturbada, que envolve um desenvolvimento económico difícil e a falta de um reconhecimento social mais amplo (como um campo culturalmente relevante). No entanto,

os seus domínios e subculturas mais independentes têm dado provas de criadores individuais empenhados, informados e inventivos. As mulheres criadoras não são exceção à regra, e este grupo em particular demonstra três potencialidades para expandir o campo, tanto política como esteticamente. Além disso, estas mesmas estratégias de des/re/construção abordam questões associadas à identidade, ao autorretrato, a questões corporais, à memória e aos próprios processos de criação de significado em que assenta o seu trabalho. As dimensões feministas do seu trabalho, ainda que bastante variadas, permitem detetar interpretações intensas do eu e do papel da mulher num processo mais amplo de autorrealização e vida social. Assim, utilizarei as noções de “cuteness” (fofura) e “animatedness” (animação) de Sianne Ngai para compreender como as três autoras interpretam e constroem o seu eu na banda desenhada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

banda desenhada experimental, contra-estratégias, *cuteness*, *animatedness*, identificação heteropática

There is no fixed or definitive state.
Is this not the truest statement?
Since all living beings
are nothing more than “condensations of breath”?
François Cheng, *Le Dit de Tianyi* (The Saying of Tianyi)

1. THREE WOMEN AUTHORS IN THE CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE COMICS SCENE

The Portuguese comics scene has lived in perpetual crisis mode for 40 years. Since the demise of regular comics magazines for a broad audience widely distributed by commercially sound distribution networks, production has followed mainly hazardous paths while sporadically met with critical success. Nevertheless, one may underline the overall accomplishment of a fluctuating auteurist scene in Portugal, producing outstanding, if under-recognized, work.

In order to pay attention to this production circuit, we must look into publications that are somewhat at the margin of literary institutions and commercial distribution models. This includes independent or small presses, author’s editions, short pieces that have been presented outside published forms or in non-comics publications, as well as the plethora of print objects that we may call “fanzines”. These are the sorts of platforms that I have used for the present chapter. Most of the works I mention are not easily and commercially available books.

One might argue that the weakening of more sound commercial publications opened room for numerous opportunities to attempt a new approach to comics. With the advent of modern democracy in Portugal, post-April 25th, 1974, the comics medium gradually opened to new genres, visual choices, themes, and venues. The didacticism that had presided over most comics production throughout the Estado Novo dictatorship was not completely abandoned. However, new authors tried out other types of artistic languages, from science fiction to surrealism (sometimes both), to realistic portraits

of youth, women, ethnic or sexual minorities, and themes of urban decay, financial strife, unemployment, and more (Moura, 2022, pp. 49–65). Third-wave feminism had a significant impact on this comics-making scene because new women authors brought the female identity to the forefront of their artistic endeavors and political concerns. It finally allowed for the emergence of diverse spaces within a heteronormative medium, as most others within the country at the time and, arguably, today. Authors such as Ana Cortesão, Alice Geirinhas, Mimi, Maria João Worm, and Isabel Carvalho put out many comics (more often than not short pieces across multiple collective publications) that either bolstered women’s empowerment or exploited sarcastically the hurdles within a very traditional, misogynistic, patriarchy.

Today, we have many women creating and publishing comics in Portugal, and there is practically no publisher, big or small, that does not have a roster of authors that includes women. I’m referring mainly to publishers that put out Portuguese authors, not solely international translated work. As for non-binary people, less so, but there is some diversity in this regard as well. Moreover, some of these women authors are quite comfortable working on more genre-locked material, ambivalent broader themes, or institutional commissions that do not necessarily have as their main themes political or identity issues that relate directly to womanhood, as it were. Such is the case of Joana Afonso, Rita Alfaiate, Marta Teives, Dileydi Florez, Inês Garcia, and Sofia Neto, among others. This does not mean, *at all*, that these authors do not pursue a feminist position in their own private lives or that their work cannot be read from a feminist perspective, but solely that their output is not unequivocally exploring such issues. *A propos* an exhibition of four women comics artists at the “Amadora Comics Festival” of 2022 (in which Mosi, one of our authors, participated) Sara Figueiredo Costa (2022) wrote that stories may “rummage through family memories, daily life episodes, observations of a world that reaches us through the multiple screens and narratives that we listen to or experience” (p. 4). Even if these stories are created by women, have women protagonists, or both, they are, above all, “stories that cross our shared present, whether by the manner after which they question the identities that construct us or by the attention that they deconstruct preconceived ideas and prejudices that still define the way we live” (Costa, 2022, p. 4).

However, or so I believe, what is at stake in the pursuits of the group of women authors I have chosen as the constellation of the present paper is more vehement, intricate, and influential. All of these authors have started their comics production within the last 10 years or less and, through very distinct strategies, moved on to realms of comics-making that explore the construction of the self, experimentation through fragmentation, and the very ontology of comics as a medium. In order to understand how they do this, I will use Peter Wollen’s counter-strategies to describe formal choices and some of Sianne Ngai’s (2012) aesthetic categories and emotions to delve deeper into their meaning-making modes.

I shall begin with a presentation of each of these authors.

Hetamoé is the pen name of Ana Matilde Sousa, born in 1984. She is a visual artist, an art and comics lecturer, and a brilliant scholar and researcher. Her main body of

work is quite influenced by specific formal and thematic traits from Japanese comics or manga, especially its more alternative circles. Her work is tinted by notions such as the abject, the grotesque, the excessive, and the extreme, and she creates disturbing amalgamations between the cute/*kawaii* styles and more violent and pornographic genres. Her very signature is a *portmanteau* between the so-called “ugly/bad” manga style, known as *heta-uma*, and *moé*, a very strong affection towards characters of Japanese popular visual culture (Sousa, 2020; for *heta-uma*, see her “Glossary”, entry 21; for *moé*, 23). She has launched several fanzines exploring harsh visuals — between drawing, collage, appropriation, and digital manipulation, among others — and shorter pieces in anthologies or short booklets. She also signs with her own name other types of comics material, such as *Einstein, Eddington e o Eclipse — Impressões de Viagem* (Einstein, Eddington and the Eclipse. Travel Impressions), which I will not include in the present chapter, even though in a different assessment it could very well warrant a co-joint consideration.

The author, in the *They Say That Clovers Blossom From Promises* (hereafter “Clovers”; Hetamoé, 2015a) piece, addresses the loneliness that stems from love affairs gone wrong, the disappointment of personal expression, and how desire constitutes the very self. These could be seen as Hetamoé’s permanent theme throughout her oeuvre, as this piece is less structured as a story than a flux of phantasmatical, holistic impressions. One could, in a brief glimpse of “Obscure Alternatives” (Hetamoé, 2015b; Figura 1), think that this would be a high fantasy story, with cute elves having a conversation, even if there are modern objects (cell phones, a gun).



Figure 1. *Obscure alternatives*

Source. From “Obscure Alternatives”, by Hetamoé, 2015b, in Clube do Inferno (Ed.), *QCIDI 3000 – FEAR OF A CAPITALIST PLANET*, pp. 3–8. Copyright 2015 by Chili Com Carne.

However, the verbal captions seem to stem from a disembodied narrator, and some snippets of dialogue, very emotionally intense, cannot be clearly attributed to the characters we see, creating a very complex mesh of metalepses. It is as if the text — very few speech balloons have attributive tails — created a sort of poetic fog overshadowing the concrete experience of the images’ storyworld. The intertext mesh is quite dense, with references to Marxist theory, Satanic rituals, and numerous obscure allusions to Japanese popular culture (the title is a reference to a song by the new-wave English band Japan). It forces the reader to engage with the hard-won deciphering of such friction between apparently different referential worlds. Elsewhere, I have compared this short piece to a version of the classic bunraku piece *The Love Suicides at Amijima* as if under the famous dictum from *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1848/2012; partly the

main influence of *QCDI 3000 – FEAR OF A CAPITALIST PLANET*): “all that is solid melts into air”. In the following analysis, one must bear in mind this permanent tension of construction and dissolution, dematerialization and rematerialization, in this author’s work.

Joana Simão, more famously known as Mosi, was born in 1995 and has been a tireless creator, facilitator, and teacher of comics. If some of her first output was clearly and unabashedly committed to clear-cut genres, from her young adult autobiographical road trip chronicle with *Altemente* and her high fantasy graphic novel with Nuno Duarte, *The Other Side of Z*, she quickly swerved into more experimental territories, both at the material and textual level, turning to small press formats and even web-bound work to do so. She is extremely active on Instagram, for instance. Nonetheless, for this paper, I will only delve into printed work. Her work always questions comics’ usual strategies of figuration, composition, narrative, poetics, coloring, and cultural underpinnings.

Her short comics share several thematic concerns, subject matter, as well as a semi-autobiographical voice that allow us to consider it as an ongoing, unified project, somewhat as I have been arguing in other projects about artists such as Edmond Baudoin, Marco Mendes, and Francisco Sousa Lobo (Ana Margarida Matos also falls into this possibility). However, she does not always clearly engage with an autobiographical pact. The “I” pronoun may well be present, but there are no visual or textual hints that allow us to be certain that the voice (quite often disembodied) is speaking of/from the empirical Joana Mosi. Even the untitled *Amadora* piece, which discusses “my maternal grandmother” with actual names, precise dates, and detailed biography, does not offer an indisputable link.

The third author is Ana Margarida Matos, born in 1999. After launching a couple of fanzines around 2020, she published a widely celebrated book, *Hoje Não* (Not Today; Matos, 2021). This 120-plus page book can be described, although superficially and incompletely, as a COVID-19 lockdown journal. In fact, as the result of winning a comics competition (Chili Com Carne’s 2020 “Toma Lá 500 Paus e Faz uma BD!”), she dedicated herself to registering carefully for six months her life, a page per day in 2021, as a creative routine. However, she did not succumb to what most comics and cartoons that belong to this category did, which was basically presenting observational humor around the same handful of immediately tired tropes. Quite the contrary, she turned this occasion on its proverbial head to mold a profound graphic essay on her own interiority, health, identity, as well as the very social organization that we inhabit and discussing possible alternatives of categories such as labor, economy, empathy, and so on. At the same time, with creativity at its core, this book reinvents the very visual and compositional tools of meaning-making in the comics medium using recurrent fragmentary self-portraits, graphic ritornellos, themes and variations of note-taking and journal-writing, and more. This quickly became one of the most thought-provoking projects of Portuguese long-form comics in the last few years. Both her previous and subsequent work, despite being slightly overshadowed by the larger reception of *Hoje Não*, also goes into enmeshed issues of self-presentation, communication and artistic expression, social networking and social masks, precarity, and suburban life.

Perhaps Matos' (2021) *Hoje Não* is the most grounded and referential of these three authors. Numerous calls to Portugal's contemporary, specific, historical situation are presented as par for the course in a diaristic mode. Even if we can create connections between historical actualities within Mosi's work, it will always be based on educated guesses and assumptions, given that Mosi tends to erase place names, time stamps, and other concrete mapping strategies. Matos floors it.

As you might surmise from the outset, I want to play up two main traits these three women authors share. On the one hand, of course, they share a superficial gender identity, also reflected somewhat in themes and protagonists, as I have briefly mentioned. In that regard, through fictive stories with female protagonists, autobiographical or semi-autobiographical work, or other textual strategies, but above all, in which empowerment and self-reflection are key subjects of the storylines, they construct feminist storylines. Even if the story makes the character deal with significant inner turmoil, overwhelming trauma, or societal forces, or contrastively, with quite serene, intimate moments, in the words of Roberta Trites (1997), "the feminist protagonist need not squelch her individuality in order to fit into society. Instead, her agency, her individuality, her choice, and her nonconformity are affirmed and even celebrated" (p. 6).

On the other hand, they also share a kindred formal and material attitude by deploying counter-strategies to comics' more mainstream stylistic choices. Comics is a medium that quite often, if not always, reveals its constructedness, and sometimes this awareness can be used for emancipatory purposes. To a certain extent, these strategies can be compared to what Peter Wollen (1972) calls the "seven deadly sins" of counter-cinema, values used to the contrary to normative expectations of orthodox cinema (or "virtues"). Cinema, of course, is a medium with a powerful history and extremely significant critical and theoretical reception. But comics has its own conventions and traditions, its history and social developments, positional and methodological specificities, affordances, and expressive traits. Comparative studies abound, too many to mention. I will be using Wollen's categories — out of his order, which I believe is not fundamental — to guide us through the formal venues used by my three authors.

As we shall see, Matos', Hetamoé's, and Mosi's texts do not follow orthodox comics signatures, disrupting meaning-making. One such aspect is the way they remediate digital native forms (social media interfaces, icons, emojis, framing devices, multi-channel narrative strands), which leads me to call them "post-digital" in the title, however, which is paramount, without entirely divorcing from the medium known as comics.

2. MEANING-WEAVING THROUGH COUNTER-STRATEGIES

2.1. ESTRANGEMENT

One of Peter Wollen's (1972) most alluring "counterparts and contraries" to "the values of old cinema" (p. 2) is that of "estrangement," precluding a facile, faulty

identification. I do not have the time here to go into the problematic notion of *identification*, something habitually engaged with in such a fashion that it conflates what it means in the field of psychoanalysis and what it means in semiotics. Suffice it to say that the adoption of an advantageous point of view (primary semiotic identification) or the proximity to a given character within the storyworld (secondary semiotic identification) within a visual medium such as comics or cinema has nothing to do with the acknowledgment of the self as an autonomous entity and other psychoanalytical structures (still quite informative, I am drawing from the synthesis by Aumont, 1990). Moreover, I have dealt with this subject elsewhere (Moura, 2022, p. 21), preferring to engage with Kaja Silverman's notion of "heteropathic identification," describable as "a form of encounter predicated on an openness to a mode of existence or experience beyond what is known by the self" (Bennett, 2005, p. 9). In other words, while empathy is a most welcome sentiment, it is easy to fall into an erroneous feeling of *understanding* what is at stake with the individual's (fictive or otherwise) life story without leaving space for critical distancing. Such a critical stance is rather reinforced by "estrangement" counter-strategies.

Some of the devices used by the authors start with the very option of *not* presenting characters as fully-fledged embodied characters. Either the representation strategies present the characters, especially the protagonists, as fragmented bodies, drawings crossed over by lines and smudges, or the authors use very tight shots that either show a snippet of the faces or bodies (e.g., hands) or even opt for framing that erases the character's participation altogether.

Ana Margarida Matos is, arguably, the author who most engages with a clear autobiographical discourse. There are enough visual and verbal clues that allow us to understand that the protagonist of her stories is the author herself. Many of the self-portraits, instead of following a more classic representation, where authors represent themselves as "third person characters" just like all others, at least at the level of the visual track (Moura, 2008, p. 92, 121–122), are shattered in reflections and juxtapositions. In *Hoje Não* (Matos, 2021), she draws a self-portrait with post-its that show different face parts in the wrong placements, as the verbal track declares: "This is me. This is my image. This is my space". A recurring flexagon shape with parts of the face pops up repeatedly, sometimes in other forms, throughout the book (Figura 2).

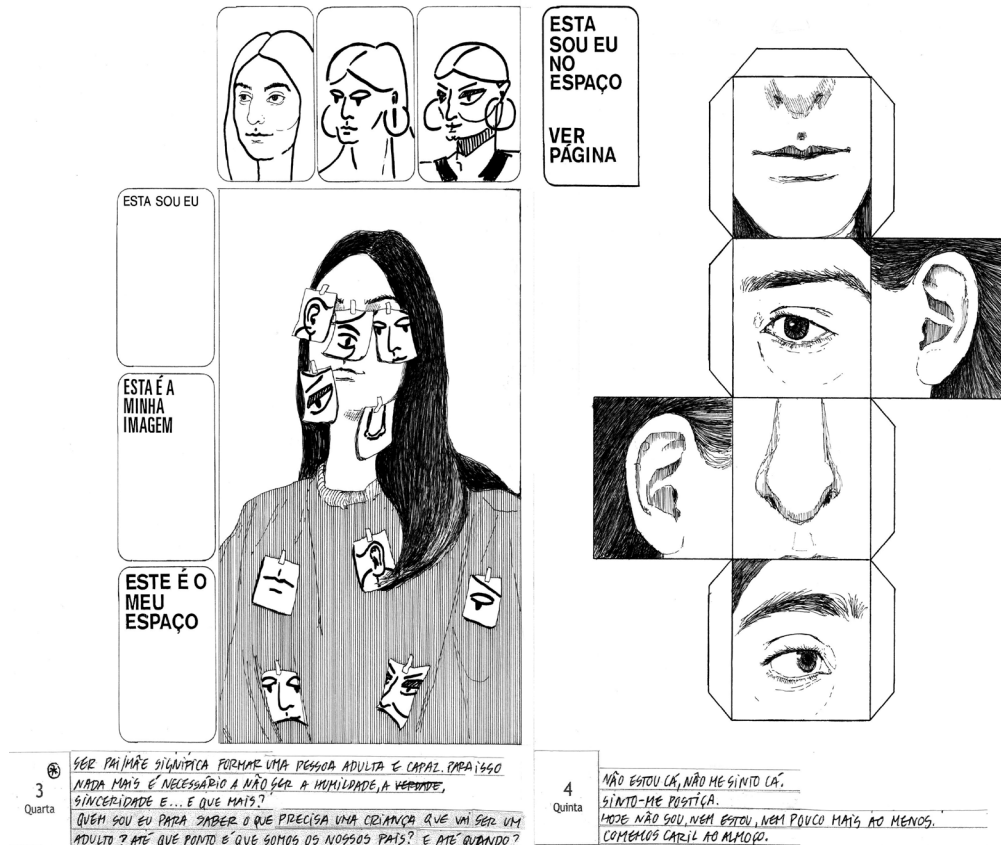


Figure 2. Hoje não

Source: From *Hoje Não*, by A. M. Matos, 2021, pp. 20–21. Copyright 2021 by Chili Com Carne. Reprinted with permission.

There is a Rolleiflex camera that she is working on that appears in exploded views or instructional drawings, perhaps as an extension of her own person, reduced to an active recording and reflective device throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. The space is the rooms she inhabits. The rooms, the camera, and the book, everything becomes a camera lucida. Matos deploys daily to note down her own self-construction, a process that necessarily goes through deconstruction. In the case of the *Stripburger* “Untitled” (Matos, 2023c) short, it seems as if the author depicts herself as an autonomous nose, as if in a post-modern version of Gogol’s famous story, after a page that shows 30 views of her own nose, depicted realistically, as we read “and yet when I look in the mirror, I look for who I am not today”. A decentered subjectivity is at its center, as it were.

The cultural historian Ben Highmore (2010) once wrote that the body might be “the most awkward materiality of all” (p. 119), and Julia Bell (2020) further elaborates when she affirms that “our bodies are contingent, difficult, inexplicable, messy, mortal. Instead of attending to these complexities, how much easier to pretend they don’t exist at all” (p. 24). My three authors may never show bodies in their entirety as an undimmed, pristine, objective reality precisely to counterbalance the body’s commodification. Joana Mosi’s (2021b) *My Best Friend Lara*, “Postal dos Correios” (Mail Postcard; Mosi, 2023), and the unnamed 2022 Amadora story never show the protagonists completely. The latter shows

the hands and feet of what we can surmise are the two main characters (a grandmother and her granddaughter), but their faces are never shown *in action*. When they do appear, they do so in the shape of an integrated photograph, translated by simplified linework. But even this, we can only surmise from a very oblique context. In “Postal dos Correios”, we don’t even see any human bodies, only spaces in close-cropped shots. As for *Lara*, its page count and size allow for a more diverse approach and style, but there is clearly a dearth of franker, more naturalized representations of the main character, the narrator. Conflating an intimate diary and an artist’s essay, it is no surprise that Mosi avoids more naturalized fictive pathways. As for the videogame character Lara Croft — the friend of the title — herself, she *does* appear full-bodied, in actions, within actionable places, but she is presented as a fictional character *within* the storyworld, so she does not belong to the same ontological level of the narrator (Figura 3).

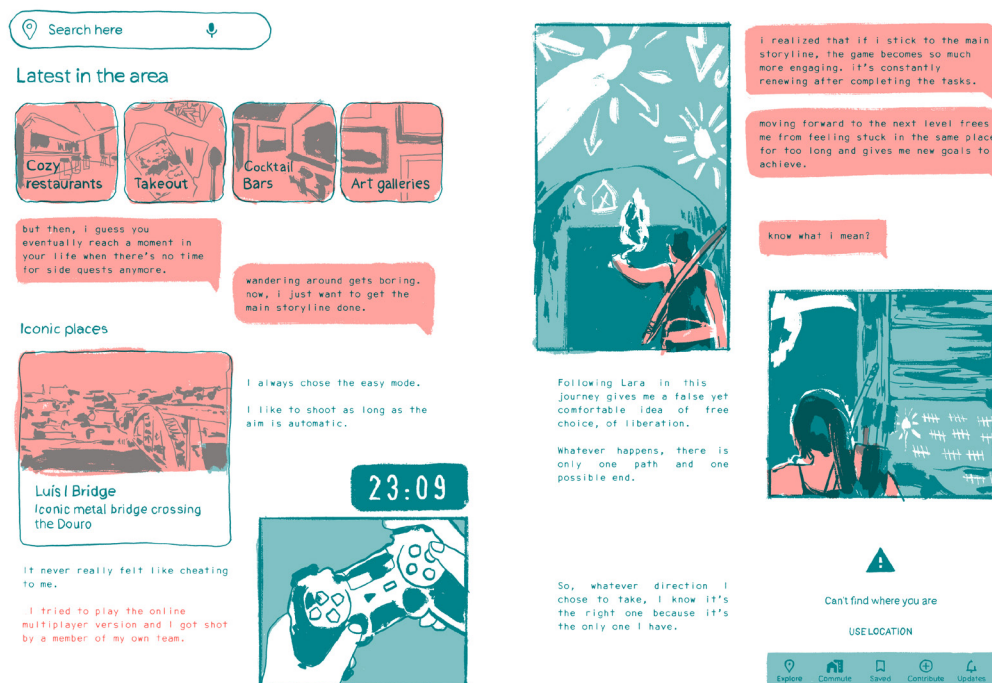


Figure 3. My best friend Lara

Source. From *My Best Friend Lara*, by J. Mosi, 2021b, pp. 44–45. Copyright 2021 by Joana Mosi.

In *The Apartment* (Mosi, 2022), perhaps the most conventional narrative of the group of texts discussed in this paper, from all three authors, the two main characters, a couple, are drawn in a minimal, cutesy style close to the manga-like *chibi* signature. The characters often appear with their back to us, but when turned, their faces are blank, with no lines whatsoever (the male character sports a pair of glasses, though). In a typical head-to-body ratio of three heads, their facelessness, allied to their stocky, short bodies, puts them, pardon the pun, head-on into the aesthetic category of the “cute”, declawing whatever threatening power the characters may have. However, it is their almost

disposable nature, like the thousands of trademark characters that inhabit a snack packet, that will exert a gravitational pull toward Wollen's estrangement. Contrary to popular belief and some attempts at theorizing this (McCloud, 1993), "blankness" and "simplification" of characters do not necessarily mean a better identification.

As for Hetamoé's characters, we face a wider diversity of narrative (or non-narrative) structures and visual signatures across all of her work. However, due to the overall appropriation and remixing of manga-associated styles, one could describe most of these as "cute" characters. But cuteness is not a superficial stylistic choice here, even though it is in contact with the overproduction and hyper-commodification of figurative characters in all things Japan (from manga and anime, that is, narrative-driven products, but also consumer goods of all kinds). In fact, this word is used here as one of our post-modern critical and aesthetic categories, as theorized by Sianne Ngai (2012). For this cultural thinker, when one considers something "cute", not only is its agency siphoned out completely, but dominance is projected over it. It is a paradoxical engagement of seemingly contradictory emotions, an affective response that harbors a degree of aggression. Hetamoé explores this by splicing such representations with abject themes. Female bodies are subjected to monstrous transformations, animal becomings, vampiric trances, sexual assault, pornographic scenes, and lurid acts, but maintain their well-rounded, cute innocence. Ngai writes: "Realist verisimilitude and formal precision tend to work against or even nullify cuteness, which becomes most pronounced in objects with simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or details. (...) the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter" (Ngai, 2012, p. 64).

3. FOREGROUNDING

Mosi's and Hetamoé's "cutenesses" are quite different, but as we will see, both strive for "less formally articulated" (Ngai, 2012, p. 64) characters and storylines as better to create critical distancing. Part of the visual or material counter-strategies for such formal dimension is analyzable via Wollen's (1972) value of *foregrounding*, which acts contrary to *transparency*. By that notion, Wollen wants to underline formal strategies that impede a post-Renaissance, traditional understanding of the place of composition as a transparent "window" into the storyworld. We have to understand the very fact that even mainstream comics' pages present already complex compositions of multiple panels (famously theorized as *multi-cadre* by Thierry Groensteen, 1999). The images, often more than one on one single page, are put into a graphically oriented structure: each panel exists in a diagrammatic relationship with another and thus triggers logical-semantic meanings. Nevertheless, through several means, these three authors further explore comics' own opaqueness and materiality via their open-ended structures. The same quality of constructedness of comics comes to the fore through these choices. We can see this exploration of materiality at two very different levels.

The first is related to legibility. As we know, for a long time, comics styles were associated with a streamlined design that aimed for maximum efficiency: simple lines for

clear emotions and meanings. Whether through the bigfoot style of classic American animal comics of the 1920s, 1930s, and after, or the post-Hergé clear line, whatever mark appeared within the place of composition had a clear representative or symbolic usage. But modern comics brought about a plethora of expressive possibilities, including those afforded from, or by tapping into, other visual media. We have artists, including Hetamoé, integrating non-representative levels of mark-making in their comics. As an example, let us consider “Obscure Alternatives”, a four-page, two-spread short that was part of the *QCDA 3000* anthology (Hetamoé, 2015b), that published material by the art comics collective Clube do Inferno, of which Sousa was a part. This piece integrates a higher degree of what we could call “graphic noise”, blots, over-inked impressions, uneven shading, overlapping of speech balloons and their placement over characters or panel frame lines, and so on.

In a previous piece, “Clovers”, with which she participated in the *QCDA 2000* anthology (with only women artists), Hetamoé not only took full advantage of the large format (when opened, the publication is close to a standard horizontal A2 format) but also used it to “scatter” her panels — by that I mean the creation of the illusion of structureless composition —, mixing captions and the typical “decorative” (I am aware of the pejorative sense of this word) elements that populate *shojo* manga pages: floating hearts, stars, sparkles, threads of glowing orbs, emojis, and other forms, that may or may not be read as mirroring an emotional meaning in relationship to the events of the story. The lack of an orthogonal grid for organizing the multiple panels of wildly differing sizes and captions, juxtaposed in a seemingly haphazard manner, can also remind one of a computer screen with too many open windows and tabs. Remember that comics are always already a medium that allows for, at one time, an overview *and* a detailed view of the elements within a plane of composition — from single, outlined panels to double spread and beyond. So, all of these elements may be interpreted at different levels of integration, from the apparently demeaning “decoration” to a poignant translation of the character’s inner turmoil. In any case, their very presence, as typical of *shojo* manga, emphasizing feelings, seems to create suspended moments outside the normative temporal narrative flow.

A second level can perhaps be seen as simply a specific variation of the former. I want to underline how the visual composition of these authors draws heavily from the multitasking aspect of video games, internet use, and smartphone screens. In the case of Joana Mosi’s (2021b) *Lara*, we find several strategies, both thematically and compositionally, reminding one of certain displays of this nature. A page may show a floating panel, but this panel is drawn after an Instagram post, with a handle profile, caption, hashtags, like buttons, number of visualizations, and so on. The page will also include a timer, a chat message, status icons, and other elements. The *Amadora* piece, for instance, dispenses with full-bodied characters altogether and presents a tight mesh of panels that focus mostly on the hands of the participating characters. When wider shots appear (also within larger panels), we see a remediated photograph, from which sometimes the faces are erased. Small blue square panels also appear, with white line

drawings with very simple captions reminiscent of either traffic information signs or highly-stylized Instagram posts (all of them carry category labels for food, fashion, or music genres as part of the narrative about which more below). Throughout the story, there are some small icons, emojis, and checks, as if integrating WhatsApp messages in the field of composition. “Postal dos Correios” is a very short sequence — more than counting pages, we should mention that Mosi uses a composition technique akin to what Chester Brown accomplished in the late 1990s, with fluctuating solitary panels on a page, or a couple of them. This story contains 11 panels across eight pages. But it starts with a metaphor, comparing “traveling to a new place” to “unlocking a new level in a videogame” (Mosi, 2023), showing how the familiarity of walking these spaces dispenses aids, as it becomes part of a bodily routine.

Matos also includes in her pages many forms stemming from digital tools, explanatory manuals, and other non-narrative visual sources. However, in her case, the diversity and richness of all the pages are so great that it is difficult to see these integrations as different from the “normal degree” of her compositional choices. In *Passe Social* (Social Pass; Matos, 2019), for instance (Figure 4), several panels seem to imitate full-bodied mirror selfies, showing the main character (extratextual information, such as the author’s pictures and selfies on social media, helps in identifying this character with the empirical author) taking pictures of herself. However, not only is she too far to fully recognize her, but there are no facial marks, just a blank surface, and the phone hides her face. It is a complicated hide-and-seek game of self-representation. There are also screengrabs from Google searches, Instagram posts, an mp3 player, the phone’s pull-down bar, and print-based communication devices such as a daily planner (which would become the very groundwork of *Hoje Não*’s structure). Moreover, there are also seemingly non-narrative panels with iconic objects that act as “zooming in” daily activities — a spoon, a can of tuna fish, a single *fusillo* — and short explanatory sequences of an action — baking a cake, preparing tea.

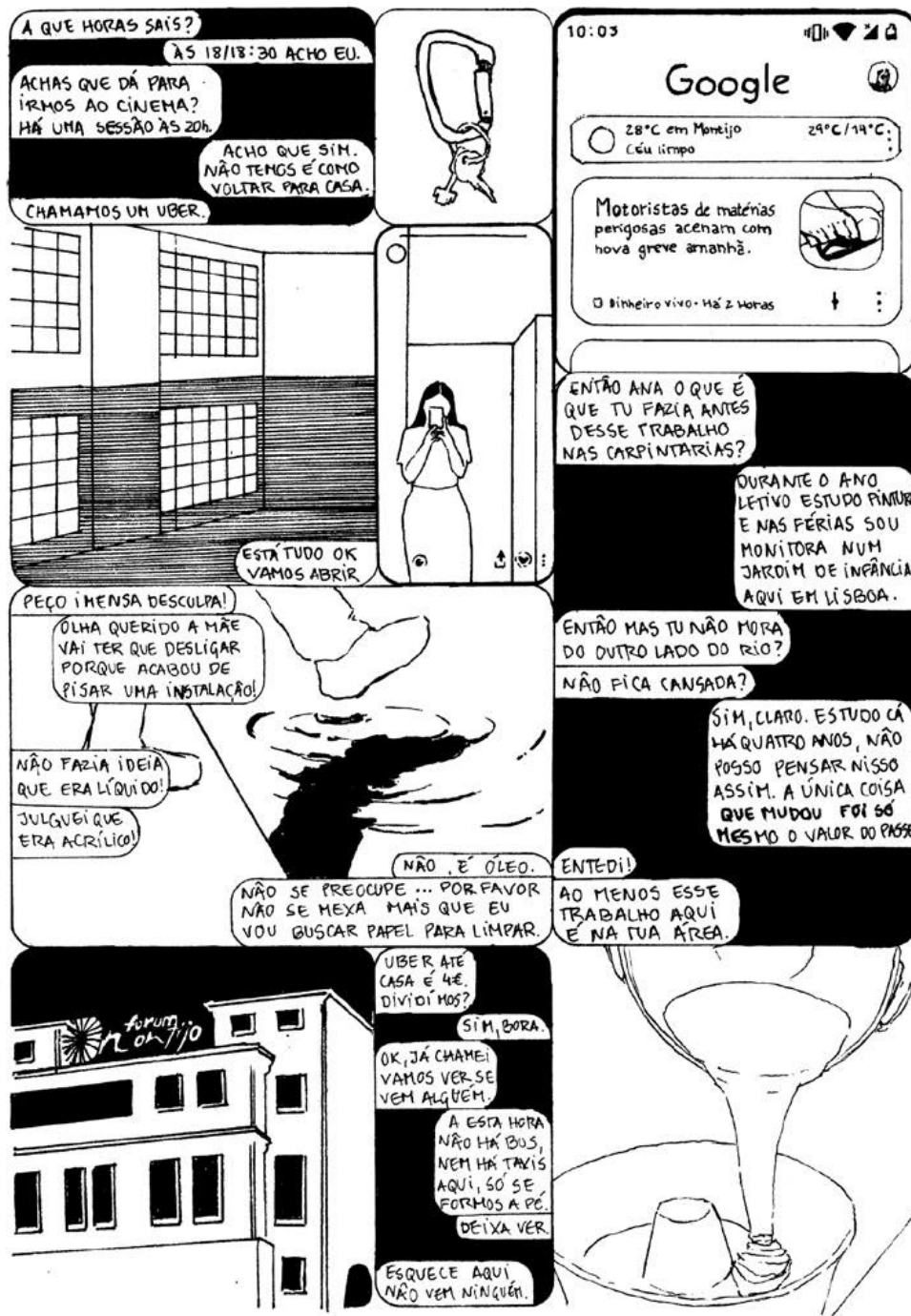


Figure 4. *Passe Social*

Source. From *Passe Social*, by A. M. Matos, 2023, p. 8. Copyright 2023 by Erva Daninha

4. NARRATIVE INTRANSITIVITY

Hetaomé, Mosi, and Matos can be seen thus as authors who employ, deploy, and remediate several visual storytelling techniques that are not only native or specific to the

comics medium but also from other media forms such as videogames and social media, which lead to these remarkable page composition choices. Moreover, these choices also impact the very “discursive track” of the stories, or their plot, as it were. The very first counter-strategy value discussed by Wollen (1972) is *narrative intransitivity*. It means that a more habitual cause-and-consequence flow is interrupted, forcing the reader to permanently re-focus her attention instead of falling into the illusion of following a natural sequence of events. Wollen is implying here the stimulus for an enhanced, attentive state. However, and somewhat paradoxically, when using the devices I just described, the dynamic fragmentation of the comics’ authors seems to set in motion at one time the mirroring of the contemporary atomization of attention brought by web user multitasking abilities but also its new affordances. Allow me to quote Julia Bell (2020) at length from her short but riveting essay *Radical Attention*:

in this environment of constant, low-level distraction our attention is often divided across many different tasks. We might scroll through Instagram while watching TV, or zone out on Facebook when we’re at a bar with friends. But what is happening is that we are not actually paying attention to anything. The social media scroll or the conversation or the programme all mush into one data stream that literally passes through us, rather than being stored for future use or recall. Our capacity to make memories is most affected by this kind of divided attention. (...) In the midst of all overstimulation we are unable to lay down new memories, which means we don’t remember much of what we are doing either. (pp. 73–74)

Julia Bell’s (2020) vaticination may sound disparaging, but, firstly, it will resonate with different parts of my three author’s texts, and secondly, what the author wants us to focus on is a mode of “being present”, as she writes, drawing from Simone Weil. A “different way to relate to each other (...) not in competition, but in connection. Not as atomised consumer units, but in solidarity” (Bell, 2020, p. 33). One must be wary of oversimplifications, but comics is a medium with an ingrained “embodied, multisensory reading process” that calls for hyperreading and hyperattention (Orbán, 2014, p. 169). So even if these authors pantomime the volatile and adaptable digital multiplicity of meaning-making items (images, texts, icons, graphs, framings), they are weaving its many strands as meaningful. Instead of creating a barrage of unrelated atoms, they present elements that the reading act will weave together into a meaningful web.

5. MULTIPLE DIEGESIS

Of course, as in any artistic endeavor, comics-creation exists in a sort of spectrum, such as the one between normative choices and more experimental approaches. There is never an absolute on/off, either/or position. Wollen (1972) opposes *single diegesis* to *multiple diegeses*, presenting, on the one hand, dominant Hollywood plot-centered homogeneous storyworlds and, on the other hand, Godard’s “film-within-a-film devices”, where

narratives may interpolate one another or even fail in communicating directly with one another. Except for Matos' (2021) *Hoje Não*, most of the other elected works are short stories, and all are materially presented as cohesive texts (short story, fanzine, booklet, artist's book, graphic novel), held together not only by its constitutive materials but also paratextual strategies. As I have been highlighting, one might as well interpret some of the textual, temporal, visual, spatial, and compositional structural choices as rupturing a single narrative track.

In *The Apartment* (Mosi, 2022a), for instance, the purportedly central storyline — the relationship of a couple — is interrupted time and again by “pictures” (pictures within pictures, drawings within a drawn narrative) supposedly of the apartment below the protagonists', which is up for sale. But Mosi's most radical contribution to the multiplication of meaning threads that weave back and forth in the readable plane is undoubtedly the unnamed Amadora piece (Figure 5). We could identify those threads by descriptions that would seem to present a coherent track, such as “dialogue with grandmother”, “playing cards”, and “fill a quiz”. The verbal track may not always coincide with the visual track, and all these threads are shuffled and mixed. For instance, in the questions from a typical internet quiz — “Plan a Party and we'll Tell you What Cake you Are” — the multiple answers are displayed as bright blue squares, but they do not necessarily appear after the questions or even in order. That invites readers to read backward or in complicated *tressage* associative movements (cf. Groensteen, 1999).

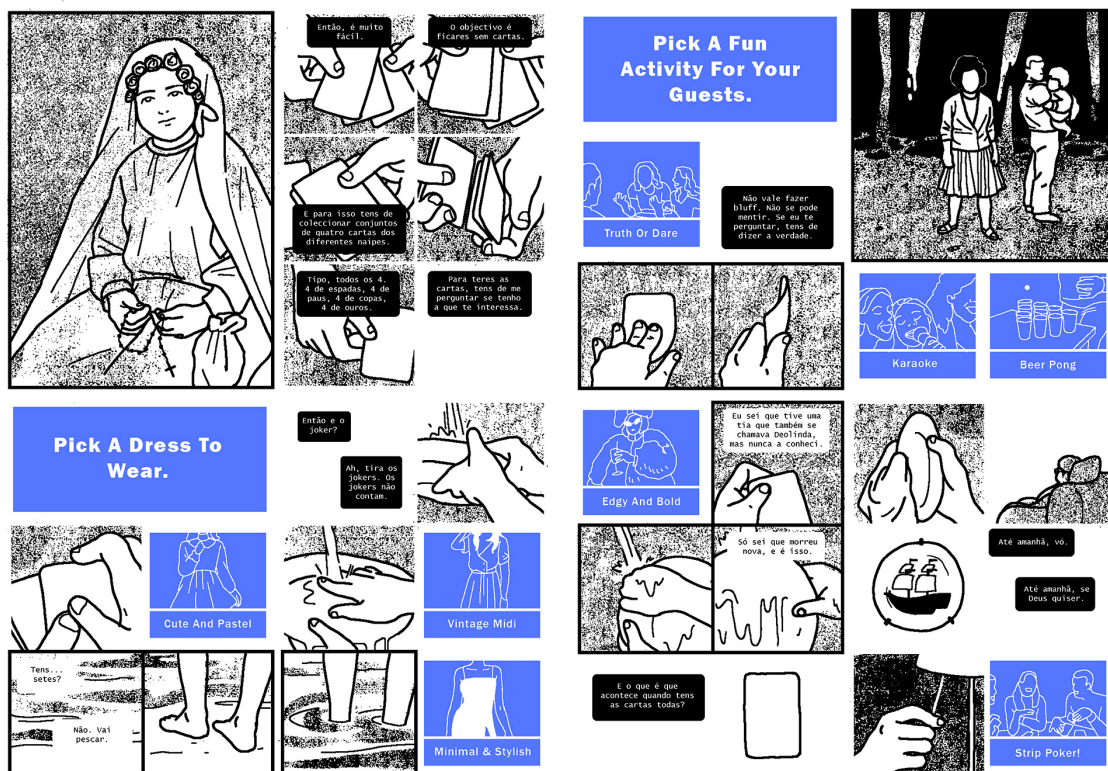


Figure 5. Plan a party and we'll tell you what cake you are!

Source. From *Plan a Party and We'll Tell you What Cake you Are!* Unpublished 10-page comic, by Joana Mosi, 2022, p. 5–6. Copyright 2022 by Joana Mosi.

From the standpoint of narrative organization — the presence of a protagonist, an exact location and time frame of the depicted actions, the centrality of a plot, and so on — it is perhaps Hetamoé the most radical of these three artists, as she explores multiple fashions to weave together the elements of her comics pieces.

Idle Odalisque (Hetamoé, 2012), the oldest publication I will consider here, presents a rather unordered composition of thick markers-drawn figures as if imitating a young, inexperienced artist or mimicking the *heta-uma* school. The storyline presents a nubile young woman who can augment her breasts by using some magical eye drops, prostitutes herself to a bear, and ends up by rather playing Scrabble and sleeping tight. While it may remind us of one the numerous and by now familiar pornographic (*hentai*, in Japanese parlance) versions of folkloric European tales, versions whose emotional impact is emptied by its visual pyrotechnics, these “awkward” approaches become far more disconcerting, by mixing the banal, the excessive, the abject and the absurd.

Yonkoma Collection (Hetamoé, 2014) already reflected a sort of “mature phase” of the author’s discursive processes at the time. Hetamoé was never interested in pursuing a euromanga style or being seen as a Portuguese *mangaka*, as many other authors who simply adopt stylistic and narrative conventions in a transplanted emulation. We could perhaps identify some almost direct sources for her subject matter and drawing techniques, such as second-generation *gekiga* luminaries Oji Suzuki and Seiichi Hayashi. Like these *Garo* alumni, Hetamoé structures her narratives around dream-like fluidity, melancholy, and the poetry of silence and ambivalence. The elements are also clearly present in other Western contemporary experimental authors, such as Aidan Koch, Lala Albert, and Blaise Larmee. But compositionally, Hetamoé uses a very typified form in this project: that of the titular *yonkoma*, a usually humorous strip consisting of four equally sized panels arranged vertically on top of one another (Figure 6). The publication is a “collection” of 17 of such strips, going through all imaginable combinations, from almost “silent” strips to some with dialogues, from either dense and concentrated depicted actions to more expanded structures or even visual lists of similar objects. There is an overarching theme, to be certain — “love hurts”, we might sum up — but the author unlocks unexpected and productive meanings from these juxtapositions that elicit the reader’s participation in performing associations.



Figure 6. Yonkoma collection

Source. From *Yonkoma Collection*, by Hetamoé, 2014, pp. 4–5. Copyright 2014 by Clube do Inferno.

Muji Life (Hetamoé, 2016) is a full-fledged solo publication that has two parts and is an object that rethinks the way comics can communicate and present themselves formally and materially. On the one hand, we have a square book that resembles the catalogs of the famous Japanese brand of household goods and a sort of companion essay presented in a separate yet integrated brochure titled *Yangire/Yandere*. In this project, Hetamoé wholly consumes the unison between the grotesque, the erotic, and the cruel. The essay deploys tools from cultural studies, feminist studies, and other academic fields to discuss the notions of its double title, which refers to specific typified female figures from some Japanese comics genres. In sum, we may describe these *yangire* and *yandere* figures as very young women characters, with candor and a mollified demeanor, but serving as a mask of a hidden facet of extreme violence. There are significant differences between these terms, that Hetamoé brilliantly elucidates, but for our purposes, suffice it to say that both nevertheless underline and support a heteronormative image of women as, and I quote Ngai (2005, p. 95) again, “animated”, that is to say, “too emotional,” and, therefore, more disruptive — in such a view — when engaging in violent acts such as dismemberment or murder. Thus, the *Muji Life* narrative, presented as a series of more or less coordinated grids of four square panels, as if presenting products, can be seen as the illustration, as it were, of the essay’s lessons. The notions, objects, and discussions from the essay feed a fragmentary story about a passionate obsession ending in the most abject violent acts.

In 2020, she published *Violent Delights* (Hetamoé, 2020), almost a paroxysmal corollary of these thematic strands. It quotes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* play and sonnets, deconstructs manga and anime visual tropes, and discusses issues such as the Anthropocene. At the formal level, it quickly shifts composition choices and drawing strategies in a sort of page-per-page zapping of styles. One could well be tempted to fail to understand its coherence, but the paroxysm may be the very violent act at the core of the most famous Shakespeare (teen) tragedy, which is not a contradiction but rather the confirmation of its powerful passion, reflected in the quote/title.

6. APERTURE

An immediate consequence of the multiplicity of narratives feeds into the next of Wollen's (1972) categories, namely *closure vs. aperture*. Wollen discusses intertextuality, eclecticism, quotation, pastiche, and irony, but we can also consider a more straightforward relationship between the texts' parts or perhaps even "episodes". Indeed, most comics seem to comfortably inhabit the end of the spectrum of satisfactorily concluded univocal storylines. Moreover, from a comics-specific structure point of view, Scott McCloud (1993) quite famously attempted to lift the notion of "closure" as the core of the "invisible art of comics". According to that early theorist, closure implies an engagement of the readers/viewers in connecting any two separate images and "closing" that gap with acts of imagination, completing actions, surmising events and connections, and eliciting an ethical response, as the readers become an accomplice to any depicted action.

However, the many jarring juxtapositions already mentioned in some of the comics texts by Hetamoé, Matos, and Mosi create an impossibility in suturing all interventions into a single semantic field. Nonetheless, some of the projects discussed here could be described as "closed" from a certain perspective. After all, Matos' (2021) *Hoje Não* is a diary that clearly has a beginning and an end, a diary that starts with monumental splash pages and spreads as if declaring its energetic beginnings and ends with a tight, solely textual barrage of daily scribbled notes until even that manuscript ends and we are left with empty daily entries. It is as if the energy ran out, or a sort of *dénouement* was underway. Mosi's (2021a) *Both Sides Now* clashes reinterpretations of two movies, perhaps at odds in terms of critical reception and genre, Yorgos Lanthimos' 2015 *The Lobster* and Richard Curtis' 2003 *Love Actually*, but which could be subsumed under the protagonist's (once again, out of sight) appreciative perspective of both. The unnamed Amadora piece could also be seen as an homage to the grandmother figure, whose memories are central to the dialogue and female bonding. A reflection upon a life almost spent and impending death and dissolution, this story ends with a sequence of increasingly blacked-out panels, depicting perhaps the sea covering the sands (this piece echoes, even if indirectly, Federico del Barrio and Elisa Gálvez two-page story "*La Orilla*", from *Madriz*, Number 13, February 1985, and a comparative reading would surely unfold multiple readings).

Nevertheless, those feelings of finality and univocity are but an illusion. Dissolution and confusion are always present and allow for an open-ended structure of most, if not

all, of these texts. Matos' (2021) book opens up with the following declaration: "today is Monday. Today was Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. All except Saturday. All except the weekend". And it closes with, "today was not Saturday nor was it any day. Today is Monday. Today I was not me. I was not none. Today went by in a blink of an eye".

Grapefruit, Matos' contribution to the Latvian publisher Kuš (unpublished at the time of this writing), is a *tour de force* about the creative act associated with the comics medium and beyond. Throughout these pages, Matos (2023b) tries to describe what she aims to do when putting words and pictures onto paper in a certain order for meaning to appear while reflecting upon her own identity and self. Creating is self-creating, but doubts and dissolution are always present. She writes, "through this [the] process of self-deconstruction, I thought myself to the point of becoming my own thoughts".

The very last page of this small book (Figure 7) has a cartoonish pencil character waving goodbye. But it is a complicated composition: a graphite-made shadowy ghost of a character seems to jump out the window, revealing the pencil to be part of the glass only. Then the windows open again, and the shadow expands and turns into an even denser shape until it disappears completely, and then the pencil appears again with its back to us and waves again before the perspective rises and disappears. Meanwhile, the verbal track (with different types, sizes, and visual presentation, but in a logical semantic sentence) declares: "while intuitive marks, printed words, and images drawn from other images carry the load of the narrative, reality goes on without me. To narrate is to create, to live is to be lived" (Matos, forthcoming). This acknowledgment of a lived reality existing apart from creative work extends the meaning beyond and outside the text. In a blurb to *Hoje Não*, the artist António Jorge Gonçalves (cited in Matos, 2021) praises Matos' "virtuously obsessive graphic rigor" in creating what he calls "labyrinth pages". Labyrinths as traps where one retraces paths endlessly or crisscrosses ways, always returning to new modes of weaving the meanings.



Figure 7. Grapefruit

Source. From *Grapefruit*, by A. M. Matos, 2023b, p. 11. Copyright 2023 by Kuš.

Also, of course, Hetamoé's radical shifts of style and voice and exploded attention herald an almost unsolvable closure, always relaunching her readers into a frenzy of associative attempts. This frenzy, a sort of emotional and semantic ride we are constantly negotiating as we try to put the pieces together of these books, is its very meaningful core. We are not solely reading these stories in order to reconstruct a plot reducible to a brief outline, and where all the parts contribute to a single, objectifiable, isolable "theme". Quite the contrary, it is the permanent shifting that is the purpose.

7. UN/PLEASURE

As we reach Peter Wollen's (1972) sixth virtue/sin pair, the one between *pleasure* and *unpleasure*, it becomes slightly more difficult to follow within his lines. The very notion is slightly more controversial for our own times, or at least in my own interpretation. First, entertainment is seen by Wollen as part of a consumer society that was, of course, rightfully so, denigrated by a Marxist criticism standpoint. I do not want to go into that much detail about the contemporary alternative economics of indie comics, even though we may be buying here into some sort of co-opting of normalized marketability, but I will note that despite their limited runs (below 500 copies, overall, of each of the mentioned titles), they have, as one says, "sold well". *Hoje Não*, for instance, even sold out its Portuguese edition and is about to be published in English by a non-negligible new United States independent publisher. Mosi's *My Best Friend Lara* is a hand-made,

hardbound, two-color risograph printed book. With its delicate, textured pastel colors — a two-tone forest green and a stark salmon tone — mixed with expressive brushstrokes (even if done digitally), sometimes even close to abstract-like blots and streaks over the figures, it brings about a striking materiality that serves as a counterpoint to its subject matter — the smooth, so-called immaterial nature of videogames and computer — or phone-based media. In fact, by overexposing digital-native forms across her work, Mosi emphasizes their haptic and emotional qualities, and this book object is its most complete accomplishment. In all respects, it is quite close to an artist's book for its materiality, from artisanal bookbinding and manual interventions, and its very limited print run (a few copies of which were sold with an additional printed drawing). One cannot deny some degree of fetishism at stake here, enhancing its pleasurable features.

However, there is a second level in Wollen's (1972) writing when he touches on fantasy and its complicated cluster of meanings. In order to simplify, I want to appeal to Slavoj Žižek's (2008) dictum that fantasy is constitutive of the subject's reality itself. Allow me a longer quote from the Slovenian philosopher from *The Plague of Fantasies*:

there is no connection whatsoever between the (phantasmatic) real of the subject and his symbolic identity: the two are thoroughly *incommensurable*. Fantasy thus creates a multitude of 'subject positions' among which the (observing, fantasizing) subject is free to float, to shift his identification from one to another. (p. 7, nota de rodapé 5)

We have spoken elsewhere (Moura, 2022, p. 220) of the “permanently shifting bodies” and the “avatars” of creators dealing with trauma-related autobiographies. We have also mentioned above how these authors present oblique forms of representation of their characters, mirroring this multitude of subject positions. Such exploitation of fantasy, of dream work, elicits some sort of pleasure. But the revolutionary unpleasure championed by Wollen (1972) is still extant: it lies within the provocation of these very shifting representation strategies and multiple foci.

There is probably no other clearer realization of such a paradox than Hetamoé's pornographically-informed *Onahole* (Hetamoé, 2013). Materially speaking, this is a very gestural, raw, low-fi affair. This is a classical xeroxed, folded, and stapled booklet made of A4 sheets, with very spontaneous linework apparently drawn in pen, and filled with basic, “dirty” textures that may employ whiteout, graphite, toner dust, or other inks. The figures are bodily but are framed in such a way that they solely reveal the body parts necessary to the minimalist plot, and with straightforward yet evocative, somewhat frantic composition. “Onahole” is the name given to a sex toy, a silicon device that simulates a vagina or anus and is used for penis masturbation. The story presents itself as a text, sometimes written by hand, other times typed, which may point to either a shift within the same unified voice that speaks to the protagonist or alternate voices. As for the images, these depict what looks like flowers, a half-whited-out horse in a landscape, an aroused penis, a young teenage-looking woman, who seems lost, and in at least one scene, shows a disturbing expression of pain on her face, presumably due to a forceful, painful penetration

(Figure 8). The situation is indeterminate, but there are sufficient elements to believe that sexual violence seems to be indeed the key event of this short story, even though there are no absolute assurances. For instance, there is no absolute certainty of who the perpetrator is and who the victim is, even though it is not hard to guess from a societal standpoint. In fact, this visual narrative reminds me of Michèle Cournoyer's (1999) short animation *Le Chapeau*, in which the visual transformations between the incredibly diverse objects are only decipherable through the enigma created by the very sequentialization of the images. If we consider that these objects of self-gratification, the *onaholes*, are yet another absolute and quite spectacularly reductive reification of a woman's or female body, violence is present from the moment of its very conception and manufacturing. However, by intercalating scenes with flowers as well as the recurring word "growing", perhaps Hetamoé wants to point out, obliquely, to a completely different direction: that of self-discovery and self-celebration. The friable frontier between pleasure and unpleasure remains, however.



Figure 8. *Onahole*

Source. From *Onahole*, by Hetamoé, 2013, p. 9. Copyright 2013 by Clube do Inferno.

8. REALITY

The final opposition Wollen (1972) proposed is between *fiction* and *reality*. As we have seen, creating a homogenous storyworld presented to us as if seen by a framed window that erases itself as a channel or offers us the illusion of being unaware of its presence creates an easy path to identification and emotional and intellectual closure. On the contrary, counter-narratives will disturb its spectators and readers, pushing towards a critical positioning and not letting go of the idea that we are facing an interpretable and open-ended text *as text*. *Violent Delights*, for instance, seems to present a staccato-like opening salvo of several framings that paradoxically erase one another by substitution but also create a cumulative effect... Despite the groundedness of *Passé Social* and *Hoje Não*, Matos insists on strategies that make her most specific circumstances present but also forces her readers to negotiate their own positioning in relation to the textual/verbal matter.

However, the negotiation of fiction and reality in a visual medium does not occur solely at the level of its diegesis, its verbal track. Shifting styles, when not justified by a storyworld resource, is jarring and may alert us to complex negotiations of meaning. Take Joana Mosi's (2022a) *The Apartment*. This short book has an impactful exception in its representation choices. As we mentioned, the characters are very simply drawn, with a few lines for their contours. They usually appear with one of two colors, a soft orange and a slightly electric blue, quite probably applied digitally but resulting in a pochoir-like pattern. There is a moment when the male character turns blue (from orange) when he screams across the room to his companion, and at the end, when the female character is reacting to a film they just watched in their living room, her face is red, whereas the rest of her body (as well as surroundings, including her husband) is blue, somewhat like when people blushing are represented in comics. But the greatest discrepancy in style is the page that shows the character crying while watching the movie (Figure 9): we have a page with four panels, separated by a small black filament, showing the character's profile, drawn in a more detailed style, almost realistic, even though it is also done with simple outlines, and a progressively darker and blottier shade of red. A tear rolls down the character's face. She wipes it with her fingers.

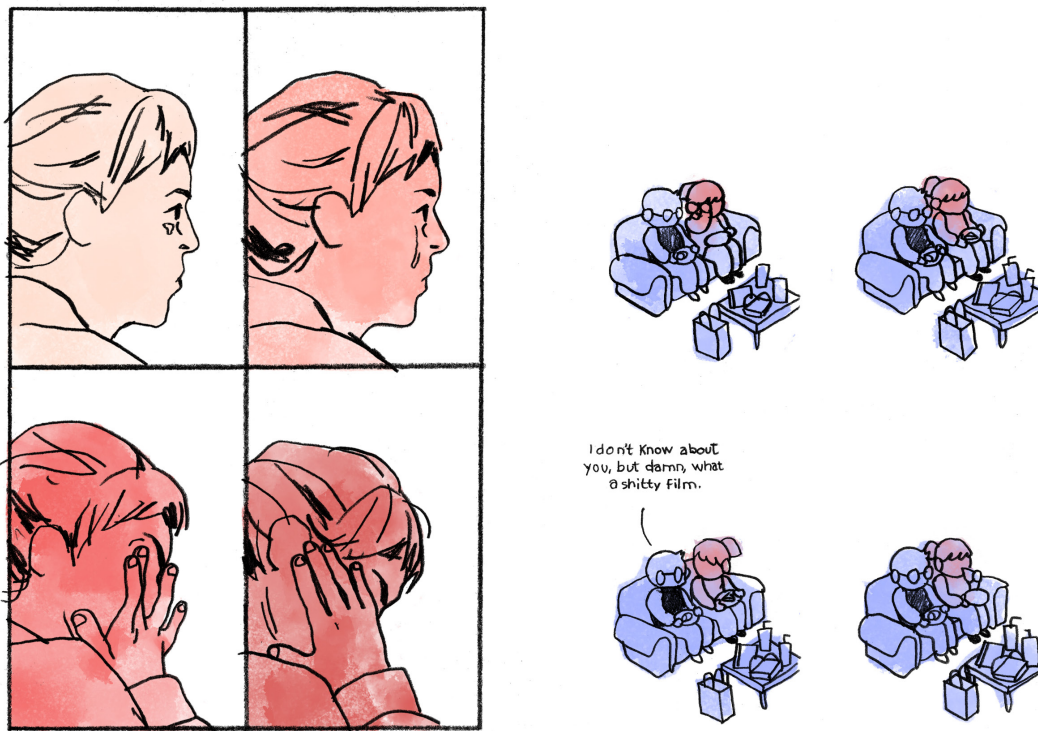


Figure 9. *The apartment*

Source. From *The Apartment*, by J. Mosi, 2022a, pp. 22–23. Copyright 2022 by mini kuš!

When we spoke above of Hetamoé's *Muji Life*, I only mentioned Sianne Ngai's (2005) "ugly feeling" briefly, but now I can unpack this analysis further, given that to a certain extent, perhaps this is a one-page moment that shows that character's *animat-edness*. Right at the introduction of her groundbreaking book, Sianne Ngai (2005) points out how animatedness leads "into the passive state of being moved or vocalized by others for their amusement" (p. 32). Obviously, in *The Apartment*, we are before a little paradox: after all, this flitting, more realistic style could be read as "less animated" than the cartoonish style of the rest of the book, but within its narrative, the contrast acts in such a contrarian way. The sudden access to facial microexpressions embodies the emotional excessiveness, something impossible to accomplish via the *chibi* style from before and after.

As described, the female character was watching a movie. She cries, and we witness that cry via such radical stylistic transformation. The character's husband — back to a *chibi* style — however, seems to have a very different reaction to the same movie, as he says, "I don't know about you, but damn, what a shitty film" (Mosi, 2022a). This acts in two manners. Not only do we understand that the emotional significance was quite different for the couple — she cries over it, he disparages it — as it sees he does not even acknowledge her tearful reaction ("I don't know about you"). Or perhaps he is even minimizing it, locking her out of the possibility of communicating emotion. The visual facts we have access to make us believe that they share the same space (the

sofa) but are miles apart. There are, along the story, hints at issues that could lead to further spousal scuffles: about the back room, the carpet, the placement of the table, and the ordered food price, but “nothing happens”, to quote an important book by Greice Schneider (2016) on how contemporary comics address the aloofness and feelings of inertia in modern society. The very fact that no melodrama in *The Apartment* points to a silent yet simmering degradation of this couple’s intimacy. The female character finds an emotional release in the film, a release that literally — even though in the confines of the materiality of the drawn world — animated her into new shapes and gestures and affective-physical affordances. But she will remain locked.

9. IN CLOSING: ANIMATING MEANING-WEAVING

It is important to notice here that Ngai (2005) also theorizes animatedness as a “marker of racial or ethnic otherness in general” (p. 94). This, however, will not be a venue for analysis in the present chapter. The three artists I am discussing are all white Portuguese women, which does not imply any sort of “neutrality”. Moreover, we could open a lively discussion about Hetamoé’s use of manga characters and all the vexing issues about their perceived Asianness. These are subjects for another moment.

We could also argue that Joana Mosi’s work has been exploring precisely these sorts of subdued, restrained, almost diluted forms of emotion. The stories I have chosen here never amount to explosive demonstrations of feelings, whether of weepy nostalgia for a lost childhood or the uncanniness of recognizing places the protagonists have never been to before. But those are exactly the affective territories being presented and explored and making up the self-construction of the author’s creative voice.

Mosi presents such complex emotions by putting them into seemingly secure, detached spaces. Hetamoé plunges right into paroxysms and shocking images to coax out grueling but necessary emotions and expose our contradictory personas. And Matos launches complicated multilegibility threads that mirror the multitudinous ways through which we form *ourselves*. These acts, each after their own complex fashion, create texts that mitigate the impact or disguise the truth of powerful forms of self-identity, but it is their knotted mesh of feelings that, at the same time, allow us to see through and acutely, the very truth they tentatively conceal. In any case, there is no doubt that the authors warrant further explorations on how they explore decentered subjectivities.

Allow me to return to Wollen (1972) once again and to the closing statement of his short yet highly influential text. He writes,

the cinema cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world. waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings, and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings. (p. 17)

Comics can produce meanings, and those in Mosi’s, Matos’, and Hetamoé’s comics are finely woven and intricately constructed, both a multitude and a recurring pattern

that revisits itself and the selves. It is fragile; it wavers in the wind, but it is ready to trap any new meanings that may come their way.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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THERE'S A MONSTER IN MY MIRROR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GRAPHIC NOVEL *MONSTRANS: EXPERIMENTING WITH HORRORMONES*, BY LINO ARRUDA

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Review and editing

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to debate the construction of queer narratives in alternative forms of language, such as comics, by compiling relevant literature within the theoretical scopes of gender studies, art history and comics. Autobiographical comics offer countless possibilities for reflection because they incorporate visual elements into the narrative construction. When it comes to an autobiographical illustration, readers have a glimpse of how the artist views themselves in their memories and what they propose to expose. To explore the potential for interpreting and analysing queer autobiographical comics, this discussion centres on the graphic novel *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios* (Monstrans: Experimenting with Hormones) by Lino Arruda (2021). This work features deformed watercolour lines that construct the narrative of the author's memories in his journey to understanding his gender identity. The intention is to reflect on the theme of monstrosity present in this work and how it can be a stylistic resource and a means of critiquing the self-representation of dissident bodies, focussing specifically on the artist's relationship with the mirror, a recurring element in other transvestite/trans comics also mentioned in this article.

KEYWORDS

monstrosity, self-representation, transsexuality, comics

TEM UM MONSTRO NO MEU ESPELHO: UMA ANÁLISE DO ROMANCE GRÁFICO AUTOBIOGRÁFICO *MONSTRANS: EXPERIMENTANDO HORRORMÔNIOS*, DE LINO ARRUDA

RESUMO

O presente artigo busca debater a construção de narrativas queer em outras formas de linguagem, como os quadrinhos, através do levantamento de bibliografias dentro dos escopos teóricos dos Estudos de Gênero, História da Arte e Quadrinhos. Uma autobiografia em quadrinhos pode apresentar inúmeras possibilidades de reflexão por se tratar de uma obra que permite que a imagem também seja parte da construção narrativa, pois, quando se trata de uma ilustração autobiográfica, temos a chance de vislumbrar a imagem que o artista tem de si na lembrança e

que se propõe a expor. Com o intuito de investigar as possibilidades de interpretação e análise de uma obra autobiográfica queer em quadrinhos, tal debate será construído por meio da análise do romance gráfico *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios*, de Lino Arruda (2021), que traz, em sua publicação, traços disformes e aquarelados que constroem a narrativa das memórias do autor em seu processo de compreensão de sua identidade de gênero. Intenciona-se refletir sobre a temática da monstruosidade presente nesta obra e como ela pode funcionar como recurso estilístico e crítica da autorrepresentação de corpos dissidentes, focando, especificamente, na relação do artista com o espelho, instrumento frequentemente visto em outras obras em quadrinhos de autoria travesti/trans também aqui mencionadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

monstruosidade, autorrepresentação, transexualidade, quadrinhos

1. INTRODUCTION

Comics can be regarded as a unique form of language that combines words and images to convey content. Through a story constructed by sequential arrangement of drawings and texts, it is possible to engage in discussions through narrative resources such as humour, suspense, drama and even from a perspective of social criticism. What makes comics particularly fascinating is their plurality. From the iconic superheroes created by major foreign publishers such as Marvel Comics or DC Comics to independently published productions that explore creative freedom, as well as journalistic graphic art and children's niche, as seen in the works of Brazilian producer Maurício de Sousa Produções, comics demonstrate that there is room for everyone within this artistic category, for both creators and consumers. Narrowing down the discussion, we can consider, for example, comics' receptiveness to diversity through art that manifests both in writing and illustrations. They can provide a platform for exploring themes related to sexuality and gender identities. By analysing independent and/or autobiographical publications, it is possible to gain insights into how these themes can circulate in comics and the extent of their impact, examining how they are explored.

Comics are present in diverse cultures worldwide, and their productions, while often distinct and unique, have the power to communicate with the reader in multiple ways, as it is a field with a myriad of themes. Definitions of comics and how they are constructed and classified can vary according to the time or place in which theoretical studies on the subject emerge. This variability in meaning is influenced by language, perspectives, and even political contexts. In his thesis, Alexandre Linck Vargas (2015) explores the multitude of approaches to comics around the world, highlighting how the terminology used often shapes the way a particular social niche perceives this medium:

part of the charm that surrounds comics is their many multiple names. In France, they are called *bandes dessinées* [emphasis added] (...). *Comics* [emphasis added], on the other hand, is what they are still called in the USA

because of their inception at the beginning of the 20th century through humour. *Funnies* [emphasis added], on the other hand, fell out of favour, and since the 1980s and 90s, mainly due to Will Eisner, graphic novels and sequential art [emphasis added] have gained ground. In Japan, “the term manga can be traced back to the 18th century, and the Japanese artist Hokusai used it in 1814 to describe his books of ‘eccentric sketches’” (Gravett, 2006: 13). Notably, the word *manga* (without the accent) derives from the Chinese *manhua* [emphasis added], the term for Chinese manga today. Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea use the variation *manhwa* [emphasis added]. In Italy, comics are known as *fumetti* [emphasis added], literally “smoke”, alluding to speech balloons. In Spanish, *historietas* or *cómics* [emphasis added] are common terms, and *tebeos* is popular in Spain as a reference to the famous TBO magazine from 1917, like the word *gibi* in Brazil (...). In Portugal, the term has shifted from *histórias aos quadrinhos* to the contemporary *banda desenhada* [emphasis added]. In Brazil, besides *histórias em quadrinhos*, the word *gibi* is also widely used, synonymous with *moleque*, *negrinho* stemming from Grupo Globo’s 1939 magazine that featured a black boy as its emblematic character on the cover. (pp. 32–33)

As Vargas (2015) mentioned, in Brazil, various terms and expressions are employed within the same context as comics to distinguish the different styles of production and publication. These classifications include “quadrinhos” (comics), “romance gráfico” (graphic novel), “zine”, or “arte gráfica” (graphic art), and they serve to specify the type of narrative one is reading. Since this article will specifically focus on graphic novels¹, it is worth explaining that this is a specific classification of comics that has gained popularity in the publishing market due to its numerous production possibilities. Its designation in Brazil translates to graphic novels, used in the United States to categorise comic books — or comics — with literary traits in their production. However, much like the broader category of comics, graphic novels’ classification, origin, and definition are marked by ambiguity rather than clear-cut delineations:

there is no consensus regarding the emergence of graphic novels. In Spain in the 1940s, “*novelas gráficas*” [emphasis added] were romantic comics (García, 2012: 33). However, the term began taking on more significant artistic aspirations in American *fanzines* during the 1960s. In 1978, with *A contract with God* and its author, Will Eisner, came the real boost for this new terminology, which would gain popularity in the ensuing decades. In many interviews and his textbooks, Eisner has never hidden his idea that comics should be regarded as a form of literature when it comes to reading them,

¹ In this article, the chosen work for analysis will be referred to as a “graphic novel” to underscore its narrative attributes, with the term “comics” being used to encompass the broader category.

aligning with the perspective of the Spaniard Román Gubern in his book *Literatura de la imagen* [emphasis added], first published in 1974. The term *romance gráfico* [emphasis added], or graphic novel, lends comics a sense of literary nobility and takes comics off the newsstands and into bookshops, a trend that has notably evolved over the past two decades. Some critics have taken issue with this term, primarily due to its apparent strategy of elevating comics by associating them with culturally recognised literary traditions in “high culture” spaces. (pp. 33–34)

It should be noted that the genre of autobiography is quite prevalent within this particular category. Its defining characteristics, including a single narrative and creative autonomy, enable works with personal themes to break away from the conventions and artistic constraints typically associated with serialised publications. Contemporary themes challenge or diverge from the established norms of traditional publishing, and comics provide a welcoming space for exploring these ideas and the freedom of expression. As Santiago García (2010/2012), the author of *A Novela Gráfica* (The Graphic Novel), points out, the graphic novel fosters an “awareness of the author’s freedom” (p. 305), which may explain the abundance of autobiographical works in this medium.

Amaro Xavier Braga Jr. and Natania Nogueira (2020) have pointed out that topics concerning sexuality, race, class, and gender tend to be particularly prominent in graphic publications. This prominence is attributed to the unique possibilities offered by illustration, allowing narratives to extend into another form of language that can be shaped not only through written words but also through artistic expression. Moreover, the immediacy required for comic book narratives stems from their dynamic and straightforward reading experience. Consequently, the production of these narratives demands a more incisive approach.

Gender relations, sexuality and feminism have discovered, in this century-old medium, a platform for expressing and depicting diverse tribes that emerged in Western and Eastern societies during the 20th century, incorporating social, political and behavioural aspects that mirror the changes and concerns fueled by the numerous social movements that characterised the 20th century and whose extensions continue to influence the 21st century. (Braga & Nogueira, 2020, p. 8)

Looking back to the second half of the 20th century, we can observe new narrative behaviours influenced by contemporary issues, specifically in North American productions. According to Alexandre Linck Vargas (2016), when some comic artists embraced a more anarchist and revolutionary discourse aimed at amplifying social demands and concerns, as well as breaking paradigms and provoking conservative political norms, comics intended for adult audiences became a countercultural product and were classified

as *underground*². “In the American experience, the highest level of authorship in comics is often linked with underground comics and the world of ‘alternative’ publications” (Vargas, 2016, p. 28). In other words, the production of underground comics, which emerged in the United States in the 1960s, was driven by eschewing norms, provocation, mockery and erotic themes — the latter being classified as *comix*. This movement gave rise to *zines*³, which remain very popular to this day, and for many artists, they are a form of apprenticeship at the start of their careers.

What may draw many authors to the graphic novel is also its flexibility, allowing them to break away from the standardised techniques of classic comic book illustration since its construction praises both the drawing and the narrative, incorporating elements of literature, strengthening the autobiographical possibilities and/or accounts of experience and testimony, as is evident in the object of study of this article. Despite major national publishers recognising the potential of this category and investing in it, the independent Brazilian graphic novel still offers a means to escape the financial constraints of publishing houses and the limitations imposed on the creative processes of comics. Moreover, it opens doors for artists who deviate from heteronormative standards to gain greater visibility.

This article analyses queer-themed comic publications, particularly the autobiographical work *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios* by trans artist Lino Arruda (2021). This analysis will explore the traits and stylistic choices made by the author, who has chosen to represent himself through grotesque images. Additionally, it will examine other comic works within the same thematic scope — that contribute to debates about gender, sexuality and transsexuality, thus fostering the growth and development of the category itself and, by extension, our society, bearing in mind that “comics provide important insights into bridging gaps in our understanding of what human society was, what it is and what potential it has to become in the 21st century” (Braga & Nogueira, 2020, p. 12). To this end, we will use a methodology based on a compilation of literature from gender studies, comics, and art history.

2. DRAWING GENDER

Fortunately, in Brazil, the production of gender-themed comics has become more frequent, largely influenced by the work of the renowned Laerte Coutinho, a transgender cartoonist who found in her drawings a way to understand herself within her gender

² “The term underground may have been coined by Time magazine, initially referring to Andy Warhol’s films and later to the newspapers popping up at the time. As comics appeared in newspapers, they earned this nickname” (Moreau & Machado, 2020, p. 441).

³ *Zines* are low-cost editorial productions to publish and disseminate independent content, usually encompassing illustrations, poetry, manifestos and a diverse range of topics, and can be distributed for free or not. They can be published privately or collectively, depending on their purpose. Very present in the punk movement in the United States, they soon took over the world because they were low-budget productions that could be easily acquired, albeit clandestinely. In Latin America, the production of *zines* remains fairly common, but in Brazil, it was especially prominent in literary circles during the time of the so-called “marginal poetry”.

identity while shedding light on the peculiarities of trans experience for her readers. Notably, research on Laerte's productions and its impact on gender studies has been conducted by Maria Clara da Silva Ramos Carneiro (2021) and Hadriel Theodoro (2016). Maria Clara Carneiro's analysis focuses on Laerte's body, portrayed in her comic strips as a staged transvestite body. She delves into how Laerte, through her characters Hugo and Muriel, has "created a constellation of characters, where her line and approach to humour function as signs or as boundaries between her body as Author and that of the other authors who inspired her" (Carneiro, 2021, p. 64). On the other hand, Hadriel Theodoro (2016) delves into the visibility of transgender experiences in the media, considering them as a form of consumption. He seeks to investigate "the intersections of the media visibilities of transgender people with how they permeate a political and citizen action aimed at legitimising their own existence, securing social recognition devoid of stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination" (p. 34). In the case of Laerte's comics, his research aims to understand:

how Laerte's experience can contain an interrelationship between production and consumption aimed at assigning visibility to transgender people; to determine whether the media portrayals of Laerte's transness favour binary frameworks or the multidimensionality of transgender identities; and to understand how the experience of transness is constructed in the visibility policies derived from Laerte's activist experience. (p. 35)

The character Hugo/Muriel, recognised as an allegory of Laerte's gender transition, emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. Through a series of comic strips published in the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper and on the internet, the artist gradually developed the theme and drew her process, allowing us, her readers, to follow her phases of rediscovery. Vera Maria Bulla (2018), analysing some of the artist's comic strips, notes that:

[the strips] can be seen as a form of self-understanding for the cartoonist who, while learning about gender issues, leverages her knowledge in the strips and spontaneously educates the reader, in a didactic and humorous manner, to learn with her about what it means to be transgender. Laerte's method of sharing her discoveries serves as a way to educate the wider public to be more tolerant and potentially create opportunities for dialogues about respect and acceptance. (p. 32)

Laerte Coutinho's comic strips about her gender transition delve into her desires, confidences and fears, permeated by plenty of humour and a good dose of irony, especially when the focus is on highlighting the shortcomings of hetero-cis-normativity in maintaining genders within a society still based on outdated binary guidelines.

Comic strips have the power to convey ideas and opinions in tandem with the themes they address. Studying Laerte's comic strips to investigate how the process of discovering his own gender identity unfolded through his

characters offers valuable insights by dispelling countless misinterpretations surrounding issues related to gender and sexuality. (Bulla, 2018, p. 47)

Laerte's remarkable talent in comic production, coupled with her ingenuity and courage in opening up to the public, underscores the capacity of autobiographical narratives to thrive across diverse formats and various media. It is no coincidence that the emergence of a voice that resonates with many, employing both narrative and drawing as communication channels, has the potential to promote revelations and transformations in its surroundings by fostering debate on matters of identity and art. As comic artist Aline Zouvi (2020) remarked about the autobiographical space in queer comics:

this autobiographical space amplifies an identity narrative that doesn't just concern its author but an entire community to which he belongs and with which they identify. The fusion of imagery and text provides, in addition to this narrative and discursive construction, the presence and visibility of the image. We might not realise it, but for the author and the LGBTQ+ audience, it is essential not only to read but also to see themselves drawn in the comics. Representativeness finds in autobiographical narratives the opportunity to advance discussions on gender identity and sexuality through the lens of comics. It is becoming increasingly important that we do not lose sight of this power, always striving, as authors or readers, for a production attuned to its social and cultural context but also committed to its artistic quality. (p. 16)

The autobiographical queer graphic novel can thus construct realities on the fringes of a social system that often excludes lives deviating from the norm. We can see, in various works of this specific nature, that the line, the drawing, the illustration, and, in short, the artistic aspect of the visual narrative embodies what the verbal narrative, constrained by speech balloons and subtitles, can merely suggest due to the opacity of language. Works of Brazilian artist Alice Pereira (2019), entitled *Pequenas Felicidades Trans* (Small Trans Happinesses), and Italian artist Fumettibrutti (2022/2019), *La Mia Adolescenza Trans* (My Trans Adolescence), both autobiographies, explore similar plots while presenting distinct constructions. Alice Pereira (2019) approaches her gender transition process from an intimate and self-analytical standpoint through soft lines and colours and with touches of irony and caustic humour.

As noted by Maria da Conceição Francisca Pires (2021), Alice Pereira's intention "was to illustrate how the widespread lack of knowledge, ignorance or refusal to acknowledge transgender issues contributes to reinforcing stereotypes, prejudices, stigmas and taboos" (p. 2). Fumettibrutti (2022/2019), on the other hand, exposes the violence and transphobia she suffered during her process directly and unashamedly, using strong colours and rustic features in a more realistic narrative. Here, visuals have the power to overcome blockages that try to hinder the rights and voices of many LGBTQIA+ lives. As noted in the article "Transmediality Against Transphobia: The Politics of Transsexual

Self-Portraiture in Fumettibrutti's Work Between Comics and Photography", published by Nicoletta Mandolini. In both these works, it is possible to witness an interlocutor who embarks on a process of body *complexion*⁴ that can serve, as in Gloria Anzaldúa's "autohistoria teoria" (self-writing theory; 2012), as a possibility of healing and subjectification. These narratives are not merely cathartic but crucial in exposing the truth and the lived experience.

3. MONSTERS AND HORMONES

Lino Alves Arruda introduces his doctoral thesis, entitled *Monstrans: Figurações (In)humanas na Autorrepresentação Travesti/Trans Sudaca*⁵ (Monstrans: (In)human Figurations in Transvestite/Trans Sudaca Self-Representation) by posing the question "how are transvestite /trans experiences represented in contemporary culture (visual arts, literature, cinema, theatre, etc.)?" (Arruda, 2020, p. 15). Author, artist and comic book artist, Lino identifies as transmasculine and has a disability. He has dedicated his academic research to analysing his experience before, during and after his gender transition, as well as other LGBTQIA+ existences, in unison with his creative approach. In his thesis, Lino Arruda chose to introduce his work with several thought-provoking questions like the one above to prompt reflection on how several of today's artistic manifestations. Although anchored (and here this word fits perfectly) in an initiative intended to embrace diversity, they may inadvertently support discourses that continue to uphold "identity *cysthemes* and are linked to the production of hegemonic knowledge, perspectives and subject positions" (Arruda, 2020, p. 15). His research bore fruit and a year after the presentation of his thesis, Lino published, with the support of the project *Rumos Itaú Cultural* — but still independently — the graphic novel *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios*, his autobiography in comics.

In this work, Lino Arruda recounts his childhood, adolescence and adulthood, focusing on the medical interventions he underwent as a child, the discovery of his sexuality and his reflections on his gender identity. When he draws himself, he uses free and shapeless strokes, sharing with the reader the perception of his image through the eyes of others and from his own perspective. The author dedicates his work as a comic book artist, both in this work and in *zines* published in other years⁶, to tackling themes such as transsexuality, everyday life, sexuality and visibility, which made his autobiography the account of the experience of a person who grew up under strong interventions

⁴ The concept of "complexion" refers to the complexity of the social injunctions each individual carries. As Chantal Jaquet (2014) elaborates, the complexion comprises multiple dimensions (such as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that overlap and interact to shape individual trajectories. The *complexion* is dynamic and can change over time as new social injunctions are incorporated, or old ones are abandoned.

⁵ The "term is a pejorative label used to refer to Latin America and its inhabitants. It gained prominence, particularly in the Spanish context, during the waves of migration in the 1990s, intending to address Latin American immigrants negatively. In this work, the appropriation of this terminology aims to evoke xenophobic/racial tensions and re-signify its original use and meaning" (Arruda, 2020, p. 15).

⁶ They are: *Sapatoons* (2011); *Anomalina* (2013); *Quimer(d)a #1* (2015); *Quimer(d)a #2* (2018) e *Peitos* (2018). Learn more at <https://www.linoarruda.com>.

and social judgements of policies on his body and compulsory attempts (internal and external) to standardise his image and identity. His research work has led him to dedicate his studies and artistic and cultural approaches to the trans and transvestite community, especially through the theme of monstrosity based on our Western culture, as a means of self-representation and expression, as he states:

the primary objective of this research is to identify, organise and analyse a self-representational, independent and countercultural transvestites/trans literary and imagery archive, aiming to create channels through which these dissident voices can engage in productive dialogues with others to reshape the mainstream symbolic repertoire. As such, dismantling the institutional systems that have consistently excluded transvestites/trans self-enunciations and self-representations is one of the prerogatives of this project, especially considering the exoticising and alienating imaginaries and discourses commonly found in the authorised sites of knowledge production about dissident subjectivities. (Arruda, 2020, p. 15)

Through his self-representation, Lino draws creatures that many would consider grotesque, sometimes reflected in the mirror, at times looking back at us, with the aim of re-signifying what exactly this “frightening” characteristic is, this monstrosity, which reflects social hypocrisy much more than how he sees himself. After all, we label as a monster something or someone not identified within standardisation, not reflected in the mirror of the so-called “ordinary”, which is demeaning and considered abject. The philosopher Julia Kristeva (1980) explored the concept of abjection in her work *Poderes do Horror: Ensaio Sobre a Abjeção* (Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection). She contended that the abject is what causes strangeness, shakes established foundations and threatens an existing order: in this sense, the trans existence exposes the failures of the social heteronormative system.

Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness [*propreté*] or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva, 1980, p. 4)

The horror of abjection described by Julia Kristeva is close to the representations of the female body in literature and cinema, when this body is also seen as abject, as we can interpret from Barbara Creed's (2007) notes in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's essay (1980/?), she analyses how the representation of women in horror films involves abjection through the lens of masculinity.

The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity.

However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one. (Creed, 2007, p. 7)

Although heteronormativity here is not directly challenged within a system of sexuality control, much of female representations in horror films permeates the narrative in which women are subjected to physical and/or psychological torment imposed by male characters, whether human or monstrous. The abjection of the female body is, therefore, constructed by misogyny. On this subject, philosopher Judith Butler, in an interview conducted by the Women's Studies Department of the Utrecht University Arts Institute⁷ in the Netherlands, examines the concept of abjection and underscores that reimagining bodies can be seen as a pillar of feminism which is crucial for survival. She goes on to highlight that “the abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology.” (Prins & Meijer, 2002, p. 157).

But back to Lino Arruda, why monstrosity? In fact, monstrosity has been a recurring theme in Western art since ancient times, with its roots in Homeric poems and heroic epics. Mythical creatures like cyclopes, sirens, and three-headed monsters are fanciful creations that often played the roles of tormentors in literary adventures filled with moral lessons and symbolic meaning. However, as pointed out by Ana Soares (2018), monsters are not confined solely to the realm of imaginative literature, nor are they always cast in antagonistic roles. In analysing the subject, Soares states that monstrosity — or, as she calls it, “the monstrous” — is a concept that permeates our culture and extends beyond the realm of imagination and creative storytelling. It serves as a representation of the fear of the unknown or a challenge to reason:

monsters are not just the product of abstract imagination, nor is their existence expressed only in verbal discourse: their incarnations in graphic pictorial images are many and go back a long way. They didn't just emerge with technological sophistication (such as cinema). In fact, some of the monsters with the most extensive graphic representations in 16th-century illustrations can be traced back to texts from the 5th century BC. Monsters' discursive expression and visual counterparts are not new, nor were they only discovered during the age of European exploration and contact with their neighbours. The etymology of “monster” seems to be associated with the Latin verb “moneo”, which means “to warn”. In some way, therefore, when referred to this way, monsters convey a signal, usually of some fear, negative or threatening event. (Soares, 2018, p. 55)

Ana Soares (2018) delves deeper into her discussion by reflecting on what it is about the monster that fascinates the human who created it and concludes that the

⁷ Originally published as “How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview With Judith Butler” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* in 1998 by The University of Chicago Press..

monstrous is something intimately connected to humanity since “the monstrous, after all, is human like us” (p. 56). For the author, the wellspring of the creation of the monsters that haunt and terrify humans is the realm of reason, unique to us human beings, considered rational and thinking animals. These qualities set us apart from what might be deemed abominable.

The monstrous resides within us whenever we contemplate it. Wherever we are, it is always nearby and far from exotic. It is initially described as the dehumanised, the sub- or super-humanised. Its constitution in literature (...) is formed by emphasising the differences that set it apart from those who describe it, from the writer — from humanity, thus, from a non-monstrosity of the writer. Nevertheless, since they are solely generated in human thought, monsters are, after all, as human as we are by their very essence (Soares, 2018, p. 66)

In an etching by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, from 1799, reason is seen as the very creator of monstrosity. The etching, known as *Plate 43* (Figure 1), is part of the collection “Los Caprichos”⁸ and reads “the sleep of reason produces monsters”:

⁸ “This is the best known image from Goya’s series of 80 aquatint etchings published in 1799 known as ‘Los Caprichos’ that are generally understood as the artist’s criticism of the society in which he lived. Goya worked on the series from around 1796-98 and many drawings for the prints survive. The inscription on the preparatory drawing for this print, now in the Prado Museum in Madrid, indicates that it was originally intended as the title page to the series. In the published edition, this print became plate 43, the number we can see in the top right corner” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, s.d.).



Figure 1. *Los Caprichos*, Plate 43

Source. From "Plate 43 from "Los Caprichos": The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (El Sueño de la Razon Produce Monstruos)", by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, s.d. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/338473>). Public Domain

Goya was a harsh social critic. *Plate 43* was the artist's attempt to prompt Spain's social and intellectual strata to pay closer attention to the relevant events of his time, which involved political issues between the country and France (Soares, 2018). In this case, the monstrosity, represented by animals flying over the figure of a man lying at a table at which he was apparently writing, conveys the representation of what could emerge the moment reason succumbs:

the caption itself induces ambiguity in the interpretation: the Castilian word "sueño" can either mean the "sleep" of reason (in other words, the moment when reason allows itself a moment of peace and man is dominated by the non-rational) or it can be the "dream" of reason, symbolising a projection or longing, which would be the fruit of the human capacity to create ideas, or the outcome of a state of vigilant production in which monsters are generated. In either interpretation, for Goya, even when represented outside what is physically human, the monstrous is born of that and may even be born from the most human of qualities: reason. (Soares, 2018, p. 55)

Indeed, the representation of monstrosity in the arts has long been a means of questioning human behaviour and rationality, as well as humanity's ability to create and be dazzled by the unknown, fascinated by what is new, and at the same time, being enthralled by monstrosity can be nothing more than a reflection of what human reason itself is when it is free or at rest.

So, how can monstrosity be autobiographical? Before introducing this explanation, it is worth mentioning that the graphic novel *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios*, before its completion and publication as a complete work, emerged through the publication of one of the zines authored by Lino Arruda (2020): "combining illustrations and autofictions, *Monstrans: experimentando horrormônios* is a chapter-zine in which I embark on the non-human in autobiographical representations to recount my transmasculine experiences of unintelligibility" (p. 19). Lino emphasises when talking about this chapter-zine in his thesis that the monstrous subjectification he uses in his illustrations can disrupt the norms that define what representation and reality are, pushing aesthetics beyond the human realm and into the territory of monstrosity, a recurring theme in the theoretical framework of his research into dissident artistic productions in a decolonial context (Arruda, 2020). He goes on to say that the classic image of the monster (werewolf, *Frankenstein*, or even an animal/human hybridism) used in his illustrations takes up agendas that persisted in Brazil since the colonial period, which associated transvestite/trans existences with animality.

Throughout history, the conception of monsters has been associated with identity disorientation, evident in various cultures, religions, and literature, as João Carlos Firmino Andrade de Carvalho (2018) states:

the monster, in order to be a monster, in the full sense of the word/concept, must reside on that boundary between existence and non-existence, between the possible and the impossible, paralysing and enrapturing the human being's gaze at something unique and unrepeatable and showing them not so much what they are not, but a singular alternative possibility of existence. (p. 39)

This non-place of belonging can also be related to the dissociation of human identity that transvestites/trans people suffer from a society that denies citizenship, dignity and human rights to such experiences: "the problem posed by the monster is therefore that of the dialectic of identity and difference, or, to put it another way, that of the limits of man's humanity" (Carvalho, 2018, p. 40).

Philosopher Paul B. Preciado (2021) also uses the idea of the monster as a reference to his existence as a non-binary body in his speech "Eu Sou o Monstro que Vos Fala" (Can the Monster Speak?). This speech was written by Preciado in 2019 to be read by him at the "International Conference" of the School of the Freudian Cause, when he was invited to speak at a psychoanalysis conference at the Palais de Congrès in the French capital, Paris. As it turned out, the philosopher could not finish reading his speech because he was

booed, offended and ridiculed by the 3,500 psychoanalysts who were meeting to discuss the topic of “women in psychoanalysis” and who did not accept the speaker’s questions:

the speech triggered an earthquake. When I asked whether there was a psychoanalyst in the auditorium who was queer, trans or nonbinary, there was silence, broken only by giggles. When I asked that psychoanalytic institutions face up their responsibilities in response to contemporary discursive changes in the epistemology of sexual and gender identity, half the audience laughed and the other half shouted or demanded that I leave the premises. One woman said, loudly enough that I could hear her from the rostrum: “We shouldn’t allow him to speak, he’s Hitler”. Half the auditorium applauded and cheered. The organizers reminded me that my allocated time had run out, I tried to speed up, skipped several paragraphs, I managed to read only a quarter of my prepared speech. (Preciado, 2021, pp. 278–279)

Preciado (2021) dedicated the publication of the full speech to Judith Butler. In the more than 50 pages of his account, we can understand how mistakenly the psychoanalytical class can influence the widespread perception of trans experiences by pathologising gender and sexuality, attributing them to mental illnesses and biological disorders:

I, a body branded by medical and juridical discourse as “transsexual”, characterized in most of your psychoanalytic diagnoses as a subject of an “impossible metamorphosis”, find myself, according to most of your theories, beyond neurosis, on the cusp of — or perhaps even within the bounds of — psychosis, being incapable, according to you, of correctly resolving an Oedipus complex or having succumbed to penis envy. And so, it is from the position assigned to me by you as a mentally ill person that I address you, an ape-human in a new era. I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with your discourse and your clinical practices. I am the monster who gets up from the analyst’s couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen, as your monstrous equal. (p. 281)

At various points in his speech, the author states that he prefers his new condition as a “monster of modernity” (Preciado, 2021, p. 317), as perceived by psychoanalysis, over attempting to cage himself within the binary condition of the cisgender world. For him, to exist within the experience of this monster is to be able to belong to an unexplored universe. As we can also see in Lino Arruda’s graphic novel in the moments when his shapeless identity is represented, transsexuality is a dynamic state; it is an ongoing process that unfolds throughout one’s lifetime, one that defies the norms ingrained in a system of control precisely because it acts in a manner that transcends conventions: “the monster is one who lives in transition. One whose face, body and behaviours cannot yet be considered true in a predetermined regime of knowledge and code — the code may be a language, a power” (Preciado, 2021, p. 296). This is probably the inspiration for the title *Monstrans*.

The hormonal changes associated with gender transition, the derogatory social stigma on dissident bodies, discovering a new body and searching for remnants of what no longer exists are themes of many independent productions and have provided readers with a sense of identification and recognition⁹. Bringing the narrative closer to the reality of those who consume autobiographical works on these themes shows that different experiences are animalised by the (cis)theme (Arruda, 2020).

This representational artifice has become more prevalent in contemporary countercultural media (such as zines, booklets and other autonomous literary materials), especially in projects aiming to challenge the observer (by using the figure of a body that quickly and intuitively generates identification) and, at the same time, circumvent the burden of compulsorily evoking an identity unit through the representation of the body. (Arruda, 2020, p. 26)

Lino Arruda also notes that instead of fighting to get out of a marginal or underground label, queer graphic publications prefer to embrace the chaos and assume the failure inherent to heteronormativity itself since, for there to be success on one side, there always needs to be failure on the other. Therefore, if such publications show a loss of human identification, linguistic standardisation, control of bodies, among others, it is because of a resistance movement that, by assuming failure, allows the transvestite/trans counterculture to take the power of its time and space upon itself, re-signifying its identity through the exposure of monstrosity, as we can see in the comic below by Lino Arruda, published in one of his zines (Figure 2).

⁹ Examples of some Brazilian productions: *Arlindo* (2021), by artist Luiza de Souza (Ilustralu); *Quadrinhos Queer* (2021), curated by Ellie Irineu, Gabriela Borges and Guilherme Smee; *Sob a Luz do Arco-Íris* (2020), curated by Mário César Oliveira; *Revista Mina de HQ* (<https://www.minadehq.com.br>), an annual publication, curated by Gabriela Borges.



Figure 2. Zine Quimer(d)a, Number 2, 2017

Source. From *Monstrans: Figurações (In)humanas na Autorrepresentação Travesti/Trans Sudaca*, by L. A. Arruda, 2020, p. 38. Copyright 2020 by UFSC.

Nota: Transition from depression / This beard won't grow! / Minoxidil - Now it will! / Let it happen / Na-tu-ra-lly / Now just lie back and dream bearded dreams / Uuaah. Today's the day! / Hey, where is it? / Ahn? / Of course. / Good morning to all mutant bodies!

The accounts of the gender transition process in comics, such as those in the picture above, have a common element relevant to our discussion since it is always present when the artist is self-reflected during the narrative: the mirror. The mirror in *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios* (2021) is much more than a scenographic feature. This device allows the reader to follow Lino Arruda's self-reflective process about his identity, gender transition and the transformative effects of hormonal chemical processes that damage his skin. Moreover, the mirror is also present in moments of his childhood and adolescent memories as an object that exposes what is out of place. However, later, it also serves the function of confrontation, the search for understanding and identification. In his narrative, Lino illustrates how, during his childhood and adolescence, he realised that there was a body in the mirror's reflection that was not in its ideal space, in its place of truth. Lino's change in behaviour towards the object over time is clear: before, he was

a confused child apprehensive in front of his reflection, even turning his back on it; later, an individual contemplating the changes with a new perspective, one of admiration and discovery, ultimately leading to self-knowledge. In front of the mirror, monstrosity takes shape in Lino's eyes, making him see what is extraordinary where others project abjection.

The book's introduction begins with the author gazing into the mirror, inviting the reader to join him in reflecting on the consequences of undergoing hormone treatment with testosterone: acne rashes, oiliness, and scarring, among others. In Figure 3, we can see that this dialogue is with us, as Lino first draws himself looking outside the frame, outside the work, demonstrating the drawing's ability to establish a direct and tangible connection with the recipient. That is made clear in the first picture, where the reflection faces us, and yet there is nobody in front of it, which is more evident in the second picture when the monstrous creature has its back to the mirror and faces us. Here, we see a transformed naked body with four breasts and a tail, a snout and lots of hair. The self-representation constructed in this introduction aims to reflect on the changes caused by the hormones and how Lino feels as he goes through this process — the process of monstrosity — as well as the new precautions he must learn to take to and prevent the treatment's side effects from becoming permanent.

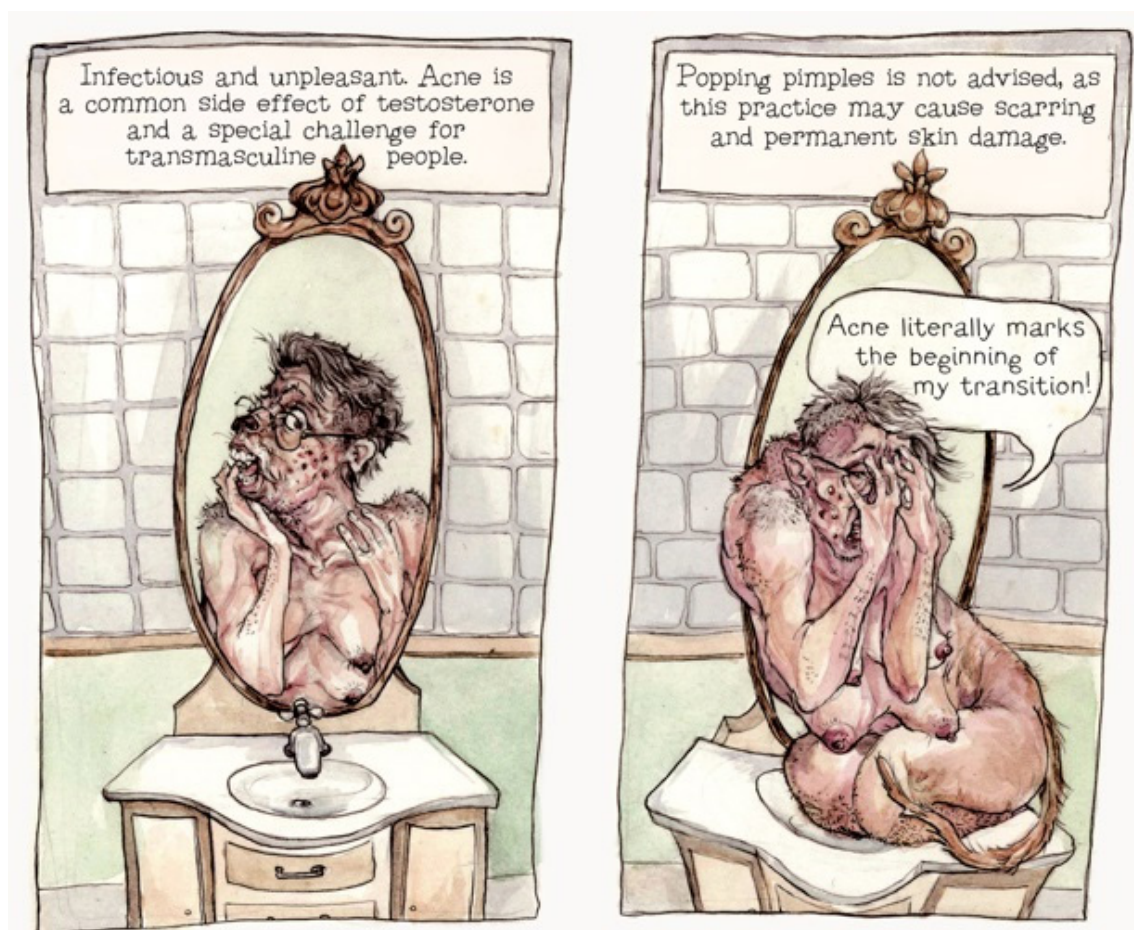


Figure 3. About acne

Source. From "Introdução", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando hormormônios*, p. 6. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

In Figure 4, the hybrid creature in the mirror turns its attention to itself, closely analysing its appearance through a magnifying glass. It now engages the readers through this object, drawing them into its self-examination, thus creating a third perspective — ours — in its self-analysis. Lino then teaches us that the complexities of the damage caused by acne go beyond the skin's surface. He explains that since inside the pimples, living in the pus, there are bacteria that can proliferate and generate further infections. Based on this information, the introduction of the work also serves as a reflection, making Lino contemplate the life that resides inside him and how it is part of his body and his transition. Despite the potential harm, these bacterial lives emerged when he began his transition, making them part of the process.

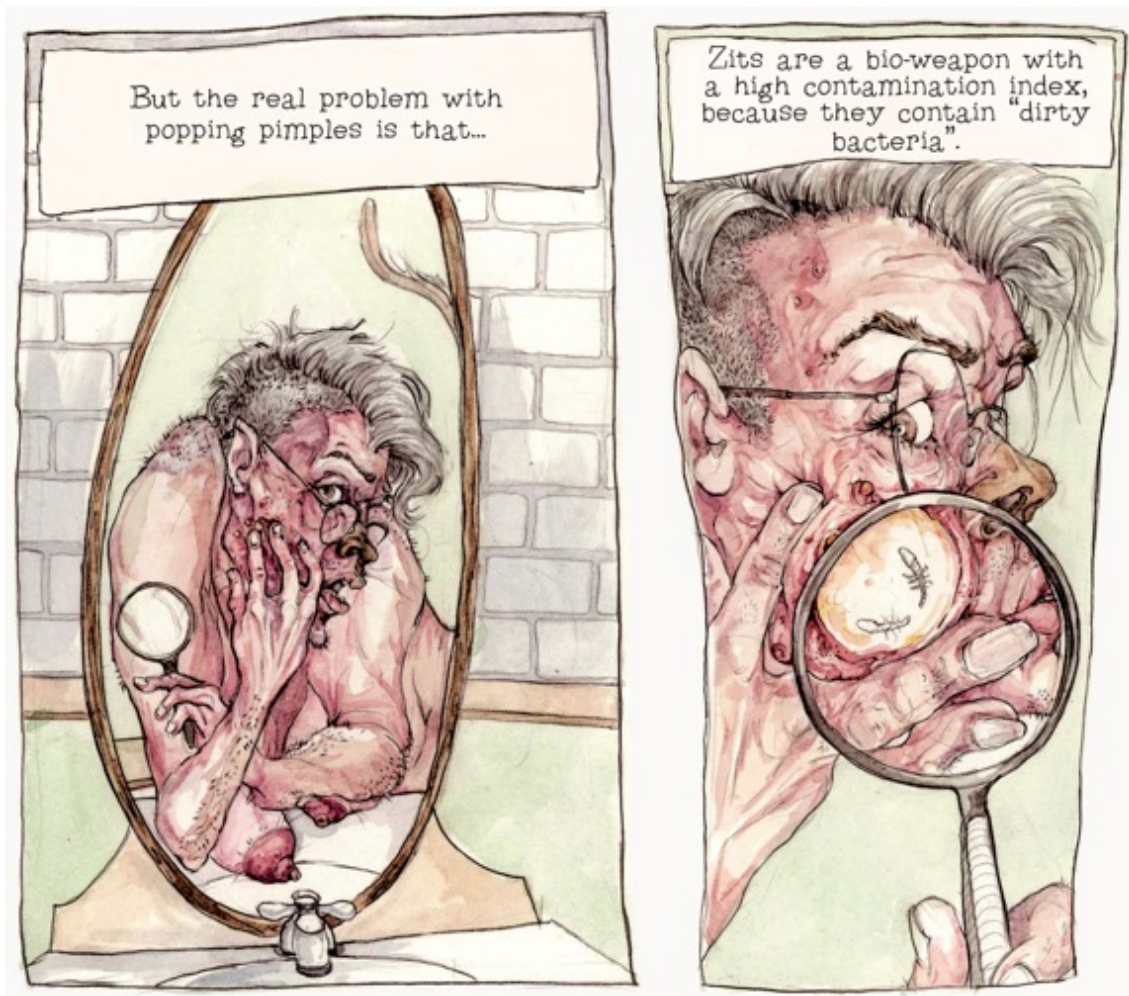


Figure 4. Acne under the magnifying glass

Source. From "Introdução", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horrormônios*, p. 6. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

As such, Lino Arruda embraces the possibility of perceiving the less pessimistic side of interpreting his transition process and marvels at what his body can create, as we can see in Figure 5.

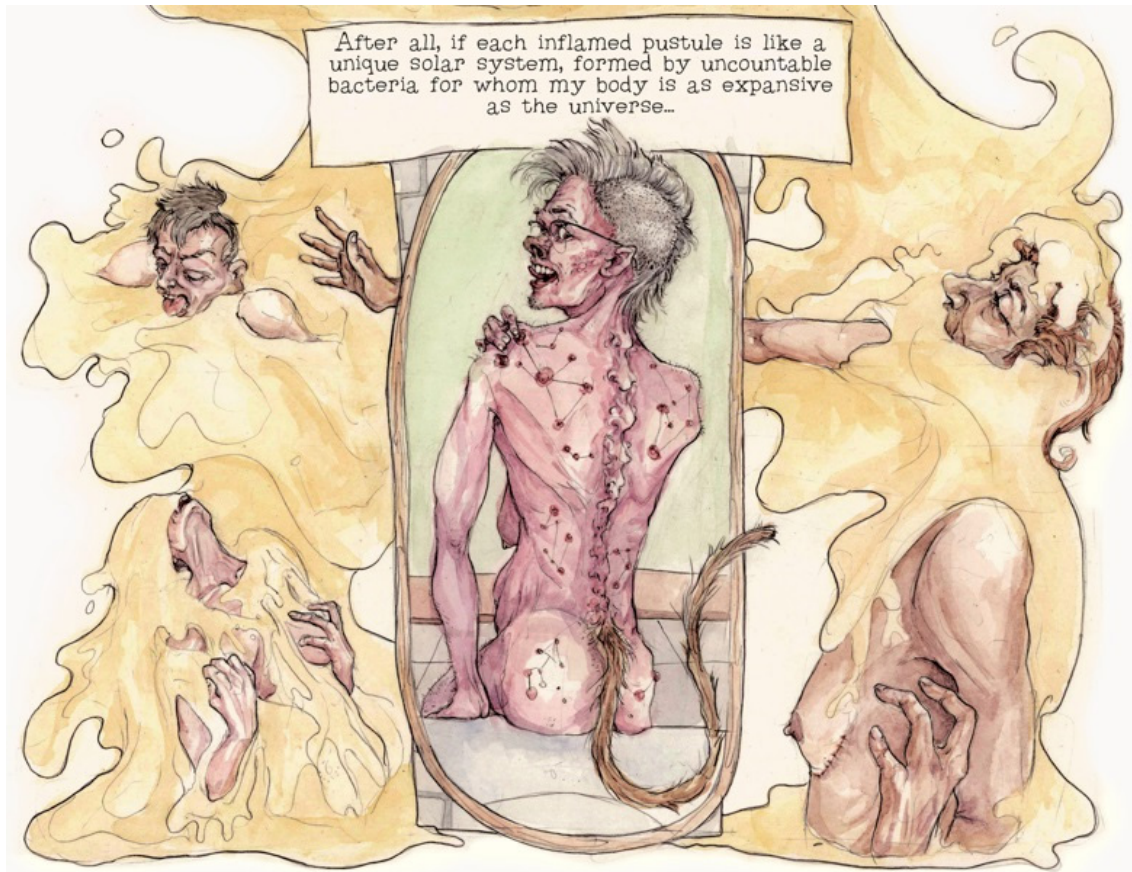


Figure 5. Acne acceptance

Source. From "Introdução", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horrormônios*, p. 6. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

In Chapter 1, titled “Conversion Therapy”, Lino Arruda delves into his childhood memories and the time when, while struggling with his doubts about discovering his sexuality, he underwent painful physiotherapy treatment due to his physical disability. The author tells us that during her pregnancy, his mother was involved in a car accident that caused an injury that affected the development of his spine and lower limbs. So, from an early age, Lino has had to deal with a body that does not conform to the standards demanded by society. Little did he know this would be just the first of many medical and invasive processes he would have to endure. In an interview with *Revista Mina de HQ* in 2022, Lino says that in *Monstrans*, he tried to address all possible manifestations of his body and how it finds itself in society, surrounded by the labels assigned to him immediately after birth:

in *Monstrans*, I wanted to explore those moments of convergence between being trans, being disabled, being born visibly disabled and visibly masculine, with a visibly crooked gender. It’s one of the moments when the discourses are very different, like the medical discourse: this idea that I was born trans or that I was born “in the wrong body”. These are convenient discourses that ultimately serve the purpose of trying to “fix the body” or make it “the right body”. (Vitorelo, 2022, p. 34)

The title of this chapter takes us back to the conversion therapy for homosexuality, the so-called “gay cure”, advocated by conservative extremists who believe it is possible to cure homosexuality as if it were a disease, making individuals heterosexual. As such, the title serves as a pun on the fact that physiotherapy sessions would also be a way of converting his divergent body, as he narrates in Figure 6 and Figure 7.



Figure 6. The physiotherapy

Source. From “Terapia de Conversão”, by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horormônios*, p. 22. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.



Figure 7. Medical Interventions

Source. From "Terapia de Conversão", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horrores mônicos*, p. 39. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

The physiotherapy process, intended to “fix” Lino’s body, helps the author contemplate his image and see the monstrosity he will later explore as the power of his existence. However, like any process of change and discovery, it is not only slow but also painful, both physically and emotionally, especially for a child trying to understand their peculiarities through the indolent discourse of medicine. Therefore, until the moment of self-awareness, Lino faces an inner battle and, for a while, the mirror, this object that unveils his raw truth, becomes a source of discomfort. In Figure 8, we witness a moment in the narrative when Lino tells us he was enrolled in a ballet school to work on his spine and posture alignment. However, for the author, being in a studio surrounded by mirrors only worsened his relationship with his image.



Figure 8. The room of mirrors

Source. From "Terapia de Conversão", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horromônios*, p. 25. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

Over time, Lino's relationship with the mirror evolves from annoyance to contemplation, as the object accompanies the author's transformation and becomes an instrument of study and self-discovery. In Figure 9, we can see that Lino starts to grasp the nuances of his image and the distinctive qualities of his body that make him unique, as if, at this stage, he began to embrace monstrosity and interpret it as a metaphor for his self-representation.



Figure 9. A new vision

Source. From "Terapia de Conversão", by L. A. Arruda, 2021, *Monstrans: Experimentando horrormônios*, p. 40. Copyright 2021 by Lino A. Arruda.

The use of the mirror in an autobiographical comic book narrative has the powerful ability to allow us, as readers, to witness the process of self-knowledge in motion, narrated as it happens or as a recollection. Whether used for contemplation or confrontation, the mirror peels away the layers of illusion we may have constructed about our image, revealing reality even if it is open to our interpretation. Revisiting Vera Bulla's article (2018), the researcher also highlighted the significance of the mirror in her analysis of Laerte Coutinho's comic strips. In these strips, Hugo is sometimes depicted interacting with his own reflection while dressed as Muriel, as illustrated in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Hugo, standing before the mirror

Source. From “Capítulo”, by L. Coutinho, 2005, *Hugo Para Principiantes*, p. 49. Copyright 2005 by Editora Devir.

Note. For the classic tummy problem, a classic solution! Genius! Now, an outfit to disguise it!

For the author: “we can then consider that Hugo sees his feminine beauty in the mirror and admires a new way of showing himself to the world, glimpsing a new possibility, contemplating it while observing his reflection in the mirror” (Bulla, 2018, p. 39). This suggests that this could be another function of the mirror object, the glimpse of an expectation, as we can see in Alice Pereira’s comic (2019; Figure 11).

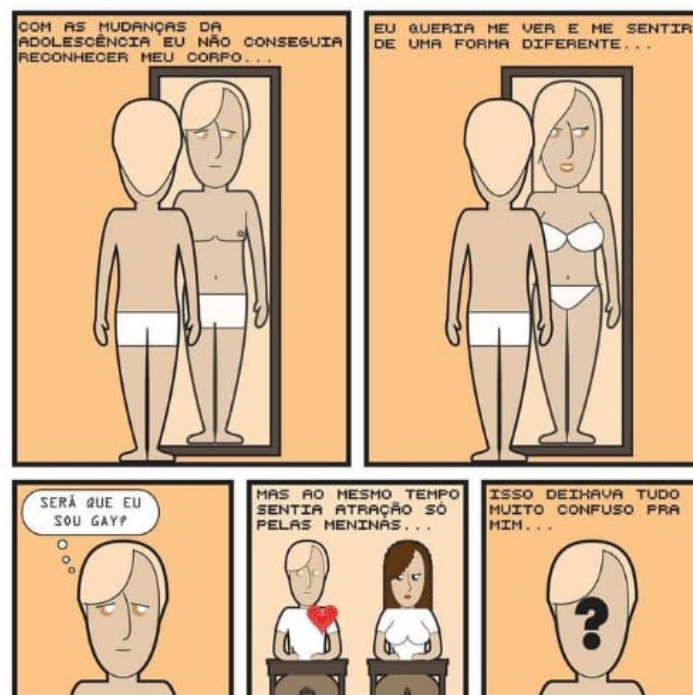


Figure 11. Pequenas Felicidades Trans

Source. From “Capítulo”, by A. Pereira, 2019, *Pequenas Felicidades Trans*, p. 9. Copyright 2019 by Edição da Autora.

Note. With the changes of adolescence, I couldn't recognise my body... / I wanted to see and feel myself differently... / Could I be gay? / But at the same time, I was only attracted to girls... / That made everything very confusing for me...

Through the reflection, the narrative can also be constructed from a futuristic perspective, as the mirror in an illustration can offer a glimpse of the artist's vision of self-representation and what he imagines the end of his process might be. As such, we can understand that Lino Arruda's relationship with the mirror constantly evolved during his maturing phase. The monstrous vision, which generated confusion and even shame, became a monstrous vision that fascinates and seduces.

4. CONCLUSION

The use of monstrosity as a resource for self-representation in the graphic novel *Monstrans: Experimentando Horrormônios* may disappoint readers expecting a story about overcoming a disability, the challenges of discovering transsexuality or even a transsexual man's image disorder. On the other hand, Lino Arruda, frustrates all those mistaken expectations when he provokes us with his boldness and attitude by proudly drawing himself shapeless and in visceral tones as he explores the study of his body, his image and his technique.

At every transformation observed in the mirror or depicted on the physiotherapy table, Lino is one step ahead of those who anticipated an LGBTQIA+ narrative with a tragic beginning, with pre and post-gender transition moments leading to a happy ending. Instead, for the author, each painful or challenging moment he narrates and draws is part of reflecting on the events that have marked his life and proved crucial to his development. That is why *Monstrans* wraps up neatly; it avoids romanticising suffering and prompts readers to confront it candidly and directly without beating around the bush or lamenting. On each page, the child, teenager and adult that is Lino Arruda learns from the setbacks he faces, the mistakes he makes and the obstacles that stand in his way, showing the evolution of his personality and self-awareness, making his journey the primary focus of the plot.

Works like Lino Arruda's, deviate from portraying marginalised existences as tragedies, offering a chance to perceive that experiences beyond heteronormative societal norms and aesthetic conventions are not exceptions but simply additional ways of coexisting within society. However, we still have a long way to go when it comes to approaching transvestite/trans themes in any media, be it comics, literature, cinema, television, among others. These experiences persist on the periphery of an oppressive standardising system. Artists such as Laerte Coutinho and Lino Arruda, as influential voices in their spheres, contribute to paving the way for other narratives to emerge and be heard, or in this case, read and contemplated. Lino's portrayal of monstrosity is an act of reclaiming his self-image. It becomes an action to re-signify perspectives, both his own and those of the society that condemns him. He harnesses the power to convert prejudice and transphobia into inspiration for his art. As he highlighted in his doctoral thesis, this movement also happens in other artistic manifestations.

The graphic novel can be seen as a welcoming category for dissent since its characteristics can be attractive to free creativity and productive independence, beckoning

artists looking for a democratic and liberating space to go beyond the forms of more traditional comics. Despite the financial and personal obstacles that stand in the way of those who strive for freedom of expression, the graphic novel's growth in Brazil has been notably positive. Artists like Lino Arruda, who explore queer themes in their work, will always endure a challenging journey in advocating for the right to exist. It falls on us, readers, funders, researchers, and enthusiasts of the ninth art, to pursue this hopeful endeavour, fostering an environment where more artists can emerge daily, bolstering resistance and advocating for LGBTQIA+ experiences.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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MULTIPLICITIES, NARRATIVES OF LIFE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF TEACHING IN THE COMIC *FESSORA!*

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ABSTRACT

This article features the comic *Fessora!*, drawn and written by Brazilian author Aline Lemos, published independently and through crowdfunding in 2021. The narrative focuses on the author's personal experience of teaching one semester of history in a public school. Aline presents a set of 15 stories that address their personal memories with co-workers, students, and parents. Six stories in comic format were selected in order to understand, based on the memories and fragments of life narrated, the tensions and confluences between the work experiences highlighted by the artist. They portray their personal experience as a teacher, the emergence of a collective that reveals to us the daily life of public-school teachers in Brazil. In our analysis, we used the perspective of the life narrative of the Argentine linguist Leonor Arfuch (2002/2003, 2013) on the relationship between contemporary life narratives and the biographical space, plus the notion of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1999; Bosi, 2009) to understand the multiplicity of experiences arising from individual memory. The conclusion reached is that Aline Lemos's work highlights the challenges of education on the valorization of the teacher and the social inequalities in the classroom.

KEYWORDS

life narrative, collective memory, comic book, teaching, education

MULTIPLICIDADES, NARRATIVAS DE VIDA E MEMÓRIA COLETIVA DA DOCÊNCIA NA HISTÓRIA EM QUADRINHOS *FESSORA!*

RESUMO

O artigo apresenta o quadrinho *Fessora!*, desenhado e escrito pela brasileira Aline Lemos, publicado de modo independente e por financiamento coletivo em 2021. A história narrada tem como enfoque a experiência pessoal da autora quando foi docente de história no ensino público por um semestre. A autora nos apresenta um conjunto de 15 histórias que abordam suas memórias pessoais com colegas de trabalho, corpo discente e pais. Neste texto, foram selecionadas seis bandas desenhadas, a fim de compreender, a partir das memórias e dos fragmentos de vida narrados, as tensões e confluências entre as vivências de trabalho acionadas pela artista.

Retratam sua experiência pessoal como professora, a emergência de um coletivo, que nos revela o cotidiano de professores da educação pública no Brasil. Para esta análise, usamos a ótica da narrativa de vida da linguista argentina Leonor Arfuch (2002/2003, 2013), quanto à relação entre narrativas de vida contemporâneas e o espaço biográfico; e a noção de memória coletiva (Halbwachs, 1950/1999; Bosi, 2009) para compreender a multiplicidade de experiências a partir da memória individual. Conclui-se que Aline Lemos apresenta uma obra que evidencia os desafios da educação sobre a valorização do docente e as desigualdades sociais em sala de aula.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

narrativa de vida, memória coletiva, história em quadrinho, docência, educação

1. INTRODUCTION

Fessora! is a comic book written and illustrated by Aline Lemos¹. Published independently in 2021, it received financial aid from crowdfunding and the Aldir Blanc Cultural Emergency Act, of the Belo Horizonte City Hall. In their graphic narrative, Lemos portrays their experiences as a public-school teacher in Minas Gerais during the semester they held the position of history teacher². This life experience was marked by challenges arousing more questions than answers, as the artist points out in the book.

We have taken comic books based on what Postema (2018) postulates as art and narrative forms, a system in which fragmented and distinct elements act together to create a whole that is complete. The comics, therefore, have pictorial and textual parts, often presenting a mix of the two. We also rely on Paulo Ramos (2011, 2014) to understand this art form and narrative as a hypergenre that functions as a kind of “label” within which several common genres come together, although they are individual and autonomous, since they are composed and named in different ways. In that author’s understanding, this is because these autonomous genres are shaped in interactive and sociocognitive processes and, therefore, do not happen automatically.

This hypergenre of comics is made up of various cartoon formats (Ramos, 2011, p. 105), such as caricatures (*charges*³), cartoons, comic strips, serial comic strips, free

¹ Artist, comic artist and illustrator from Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, self-declared non-binary person (their pronouns are *elu/ela*). They wrote “dozens of zines and books such as *Artistas Brasileiras* (Brazilian Artists; 2018), published in partnership with the publisher Miguilim — which earned them the 31st HQ Mix Trophy (2019) in the Homage category — and independent publications such as *Fogo Fato* (2020) and *Fessora!* (2021), both made possible by crowdfunding. They collaborated with publications such as *Folha de São Paulo*, *A Zica*, *Plaf!*, *Banda* and *Mina de HQ*, and were a teacher in the courses *Vidas, quadrinhos e relatos*, financed by the Municipal Law of Incentive to Culture (BH) — which resulted in a book of the same name — and *FIQ-Jovem*, of the Municipal Foundation of Culture of Belo Horizonte. In addition, they are founding member of the group *ZiNas* (2014) with which they published the zines *Transa* (2014) and *Aborto* (Miscarriage; 2015) and the book *Vida, Quadrinhos e Relatos* (Life, Comics and Stories; 2017)” (Lage, 2022, p. 292).

² Aline holds a bachelor’s and master’s degree in History from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, as well as complementary training in design and fine arts. As reported in the comic itself, four years after applying for a vacant position, Aline was summoned to the classroom. At the time, they were already studying on their way towards the arts, but they needed a job and so they stayed one semester in the school. This experience is portrayed in *Fessora!*.

³ *Charge*, according to Paulo Ramos (2009), is a text of humour (which can contain images/illustrations/drawings and words) that deals with facts or themes linked to the news. According to the author, it is no coincidence that they are usually published in the politics or opinion section of newspapers. This is because politicians are often a great source of inspiration for cartoonists, who tend to portray them in a caricatured way. Thus, by establishing an intertextual relationship with the news, cartoons to some extent recreate the facts in a fictional way (Romualdo, 2000).

strips, digital comics, graphic novels, and many others. For the purposes of our research object, we are specifically interested in autobiographical comics, in other words, the author's own narratives and drawings.

Associating autobiographical and/or self-referential comics with writing about oneself and rhetoric, researcher Nataly Costa Fernandes Alves (2021) states that character drawings often allude to the social, physical, and sexual characteristics of their creators. She calls this practice by the name “drawings of the self”, in which protagonists are drawn with features similar to those of the artists who conceive them in physiological, social and everyday aspects. These also contain what the researcher calls “visual parrhesia” (Alves, 2021, p. 59)⁴. As the researcher explains, in parrhesia the speaker talks candidly and says what he thinks without making the truth palatable for the comfort of the readers or listeners, disregarding the risks of their violent reactions and rejection. For Alves (2021), artists use everyday life as the basis on which they present the experiences of their characters in the drawings of themselves, and it is here that the similarities between comic artists and their protagonists can be perceived. Considering the ideas explored so far, we understand *Fessora!* as being a drawing of the self, as well as a narrative of the self.

Reflecting on the act of narrating oneself, to which we add the drawing of oneself, the Argentine linguist Leonor Arfuch (2002/2003) argues that those who narrate a life do not account for it in its entirety. She therefore believes that what matters is not so much the “truth” of the facts, but the way in which the narratives are constructed, the ways in which the accounts are named, and the back-and-forth promoted by the narration, in addition to the point of view and the choices between which fragments of life will be told. This is because it is through this back-and-forth that the recall and memories of a past are activated to speak about today, to give meaning to what is being said. In other words, this movement, this path of narration, gives the narrative of oneself a self-reflexive quality, as the person chooses which story or stories to tell of themselves or of another, making it meaningful (Arfuch, 2002/2003).

Consequently, when we look at testimonial forms and accounts of oneself, as is the case of *Fessora!*, what matters are the strategies of self-representation and the narrative construction: “it will be, in addition, the truth, the narrative capacity to ‘make believe’, the evidence that the discourse can offer, never outside of its strategies of verifiability, its enunciative and rhetorical marks” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 73). Life narratives, the linguist argues, are not free of fictional aspects. Although they are perceived in their different uses, the persistence of primary genres and the credibility effects triggered come into play through the same rhetorical procedures found in the constitution of the genres of fiction, especially the novel (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 73). In this sense, we understand that testimonials, self-reports, life narratives, self-narratives, and drawings of oneself are part of the biographical space.

⁴ According to the ideas of Alves (2021, p. 59), there is in these drawings of themselves a “visual parrhesia” when women artists draw their bodies without adaptations to a current ideal of beauty, without seeking a body aesthetic disguised and distant from their real bodies and without caring about the rejection of the work, the criticisms and the violence as a result of this choice.

2. *FESSORA!* IN THE CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHICAL SPACE

For Arfuch (2013), the biographical space is a multiplicity of (auto)biographical narrative forms that encompasses canonical genres, such as biography, autobiography, letters, confessions, memoirs, intimate diaries, and correspondence; and contemporary genres such as those that emerge from digital technologies and the internet, to which she adds among other forms of materiality: emails, audiovisual art installations, images and media interviews, talk and reality shows.

This characteristic multiplicity of the biographical space, although diverse, has a common trait: each form tells, in its own way, a story or life experience, according to Arfuch (2002/2003). The researcher argues that there is no “one life” that can be thought of as a one-way street prior to narration. Life, as a form of recounting, is a result contingent on narration in her view. We therefore narrate our experiences in an attempt to make sense of them. Thus, stories of oneself are always inconclusive, a retelling from the beginning, and they privilege experience (Arfuch, 2002/2003). And as we are always going through new experiences, these have a direct bearing on life “as a whole” to the degree they extend “beyond themselves” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 82).

It is this characteristic of the experiences of summoning a totality in an instant and at the same time being the minimum unit of an experience that goes beyond itself when it is directed, in the narration, to life in general — giving light to, rescuing and clipping out experiences — which Arfuch (2002/2003) believes to make the narrative of life one of the most valued signifiers of the biographical space in contemporary culture. This is because the narrative of life appears “impregnated with connotations of immediacy, of freedom, of connection with the ‘being’, with the truth of ‘oneself’, it also attests to the depth of self and offers a guarantee of the very person” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 82). In other words, when narrating a life, ours or others’, the Argentine linguist understands that it is “pinched” from a segment of life to the degree it refers to its whole and beyond the life itself. “This beyond itself of each particular life is perhaps what resonates, as existential restlessness, in autobiographical narratives” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 39).

In this sense, narrating in the contemporary biographical space is to construct oneself from fragments of life. It is articulating traits such as the “moment” and the “totality” towards new questions and more diverse interpretations regarding the narratives of the self (Arfuch, 2002/2003). It is what the author understands as the search for identity and identification in which Aline asks about the path that guides the “I” to the “we”, while revealing a “we” in the “I”, not as a sum of individualities, nor even a grouping of biographical accidents, but homogeneous articulations of shared values in the “(eternal) imagination of life as fullness and fulfillment” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 82).

In this paper, therefore, we consider the comic in question to be part of the biographical space that Leonor Arfuch highlights (2002/2003, 2013). This is because it is an autobiographical narrative comic, that is, the artist “pinches out” and chooses experiences as a teacher in the public school system to build the graphic narrative and give meaning both to this moment in their life and their existential restlessness, as well as to the whole that makes up the individual, Aline Lemos. And by talking about themselves as

they draw themselves, Lemos (2021) extrapolates the whole of their life, revealing experiences beyond themselves that also describe the collectivities of teachers and students of public schools in Brazil.

Based on the words of Aline Lemos in the synopsis of the book, where they say that they narrate their “failures, glories and emotions as a novice high school teacher”, we seek to analyze the comic book story *Fessora!* (Figure 1) from the perspective of Arfuch’s life narrative (2002/2003, 2013), regarding the relationship between contemporary life narratives and the biographical space. Thus, we intend to underscore in the memories and in the fragments of life narrated, the tensions and confluences between the work experiences that the artist chooses to talk about in relation to their personal experience as a teacher, the emergence of a collective, alongside the description of the life of public-school teachers in Brazil.



Figura 1. Comic book cover *Fessora!*

Source. From *Fessora!*, by A. Lemos, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos. (<https://alinelemos.company.site/Livro-Fessora-p407250337>)

To this end, we start from fragments of the experiences narrated in *Fessora!*, in which the artist, to some extent, is dealing with issues of an I, but exposes a we, to outline narratives of the experiences of teachers as a collective, which Aline reinforces with statistical and research data on the subject addressed. We divide these narrative paths into moments when Aline deals with: (a) the students; (b) co-workers; (c) themselves; and (d) the students’ relatives, in other words, the school community. We emphasize

that these axes do not appear in isolation in the comic book. These are experiences that are interdependent and interconnected with each other.

In regard to the structure of *Fessora!*, the book contains 15 short stories, divided into chapters interconnected in a larger context, Aline's experience as a teacher, which can be read together within the author's narrative logic, or separately without compromising the understanding of each story. In addition, there are two interviews and a dedication, all of which are illustrated. It is through this structure that the comic artist portrays in a sincere and entertaining way the daily life of a teacher in their first experience in the classroom. Exhaustion, frustrations, violence, racism, sexuality, interactions with students and other teachers, difficulty in dealing with time and in demonstrating authority are some of the topics addressed by Aline, who divides their comic book into the following stories: "O Início" (The Beginning); "O Visto" (The Check Mark); "Kathlen" (Kathlen); "Semana" (Week); "Comportamento" (Behaviour); "Estratégias" (Strategies); "O Grito" (The Scream); "Licença" (Leave of Absence); "Tempestade" (Storm); "Ocupado" (Busy); "Turma Ruim" (Bad Class); "Besouro" (Beetle); "Sovaco Cabeludo" (Hairy Armpit); "Violência" (Violence); and "Despedida" (Farewell). All of these words are directly linked to the experiences narrated in each chapter.

Without following a pattern of frame numbers by story, Aline writes *Fessora!* abusing graphic experimentalism. Not by chance, the book begins and ends with lined pages, like those in a notebook, in which the artist writes the "summary" and the "roll call", respectively. In the latter, they show the "group of supporters" of the work, that is the names of readers who helped fund the comic book, which was published with crowdfunding, and they leave a check mark there. A clear reference to the work of teachers in the classroom. This practice is also present in one of the chapters of the work.

In addition, the chapters do not follow a closed structure of numbers of frames and their formats, which are explored by the author according to the needs of the story being told. The classrooms and the teachers serve as the main scenario, but other school spaces are also portrayed. The drawings follow the characteristic particularities of Aline, who uses and abuses the simple cartoon-style strokes, for the most part drawn freehand with lines and frames that do not follow a standard geometric structure. All these particularities are also present in their other comic books, such as *Lado Bê*, a publication which, like *Fessora!*, uses shades of black and white.

3. WHEN THE ILLNESS IS COLLECTIVE: I TEACHER — WE TEACHERS

Thinking about the unicity and multiplicity of the I and the we of the biographical space, Arfuch (2002/2003) says that these are extremely important for outlining the boundaries of public and private space, individual and social space. In the author's opinion, every account of experience, narrative of oneself or biography is, to some extent, collective. This is because it also deals with issues regarding a period, a group, a generation, and a class that have a common identity narrative. In *Fessora!*, we believe this is linked to the identity performance of "teachers", although at a certain point in the narrative Aline

claims not to be “a real teacher”: “it did not seem fair to my colleagues to call myself a ‘teacher’” (p. 12). Aline reflects on the sequence of events that lead them to applying to the vacancy four years earlier. Regardless of whether Aline accepted the job out of financial need or the desire to be a teacher, it only took one semester in middle school — 6th to 9th grade (11 to 15 years old) — to experience and share some of the challenges of teaching in a public school in Brazil.

We note what Ecléa Bosi (2009) emphasizes about the collective memory that “entertains the memory of its members, which adds, unifies, differentiates, corrects and erases” (p. 332). The comic is not content to merely relate individual experiences, but it presents us with and reinforces the memories of the category of work and classroom teaching. Aline’s personal stories create points of contact with a collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1999). “It is this collective quality, as a mark imprinted on the singularity, that makes life stories relevant” (Arfuch, 2002/2003, p. 100). The researcher stresses that this happens in life narratives published in traditional literary genres, in the media, in the social sciences and in the contemporary biographical space, within which we can include *Fessora!*. This feeling is also a collective maxim.

The point of contact between collective memory, teachers and experiences in the classroom is therefore traced from the first page of the comic book when “The Beginning” of their trajectory as a teacher is portrayed and the narrative makes the anxiety of the “fessora” aesthetically clear, when she is drawn with sunken eyes, dark circles and an open mouth in a facial expression that reveals their anxiety caused by all of the advice, such as “don’t be so sweet!”, “be careful!”, and verbally expressed by Aline in the frame that closes the page, as the character walks towards the classroom: “I think I’m going to be sick” (p. 7).

The narrative continues, taking this comic further as a great narrative of life in which school experiences are narrated in order to compose the daily life of a public-school teacher in Brazil, we sense that the climax to Aline’s exhaustion is presented in “O Grito”. Not knowing what to do to contain the class playing and running around inside the room in a chaotic atmosphere, and desperately seeking to silent the students, the teacher yells “shut u-u-u-u-p!” (“cala a boca”; Figure 2). It is the narrative sequence of this scream, in the comic book, that takes them to the doctor’s office, making the final “AAA” of the scream (“...bocAAA”) become the “AAA” of the medical exam in the story “Licença” (Figure 3). After this transition, the doctor tells them, “I’ll give you a week of medical leave, rest your voice and stay away from chalk!” (p. 34), thus revealing the factors that made the teacher sick: the repetitive use of their voice and the long exposure to chalk.



Figura 2. Collage “O Grito” and “Licença”

Source. Adapted from “O Grito” and “Licença”, by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, pp. 32–33. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.



Figure 3. Comic story “Licença”

Source. From “Licença”, by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, p. 34. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

The vocal health of teachers of basic education in Brazil is one of the main causes of teacher absence (Reimberg et al., 2022). The publication of the Ministry of Health's *Work-Related Voice Disorder (DVRT)* protocol raised awareness of the problem (2018). It states that there is "more vocal illness among teachers than in the general population" (Ministry of Health, 2018, p. 13). This validation as an occupational disease is related to the debate on the mental health of these workers.

By talking about an I, the artist therefore narrates experiences of a collective: the exhaustion of teachers in the country. This is even more evident when Aline uses more than their personal experience as a narrative resource, presenting data from a research paper on illness among basic education teachers in Brazil. As revealed by a survey conducted by Gestrado/UFGM in 2013, most teachers in the country take on duties in more than one school, in addition to combining their teaching duties with other activities to supplement income (Oliveira & Vieira, 2013). Furthermore, in the reality of the school environment, teachers end up playing various roles and social functions in their daily lives, which go beyond teaching the content assigned to them (Carlotto, 2010). According to the author, this is because they are faced with diverse and emerging conflicts in the space and dynamics of relationships with the school community.

These issues are also presented by Aline, who portrays the direct teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-guardian relationships, both in the classroom and in other school settings. In one of these moments, we meet Antonio, the geography teacher, who reports: "I was away for six months," and points to the need for self-preservation "before I reached my limit" (p. 35). At the end of this narrative, we discover that, although he's back at school, Antonio now does administrative work, implying that he is not fully recovered.

Associating words such as "anxiety", "depression", "professional exhaustion" — all of which are linked to the illness of teachers — to the research "The Illness of the Teacher in Basic Education in Brazil" (Figure 3), the artist uses their experience as a narrative resource to talk about teachers as a category. This becomes clear when, from the data collected by Nascimento and Seixas (2020), it is revealed that the physical and mental health of this professional class directly influences the precariousness of the work of teachers in Brazil, and the quality of teaching. In other words, the causes of the illness of teachers are mainly issues related to working conditions. These data, therefore, are used by the artist as a narrative resource of proof, since they appear in a way that explains the shared, collective experience of the conditions to which educators are subjected in the country.

Nascimento and Seixas (2020) underline that all these factors combined with high workload and low pay, without the support and social recognition necessary for carrying out this job are conducive to mental and physical illness. Therefore, by making teachers responsible for educating children and teenagers without acknowledging the influence their working conditions have on their mental health, society, school and State contribute to this illness, as defended by Nascimento and Seixas (2020).

Work overload and poor working conditions are also highlighted by Oliveira and Vieira (2013) as complaints of teachers. The research points out that teachers report

having to take home work-related tasks and complain about the classroom environment, e.g. noise, poor ventilation and lighting. In addition to these problems, the psychosocial risks of the profession are associated with issues such as ergonomic, vocal and postural demands; the number of classes taught; and poor relationships with students, which can cause injuries due to repetitive symptoms (Santos et al., 2012). Among the problems related to the teachers' work and health, therefore, we highlight factors that cause *ma-laise* such as stress, burnout syndrome, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other chronic diseases that, when associated, can lead to aggravated conditions such as heart and circulatory diseases (Santos et al., 2012).

When portraying daily school life, it is not by chance that the representation of exhaustion is a recurring feature in the comic book, whether as a central theme or as an element of another situation portrayed. In the story "Semana", it appears when Aline is drawn first as thoughtful, then later presents gradual changes in their features until, finally, they are in the story wrapped in a cloud and with clear traces of exhaustion, such as dark circles and sunken eyes. These traits also accompany the story "Comportamento". We should point out that the two stories are told before "O Grito" and "Licença", thus giving Aline's exhaustion a linear trajectory shown on each page of the comic strip until, finally, their body reaches its limit (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Collage traces of exhaustion in Aline

Source. Adapted from "Comportamento", by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, pp. 19, 21–22. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

4. WHEN THE BODY IS NOT “NEUTRAL”: THE POLITICAL MEMORY

The stories recalled by Aline have as a common thread the author’s progressive political positions. As a non-binary and bisexual person, they do not intend to be “neutral” in the workplace. “Political memory” (Bosi, 2009) is understood as when the person who narrates the past is not content with only being a witness, even of their own story, but wishes to weave the reflection of the present with an ideological content that intervenes and reaffirms their position. This is evident in the story “Tempestade”, which recounts a conversation between teachers about prejudice occasioned by the same-sex relationship of two female students and the behavior of another student, Kevin. A teacher, represented by a white, male, and apparently older character (Figure 5), disdains the need to discuss “prejudice” and “homophobia” against the LGBTQIA+ community with the students. According to him, “no one died because of it” (p. 38).



Figura 5. Comic “Tempestade”

Source. From “Tempestade”, by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, p. 38. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

The cloud in this story reinforces not only the atmosphere of the teachers’ room, but also appears in the further development of the discourse, which reproduces a symbolic violence — seen as the most “subtle” of oppressions (Bourdieu, 1994/1996). According to the author, symbolic violence is a social production since it is constructed by ways of seeing and thinking. This is, therefore, violence carried out from the hidden and silent complicity of those who suffer it and those who carry it out, since both suffer and act unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1994/1996). In the comic, by reproducing speech commonly used in the country to justify prejudice, the teacher is inflicting symbolic violence against the female students of class 8C, mentioned on the previous page so that we can conclude that both are LGBTQIA+. Aline, for their part, does not accept violence with apathy. Although stifled by the storm, the teacher takes a stand on the reality faced by LGBTQIA+ people, citing historical facts and even data of the violence that the community faces. They use Transgender research and the dossier of the National Association

of Transvestites and Transsexuals that declare: “Brazil is a champion in the murder of transgender people. Today!” (p. 38).

In this act, we see not only the history teacher working in the environment, an image reinforced in the frame by the history books on the table, but also because they are a non-binary person who is affected by these discourses. This subject in the teachers’ room shows how there are teachers who reproduce prejudice and who are unprepared to deal with the different gender identities and sexuality of the student body. This issue can be understood as a collective experience within the country’s school communities, especially when we look at the data from the *National Survey on the Educational Environment in Brazil 2016*⁵ (Secretaria de Educação da Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais, 2016). According to the survey, comments against LGBTQIA+ people in Brazilian schools is widespread, which contributes to the creation of a hostile school environment and signals to students that they are not welcome in that school community.

The survey further reveals that “almost half (47.5%) of LGBT students reported having heard other students making derogatory comments, such as ‘*bicha*’, ‘*sapatão*’ or ‘*viado*’, often or almost always in the educational institution” (Secretaria de Educação da Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais, 2016, p. 31). In addition, the data collected shows that one-fifth of these students heard LGBTphobic comments in the educational institution, with 21.7% saying that such comments were made by most of their peers. Along the same lines, more than two-thirds of the students (69.1%) “reported that they have heard LGBTphobic comments made by teachers or other employees of the educational institution” (Secretaria de Educação da Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais, 2016, p. 31). In contrast, when teachers witnessed situations of LGBTphobia, “few students reported that their peers always or most often intervened when they heard LGBTphobic comments (25.6%), and more than a third (36.2%) said that their peers never took any action” (p. 31).

The lack of preparation of teachers and the school community is pointed out in the 2016 survey as a cause for the sense of not belonging and insecurity of students in Brazilian educational institutions. Therefore, when asked about whether or not to denounce the situations of violence and prejudice experienced in these spaces, many pointed out the lack of trust, the existence of prejudice, “shame, fear of reprisals and public exposure of the fact of being LGBT, even not believing in the possibility that the institution would take some effective action and denounce the situation” (Secretaria de Educação da Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais, 2016, p. 43).

In *Fessora!*, this unpreparedness revealed in the national statistics is visible in everything presented to us in “*Tempestade*”, especially in the words of the educators. From the teacher’s laughing at the students’ ‘mimicking’ of Kevin, to the trivialization of violence contained in the words of another teacher who calls “prejudice, homophobia (...)

⁵ At the time of delivery of this work, this was the most recent research found by the authors that maps the situation of LGBTphobia in Brazilian schools.

tempest in a teapot (...) no one dies from it” (pp. 38–39), and up to the principal’s refusal to deal with the issue, leaving it up to the families by saying that it is a “delicate” issue when Aline offers to talk to the class 8C students who are in a relationship.

Guizzo and Felipe (2016) analyze these challenges of school practices when teachers deal with this subject in the classroom. There is a slow approach to opening a debate on these inequalities by defining them as a “delicate” subject, one that is understood as being a transversal subject that is not always assimilated by the course subjects. Thus, the possibilities of change to reduce prejudice and promote the discussion that affects the lives of children and teenagers are lost, not only in the classroom, but also outside it.

“Tempestade” offers another story that begins and ends the comic: Kevin, the “blond kid in the 9th grade”. The student is described by teachers as noisy. They also say that Kevin is persecuted in the classroom by his classmates, which, in the opinion of the educators, is due to prejudice. We only understand the story of this student at the end of the comic: his mother caught him trying on women’s clothes at home. After that, Kevin “left” the school and no longer attended classes (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Kevin in “Tempestade”

Source. From “Tempestade”, by A. Lemos, 2021, *Fessora!*, p. 39. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

Kevin’s departure from school, even if it is a personal experience, is not only that; it reveals a collective, transpersonal experience, in that it represents a common situation in the daily lives of Brazilian LGBTQIA+ students, who face hostile environments in basic education schools. Failure to attend school is pointed out in the *National Survey on the Educational Environment in Brazil 2016* (Secretaria de Educação da Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais, 2016) as a consequence of LGBTphobia, which can lead to school dropout, depending on the degree of violence

and prejudice faced by students⁶. The research states that other consequences associated with the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in hostile school communities include a drop in academic performance, depression, and the feeling of not belonging in the school.

Therefore, in a few frames Aline draws a memory in common with the life experiences of transsexual and transvestite people at school: involuntary evasion. Even though the violence happened at home, Kevin does not go to school much. This introduces vestiges of an experience of the “pedagogy of violence”⁷ (Andrade, 2012) by transsexual and transvestite students in Brazil. This process can also be “induced by the school, where members of the school community, symbolically or not, subject the students to embarrassing treatment until they cannot bear to live in that space, and they abandon it” (Andrade, 2012, p. 247). This reinforces the continuity of the cycle of exclusion of these individuals in society, who experience violence at home, at school, at work, in health care and in politics. Lima (2020), when analyzing these experiences of transsexual and transvestite people in education, observes that the school is a social space that reflects society. As an effect of this, it “produces and reproduces differences, distinctions and inequalities through multiple mechanisms of classification, ordering and hierarchization that are reinforced through a reference model to be followed” (Lima, 2020, p. 79), this model of hegemonic white, heterosexual, middle class and Christian in the daily school life (Junqueira, 2015; Lima, 2020; Louro, 2000). The exaltation of these social markers inside and outside the school is reflected in two experiences that are drawn in the comics “Besouro” and “Sovaco Cabeludo”.

The title of the comic “Besouro” is a reference to the name of the Brazilian film released in 2009, which narrates the life of resistance and struggle of the *capoeirista* Manoel⁸ Henrique Pereira (1895–1924), known as *Besouro*, *Besouro Preto*, *Besouro Mangangá* or *Besouro Cordão de Ouro*. Aline presented this story in the classroom to the students during the discussion of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, a subject enshrined by Law No. 10.639 (2003)⁹. The purpose of the law is to promote the different cultures of Brazil in education, reinforcing and valuing the histories of indigenous peoples and Afro-Brazilians, who have been systematically erased from the process of colonization until today. Abidias do Nascimento (1978), in *O Genocídio do Negro*

⁶ According to the 2016 survey, “students were twice as likely to miss the educational institution when they had experienced higher levels of discrimination related to their sexual orientation (58.9% compared to 23.7%) or their gender identity/expression (51.9% compared to 25.5%)” (SEABLGBT, 2016, p. 47).

⁷ The *pedagogy of violence* does not happen only in school; it is in all instances of life where subjects learn pre-established discourses as a single truth. In the conception of Andrade (2012), this expression is linked to the *aesthetics of prejudice and death*. In this case, those who do not follow the hegemonic performance of gender are seen as “unnatural”, “unwanted” and the target of hatred and violence.

⁸ *Capoeira* is not just a sport. It is understood as “an aesthetic and fighting expression that dates back to Afro-Brazilian ancestry, capable of transmitting, through the game and its music, the denied contents of the history and culture of blacks in Brazil” (Amaral & Santos, 2015, p. 54).

⁹ In 2008, Law No. 10 639 (2003) was modified by Law No. 11,645, which also included the teaching of indigenous history and culture in the school curriculum.

Brasileiro, evidences the effort to “erase the memory of the African” (p. 84) and among the different social groups and individuals that aided in this project of the dominant ideology were historians, social scientists, literati and educators. The culture of the white man and European was desirable and emphasized in the official history of Brazil, and reflected in the school curriculum. This law seeks to break the continuity of the historical silencing of subordinated peoples in Brazil, but there is resistance to its implementation in everyday school life. This is clear when Aline presents the visit of a mother who questions the homework on the history of black people from the film *Besouro* (Figure 7): “my daughter isn’t going to do that assignment! And you shouldn’t teach those things!” (p. 49).



Figure 7. Scene of the mother of a student criticizing the assignment on the film *Besouro*

Source. Taken from “Besouro”, by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, p. 49. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

The comic artist says that as “the white teacher” they “couldn’t even imagine” the challenges of teaching about the history of non-white peoples, in this case about the African matrix religions. Aline mentions a research paper (Botelho, 2019) that lays out the impasses experienced when teaching these topics: the exoticization and “folklorization” of the elements; the demonization for not being Christian or having European references; and racism. The shock is narrated by Aline when they face this reality at school. This made them adopt a comment to avoid misinterpretation by the students, as they emphasized: “I’m not asking you to adopt any religion, do you understand? I am saying that all beliefs must be respected” (p. 51). An issue that is not brought up when talking about Christian religions in the classroom.

The *II Relatório sobre Intolerância Religiosa: Brasil, América Latina e Caribe* (II Report on Religious Intolerance: Brazil, Latin America and the Caribbean; Santos et al., 2023)

shows a 270% increase in violence against African-based religions¹⁰ in Brazil compared to the records kept between 2020 and 2021. This intolerance seeks to deny, erase, persecute or demonize the existence of the other through violence, ranging from symbolic to physical, against people and houses of worship.

This experience narrated by Aline sheds light on the debate of memory in dispute, where the school becomes a fundamental space to revive this subject from its forgotten status by teaching that there are numerous expressions of Brazilian identity (racial, gender, professional group, social class, among others) and telling stories outside the official version. To teach that the history of black people in Brazil is not limited to the period of slavery and, as Grossman (2000) points out,

to the extent that the only focus is on pain, people who have gone through a whole experience of survival and resistance end up being reduced to mere victims, and the fact that they are also survivors and resistant is not being taken into account. (p. 19)

The story of *Besouro* exposes the resistance and struggle for the right to manifest one's own religion, without being criminalized or persecuted. In "Tempestade" and "Besouro", the bias of political memory, whether individual or collective, is highlighted to help understand the challenges of the daily life of a history teacher with their students.

Aline is also the target of "joke" by three students for not conforming to a practice of femininity expected of a "woman". By not shaving their underarms, the teacher also creates curiosity about sexuality. The initial pictures of the comic show the faces of the girls when they see the teacher's hairy armpit, generating surprise and disgust (Figure 8).

¹⁰ According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2010), 0.3% of the Brazilian population declared itself a practitioner of Afro-Brazilian religions (*umbanda, candomblé, pajelança* and others).



Figure 8. “Hairy Armpit”

Source. Taken from “Sovaco Cabeludo”, by A. Lemos, 2021, in A. Lemos, *Fessora!*, p. 52. Copyright 2021 by Aline Lemos.

This joke relies on recreational racism, which is understood as a type of violence against black people when the jokes “portray blackness as a set of aesthetically unpleasant characteristics and a sign of moral inferiority” (Moreira, 2019, p. 19). The teenage students exemplified this dehumanization by reacting with the chorus of the song “Nega do Subaco Cabeludo” (Negress with the Hairy Armpit), by the humorist Pranchana Jack (2012), which became a meme in Brazil in 2012. In this song, recreational racism is evident in seeking to mask racial and gender prejudice with a hint of “humor”. This feminine image is associated with dirt that neglects hygiene. In qualitative research on the construction of black identity at school, Mizaél and Gonçalves (2015) mention a white student who sings this song to the black female colleague, which “reveals how the white child perceives media influences and appropriates them, reproducing racial discrimination” (Mizaél & Gonçalves, 2015, p. 12). Aline is associated with this negative image of the black woman in the lyrics.

Their intention to provoke a reaction in the teacher with the music was thwarted, because Aline also sings along to spoil their joke. In the end, the latter has the opportunity to explain the reason for choosing not to shave and questions the aesthetic standards placed on women. Although the adolescents observe that this is an “unhygienic” act and something that the “boyfriend may find bad”, the teacher is able to reflect with the students so they understand that men do not shave and no one associates that with poor hygiene; and that the boyfriend does not get to decide what they can and cannot do with their body. The brief conversation ends with another curiosity answered about Aline’s sexuality: “I said she had a boyfriend!” the teenager comments to her friend.

The students resort to the stereotype of what it is to be a woman. A stereotype is understood as a “set of beliefs, values, knowledge, attitudes that we consider natural,

transmitted from generation to generation without question, and makes it possible for us to evaluate and judge things and human beings positively or negatively” (Chauí, 1997, p. 116). Aline presents us with the various daily aggressions using stereotypes that promote discrimination and the maintenance of hegemonic thinking in school with the crossing of gender, sexuality, race, and social class. The perpetuation of these discourses reinforces symbolic violence, the pedagogy of violence and, consequently, removes children and adolescents from the classroom when they do not fit into these spaces.

5. “WHAT APPEARS TO US AS UNITY IS MULTIPLE”

Ecléa Bosi (2009) sees this multiplicity of memory as being like the unraveling of yarn into different skeins, “because it is a meeting point of various paths, it is a complex point of convergence of the many planes of our past” (p. 413). Looking at the narrative of life as a teacher for a semester, we analyze some of these discursive points that are not only the individual memory (a unit) that is being remembered, but also one that is collective. The school community represented by the characters of the principal, teachers, students, mother and janitor share the same event with Aline, but may have different perspectives and interpretations — either by ideological positioning or by the cultural and social repertoire, for example — as they were perceived in the comics. Stories that are part of the memory of the category of work and that move away from the stereotype of what it is to be a teacher¹¹ in a cultural product such as comics.

Understanding this potential of the work done in *Fessora!* from the individual point of view on the experience of teaching in public schools is to present readers with a part of the complexity of education in Brazil. Guided by questions about mental health, challenges of the school in welcoming and debating gender identity and sexuality, and promoting educational practices that question sexism, racism, and homophobia in the daily life of the school that is sometimes attenuated under the pretext of making a “joke” about the school mate or the alleged absence of such prejudices.

The ending story, “Despedida” (Farewell), underscores the very expectation of being a teacher: the image of a figure who could transform students and assist in the critique of their own reality in a semester. “I don’t know what I expected./Tears?/Party?/How vain of me! To think it would make a big impact!/I was the one who was affected” (p. 64).

It is important to point out that, with this work, we do not pretend to have exhausted all the discussions and debates around Aline Lemos, their comic book *Fessora!*, and the topics addressed in it. Nor is that possible. What we did was to choose and make clippings within our research universes in line with the dialogical possibilities of our trajectories and investigations carried out so far. We, therefore, encourage researchers to pick up

¹¹ Idealization observed in the analysis of Adriana Lemes (2005) on the social representation of teaching, with Professor Dona Marocas, character of the comic *Chico Bento* by Mauricio de Souza that takes place in the Brazilian rural environment. The feminization of work, clothes and accessories that stretches between the voluptuous curves of the body and the disciplined bun in the hair, glasses and small earrings. This, in addition to the discourse of unconditional love for the profession even when it is not well paid.

on our work in search of other possible analyses within this observed universe, exploring, for example, the other narratives and themes present in *Fessora!* or the trajectory of Aline Lemos as an independent comic artist in Brazil.

Translation: Traversões, Serviços Linguísticos, Lda.

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BOOK REVIEWS | *LEITURAS*

TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS OF THE IBERO-AMERICAN ANTHOLOGY *COORDENADAS GRÁFICAS: CUARENTA HISTORIETAS DE AUTORAS DE ESPAÑA, ARGENTINA, CHILE Y COSTA RICA*

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ABSTRACT

This review analyses the Ibero-American anthology *Coordenadas Gráficas: Cuarenta Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica* (Graphic Coordinates: Forty Comics by Women Authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica), published in 2020 in open digital access by a team of curators under the *Ventana* programme of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation. It outlines the essential characteristics of these comics and the introductory articles for the four sections. It examines their structure and explores their thematic, stylistic, and ideological aspects by following the path laid out by the selected works. It highlights the anthology's portrayal of women's historical contributions from recent decades to the present and its role in raising awareness about the challenges various women authors have encountered and addressed over 40 years. Although this work is organised by country and thus delves into each context, each section offers an intersectional and intergenerational perspective. Ultimately, this review represents an inclusive platform for women comic authors, fostering their growth and presenting future proposals to challenge heteronormative patriarchy.

KEYWORDS

anthology, women authors, comics, Ibero-America, feminism

ANÁLISE TRANSVERSAL DA ANTOLOGIA IBERO-AMERICANA *COORDENADAS GRÁFICAS: CUARENTA HISTORIETAS DE AUTORAS DE ESPAÑA, ARGENTINA, CHILE Y COSTA RICA*

RESUMO

Esta recensão tem como objeto de análise a antologia ibero-americana *Coordenadas Gráficas: Cuarenta Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica* (Coordenadas Gráficas: Quarenta Bandas Desenhadas de Autoras de Espanha, Argentina, Chile e Costa Rica), publicada em 2020, em acesso digital aberto, por uma equipa de curadoras, no âmbito do programa *Ventana* da Agência Espanhola de Cooperação Internacional para o Desenvolvimento. Nela, apresentamos as principais características destas bandas desenhadas, assim como os

artigos que introduzem os quatro blocos, examinamos a sua organização e os seus componentes temáticos, estilísticos e ideológicos através dum percurso definido pelos trabalhos seleccionados. Destacamos a sua visão panorâmica sobre a produção historietista feminina desde as últimas décadas até o presente e a sua contribuição para visibilizar as problemáticas que, ao longo de 40 anos, as diversas autoras têm enfrentado. Ainda que esta obra apresente uma divisão nacional e, conseqüentemente, centrada em cada um dos seus contextos, cada secção oferece uma perspectiva interseccional e intergeracional. Definitivamente, este trabalho constitui e define-se como um espaço aberto de mulheres autoras de banda desenhada que procura crescer com futuras propostas para combater o patriarcado heteronormativo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

antologia, autoras, banda desenhada, Ibero-América, feminismo

Published in December 2020, the anthology *Coordenadas Gráficas: Cuarenta Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica* (Graphic Coordinates: Forty Comics by Women Authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica) is the outcome of a collaborative effort involving curators Elisa McCausland (Spain), Mariela Acevedo (Argentina), Paloma Domínguez Jería and Isabel Molina (Chile) and Iris Lam (Costa Rica), with coordination by Carolina Chávez and cover and back cover design by Daniela Ruggeri. This anthology, described as an “open atlas” (McCausland et al., 2020, p. 11), is currently under construction to showcase the work of 40 women comic authors from the respective countries. The genesis of this publication has noteworthy origins. Firstly, it traces back to the travelling exhibition “Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y Hoy” (Present: Women Comic Authors of Yesterday and Today), inaugurated at the Royal Academy of Spain in Rome. This exhibition was produced by the *Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic*¹ (Collective of Women Comic Authors; CAC) in collaboration with the *Ventana* project of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (2016–2017). Secondly, it is connected to *Nosotras Contamos. Un Recorrido por la Obra de Autoras de Historieta y Humor Gráfico de Ayer y Hoy* (We Count. A Journey Through the Work of Women Comic and Graphic Humour Authors of Yesterday and Today; Acevedo, 2019).

This anthology’s merit lies in its comprehensive presentation of diverse women comic authors from multiple Hispanic-American areas, styles and generations. It adopts a creative and inclusive approach in its language. Furthermore, its structure and format, available online, make it easily accessible and readable because, on the Cultural Centre of Spain in Costa Rica — Spanish Cooperation for Culture/San José website, you can find the exhibition materials, introductory texts, and a selection of works and read the entire book in PDF format on the same page.

The book opens with a broad introduction, written by Carolina Chávez (Director of the Spain Cordoba Cultural Centre in Argentina), followed by an introductory text, written jointly by the project’s curators, titled “Mapear el Territorio, Construir Genealogías”

¹ This same collective also organised the exhibitions “Mujeres de Tinta” (Women of Ink) at the Museo ABC in Madrid (2014) and “Ellas Toman los Lápices, el Espacio y la Palabra” (They Seize the Pencils, the Space, and the Word; 2016) in the cities of Valencia, Seville and Barcelona.

(Mapping the Territory, Building Genealogies), which outlines the basis and purpose of this work.

It is then divided into four parts, one dedicated to each country: Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica. Each part follows a consistent structure, featuring an introductory text by the curator responsible for selecting the artworks and roughly equal sections dedicated to each. Thus, there is a progression of artists presented with concise biographies showcasing their notable works and self-portraits, sketches, or signatures. Some examples of their work are included, which may encompass full pieces, excerpts from comic book narratives, or graphic novels, whether previously unreleased or published in recent decades. The four parts maintain a consistent structure, all with a shared goal: to establish a cross-border and enduring sisterhood among women comic authors to combat heteronormative patriarchy, particularly in the editorial and political spheres. Upon closer examination, these anthologies display a degree of autonomy, as they individually present their themes in distinct styles and are divided into national sections with limited interconnection and cross-border dialogue.

The first section, “España” (Spain), begins with a statement of principles from the curator, Elisa McCausland. In this introduction, “Una Hermandad Transnacional de Autoras de Historieta” (A Transnational Sisterhood of Women Comic Authors), the curator reiterates her support for the concept of a sisterhood of women who weave networks, continually meet, and mutually acknowledge each other through cultural artefacts and creative projects in order to transform these networks into communities of affection and knowledge all while persistently challenging and questioning andronormative power structures through critical reflection.

The curator goes on to state that the obscurity or disregard for women authors, cartoonists or illustrators, particularly in the past, stemmed from their gender, their status as women, the influence of the Franco dictatorship and its damaging consequences, which led to the erosion of most of the principles established during the Second Spanish Republic, and finally, the precarious working conditions that agents of this form of artistic creation endured for years.

McCausland proceeds to enumerate the most influential women authors spanning from the 1960s and 1970s up to 2014, a pivotal year marked by the publication of the story anthology *Enjambre* (Swarm) and the establishment of the CAC² forging connections with other collectives, such as the Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée (Creative Comics Collective; 2015) and Molesto Collettivo per la Parità di Genere nel Fumetto (Molesto Collective for Gender Equality in Comics; 2020), an Italian collective dedicated to advocating for gender equality in comics. The CAC also created the Wombastic platform (2014) and later established relations with the Argentinian group Línea Peluda. The curator underscores the transoceanic dialogue facilitated by *Coordenadas Gráficas* and many of its voices, which were previously featured in the precursor anthology *Viñetas de Tortas y Bollos. Cómic Lesbicas Desde dos Orillas* (Panels of Pies [Lesbos] and Cakes [Dykes]. Lesbian Comics from Two Margins; Castro & Ortiza de Zárate, 2019) and in the catalogue of an equally essential anthology titled *Papel de Mujeres* (Women’s Paper; INJUVE, 1988).

² The Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic is a product of the Asociación de Autoras de Cómic (2013).

The second section features 10 authors from different generations, born between 1946 and 1993, and different origins: Badajoz, Barcelona, Cádiz, Castellón, Madrid and Valencia. To begin, Laura Pérez Vernetti presents “Extraños en un Tren” (Strangers on a Train) from 1985, which drew inspiration from Patricia Highsmith’s novel of the same name. This work was published in 1985 in Barcelona’s leading adult magazine, *El Víbora*. Furthermore, the same author contributes a segment from the erotic comic “Susana”, published by Amaniaco in 2004. The second artist is Mayte Alvarado with “Los Amantes” (The Lovers), a fragment from the graphic novel *La Isla* (The Island; Penguin Random House). It identifies the woman *self* with the sea, employing an expressive narrative set in a Mediterranean atmosphere in the colours blue, white, red and black, where this woman embraces a sailor. It somehow communicates with Carla Berrocal’s unpublished piece, *Variaciones Orbitales* (Orbital Variations), which delves into the theme of sex and the myth of Adam and Eve in an unpublished piece of science fiction. Taking a different perspective, Susanna Martín presents, with two Evas, a portrayal of the everyday life of a lesbian couple striving to become mothers in her play *Pajuelas* (Straws). This work adopts an autobiographical approach in two voices: Spanish and Catalan. The same author in “Chicazo” (Tomboy), a series of comic strips published in 2017 and 2018 in *Píkara Magazine*, questioned the identity and gender construction we are given in childhood, lesbophobia and the violence experienced at the hands of others. Pioneer Montse Clavé also delves into this theme in “Betty de BUP”³, where she humorously portrays the young girl’s interactions with her mother, friends, and the wider world. Years later, Raquel Gu, without the boundaries of age, explores the same topic from the adult woman’s perspective in her comic strips for *El Jueves* magazine. She employs the imagery of cut-out dolls in feminist activism, emphasising that a woman’s body is the freedom that no one can take away. The youngest among these artists, Núria Tamarit, uses the postcard format to denounce the challenges and barriers of her generation, marked by unstable working conditions and gentrification, in her story “En el Suelo” (On the Ground; 2019), where she portrays an early morning stroll through a bustling city in the company of her canine friend. A contemporary young woman, although different from the energetic and resilient protagonists of Maria Colino’s works in the comic strip *Margarita* (Margaret; Horas y HORAS, 1991), where a strong line and humour intertwine.

Lastly, Laura Pérez, in “Atávico” (Atavistic) from the comic *Ocultos* (Astiberri, 2019), presents a visceral, wordless visual narrative that underscores her contemplation of the profound changes wrought by the act of observation. A theme Maria Llovet also explores in *Insecto* (Insect), published by Norma in 2016, as she reflects upon the perspectives of women of the millennium as observed bodies.

In the second section, dedicated to Argentinian production, Mariela Acevedo reconstructs the history of women comic authors and illustrators in the country, examining some pivotal moments. She highlights the significance of *Nosotras Contamos. Un Recorrido de Autoras de Historieta y Humor Gráfico de Ayer y Hoy* (Buenos Aires, 2019),

³ The BUP (Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente) was the name given to upper secondary education when the General Education Law of 1970 was passed. It consisted of three school years that, once completed, allowed access to a university programme.

an exhibition with a book catalogue that Acevedo coordinated herself (2019). This exhibition underlines the growth of graphic productions created by women over the past decade. The increased participation of women is not merely a result of individual efforts; rather, it reflects their collective involvement across various facets of the literary ecosystem. Notably, through collective anthologies, *Pibas* (Girls; Hotel de las Ideas, 2019) and *Historieta LGTBI* (LGBTI Comics; EMR, 2017); self-published works that foster new collaborations (Club Vampire and Las Fieras Fanzine, 2018); literary exhibitions, meetings and festivals (“¡Vamos las Pibas!”); and feminist magazines (*Clitoris*, 2010). In short, various platforms where women’s comic production can be promoted and encouraged, thus establishing points of contact.

In the second part, Patricia Breccia opens the selection. She has been contributing prolifically since the 1970s, and her work is represented by “A Sangre Fría” (In Cold Blood), published in 1987 in the magazine *Fierro*. This piece explores a fantastic theme and employs the concept of *monstrification* to depict a woman subjected to patriarchal pressures. Following is La Lejana with her unpublished work from 2020, *Pumita* (Little Cougar), a dynamic, intensely coloured sequence that draws parallels with Patricia Breccia’s story. It uses the theme of fantastic transformation as a form of resistance against the violence perpetuated by the patriarchal system. Then there is Dani Ruggeri, the head of editorial design for this publication, who, with *Nísperos* (Loquats; 2020), presents a portrayal of a free-spirited and adventurous female childhood; and Mariana Salina, a contributor to *Clitoris* magazine (2011–2013), with “Karate-Do” (2020), an unpublished story about violence against women in the public space and their empowerment through martial arts. Nacha Vollenweider’s *Mujeres Volando* (Women Flying; 2013) delves into the existence of fears that threaten us in the street and the need to find ways to escape them. Along these lines, Gato Fernández explores the struggle against a fantastic being that hinders survival in an extremely precarious environment in “Quieta” (Be Still; *Fierro*, Volume 3, 2017). Femimutancia, a non-binary author, analyses the family as a space for abuse and multiple forms of violence in her fanzine *Les Niñas* (The Children; self-published, 2017), while Sole Otero explores the same topic in *Naftalina* (2020), specifically addressing issues of repression and rape. Concluding this section is María Alcobre in “La Nena (Cuarentena)” (The Girl, Quarantine), published sequentially in the magazine *Fierro* (2016–2017). This work examines the topic of abortion within a family from a child’s perspective. Lastly, the duo Muriel Frega and Ariela Kreimer with *SkatePark* (Albatros, 2020) present two models of romantic relationships (toxic/healthy) during adolescence.

The third section, focusing on Chile, opens with an introductory text titled “El Germen de una Genealogía Feminista” (The Germ of a Feminist Genealogy), authored by curators Paloma Domínguez and Isabel Molina. This introduction provides insight into the circumstances faced by the earliest Chilean women comic creators during the 1960s and 1970s, who were constrained to producing content for children, adhering to the traditional roles assigned to women as mothers, educators, and caregivers. Moving into the 1980s, they underscore the significance of Maliki, one of the few women of that era to contribute to a magazine of denunciation, satire, and humour like *Trauko* (1988–1991),

which resisted the Pinochet dictatorship and endured its censorship. Fast-forwarding to 2008, we see the emergence of the first feminist fanzine, *Tribuna Femenina* (2008–2014), created by Melina Rapimán, as an alternative to prevailing androcentric narratives where there was no room for women. As we arrive at the present day, we witness the rise of authors who have started their creative journeys through self-publishing, sharing their work on social media, contributing to fanzines, creating webcomics, and coming together in feminist resistance collectives to denounce issues such as patriarchal violence, the imposition of hegemonic beauty standards, the roles assigned to women, and matters related to reproductive processes, among others.

The collection begins with Estefani con E, a fragment from *Por Ti, por Mí, por Todas* (For You, for Me, for All; RIL Editores, 2019). This piece narrates the journey of a teenage girl as she becomes aware of the feminist struggle, starting from her domestic sphere and working her way up to the public arena. Following is *La Barba* (The Beard; 2020), presented in fanzine format under the banner of Visual Disobedience. This work confronts us directly, without any artifice, urging us to embrace our bodies and the hair that comes with them. In this story, a teenage girl dealing with hirsutism, a condition more common than often realised, chooses not to take hormones as she learns to accept her physical appearance. Melina Rapimán, touchingly and humorously, introduces us to another young woman who experiences shame and confusion during her first menstruation, lacking guidance and support from the adult women in her life. In a similar vein, the renowned Maliki contributes a comic strip that poignantly addresses fatphobia and her struggles with body image and the pursuit of ideal weight in an excerpt from *Diario Oscuro* (Dark Diary; Reservoir Book, 2019), which served as her therapy. Moving forward, Supnem presents a story inspired by real events astonishingly dating back to 2005 in Chile, when little or nothing was known about the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). In the comic strip *Mi Sida* (My Aids), which was published in 2015 in a fanzine format, Supnem educates and raises awareness by depicting the challenges of undergoing an AIDS test during a time of widespread misinformation, particularly among young people and even more so for a transgender individual. Panchulei's *Carta Abierta a Mis Amigxs Artistas* (Open Letter to My Fellow Artists; 2019), which she published on her website, underscores the notion that art must be resistant and a vehicle for struggle and confrontation. This assertive stance is also apparent in *Lesbialis*, where the girl in "El Milagro" (The Miracle; 2017) confronts the religious institution, challenges the oppressive nuns, and questions God himself, all in her pursuit to live her lesbianism with her head held high. Devil Katy contributes to this confrontation with her fanzine piece *Acoso Callejero* (Street Harassment; 2016), in which she describes sexual harassment on the streets to put an end to it: "what truly counts is that we must never stay silent again". Margarita Valdés offers an intimate perspective in "Diario" (Diary; 2017), featured in the magazine *Carboncito*, as she draws the reconstruction following an emotional breakup. The last Chilean author, Sol Díaz, co-founder of the inclusive feminist magazine *Brígida* (2018), presents the maternal story of *La Cuidadora del Huevo* (The Egg Carer; 2017) in shades of blue, white and red. In this story, a woman exhausts herself while tirelessly protecting an

egg, symbolising her child. Eventually, the egg transforms into a giant human with a flat face, who finally places the woman in the palm of the hand, reminiscent of King Kong, and says: “gracias [thank you]”. The only word in the story.

Iris Lam profiles the panorama of women’s comics and illustrations in the last section of this anthology, dedicated to Costa Rica, titled “La Incipiente Escena del Cómic Hecho por Mujeres en Costa Rica: La Ilustración Como Acto de Resistencia Feminista” (The Emerging Scene of Women’s Comics in Costa Rica: Illustration as an Act of Feminist Resistance). She highlights the importance of graphic humour illustrations published in national newspapers to disseminate the work of mainly male authors, who still predominate in the Costa Rican comics scene today. In this context, the organisation La Pluma Sonriente, dedicated exclusively to graphic humour in Central America and active from the 1980s to the present, is particularly noteworthy. The curator states that women’s names have remained largely anecdotal, hence the relevance of an anthology such as this one, which has the merit of bringing together the work of a group of women authors for the first time on the Costa Rican scene. This section introduces eight authors who are part of the history of comics produced in Costa Rica by women. Although pioneers, these individuals are not featured in this anthology, unlike the previous sections, as it focuses on new authors. However, Lam clarifies the criteria for selecting the 10 authors chosen, unlike the previous sections. They were chosen through a national call for submissions conducted intentionally to select professional illustrators and contemporary visual artists. Selection was based on the quality and relevance of their work within this project’s scope. The result is a group of authors born in the 1990s, most of whom are both illustrators and visual artists, who explored the world of illustration in this call, reflecting the “emerging scene” mentioned in the section’s title. However, there is a notable absence of representatives from previous generations.

The concluding selection in this anthology features the work of transfeminist artist Emma Segura, who in “Amiga de las Flores” (Friend of Flowers) explores the concept of the body as a garden, a motif further pursued by Ariel Bertarioni Barquero in “Clase de Natación” (Swimming Lessons), where the body transforms into an aquatic flower. The debate around hegemonic beauty takes centre stage in “Conversaciones Filosóficas con una Gata Señora en una Caja de Cartón: Los Pelos” (Philosophical Conversations with a Cat Lady in a Cardboard Box: The Hairs) by Raquel Mora Vega. Chabela Lazo Rosales delves into the intricacies of a creative and precarious daily life in “Domingo” (Sunday). “En lo Profundo de Mi Pecho” (In the Bottom of My Breast) by Daniela Acuña Carmona portrays various forms of pain. In the same vein, Karen Pérez Camacho alludes to disappearances and, probably, femicides in “La Última Vez” (The Last Time). The short format is represented by “Microcómic” (Micro Comics) by Ruth Angulo Cruz, offering a series of imaginative and ecocritical hyper-reports, and “Microrrelatos” (Micro Stories) by Angélica Solís, where the artist tackles the different forms of harassment women experience in the street. “Tiempo de Vivir en Peceras” (Time to Live in Fishbowls), by Mónica Morales Argüello, explores environmental and intimate stories, and Man Yu, in “Todo por Amor” (All for Love), expresses the struggle for self-esteem in a depressive tone.

In summary, this anthology presents a diverse and representative collection of women comic creators in open access, which is worth reading and exploring from different scientific and educational perspectives and should be related to each other across national borders. It is a commendable work that reflects the different concerns and issues of women comic authors from different places and generations. However, the absence of some recognised figures and the clarification of certain selection criteria remain notable aspects to consider.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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SHARED COORDINATES: WRITING *HERSTORY* IN IBERO AMERICAN COMICS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the emergence of a transnational sisterhood under three projects originating from the cooperation between groups of female comic book writers in Spain and Latin America. After the 2016 exhibition “Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy” and the publication of its catalogue by Autoras de Cómic, there was a shared need to claim back the role of female or non-male authorship, and its involvement in comic book production and business. The Argentinian group Feminismo Gráfico tapped into such endeavors, and in 2019 produced “Nosotras Contamos”, a travelling exhibition and a catalogue, with a thematic and a diachronic approach. When COVID-19 broke out, Spanish and Argentinian cooperation and development institutions (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo and Centro Cultural España Córdoba) engaged in a discussion on the previous experiences. The project resulted in a publication and an online exhibition *Coordenadas Gráficas* (Graphic Coordinates), highlighting the work of non-male authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica. The transnational perspective of this last project extends beyond the previous national experiences and includes a meaningful selection of comic stories that, regardless of the nationality of the author, can be defined as feminist. Sexism, gender discrimination, gender violence, and sexual and reproductive rights are the shared coordinates discussed by this long list of authors, who question gender normativity from its very composition. By introducing the associative experiences that gave life to the projects and analyzing them in the international context, the study will focus on the appropriate practice of sharing knowledge to pursue a similar recognition. Moreover, based on the words of the curators and the creators, the study ultimately seeks to shed light on the production and circulation of works of collective interest, meant to recover the role of women in the history of comics.

KEYWORDS

feminist collective, exhibition, *herstory*, genealogy, history of comics

COORDENADAS PARTILHADAS: A ESCRITA DA *HERSTORY* NA BANDA DESENHADA IBERO-AMERICANA

RESUMO

Este estudo centra-se no surgimento de uma sororidade transnacional através de três projetos que resultam da cooperação entre grupos de autoras de banda desenhada em Espanha e na América Latina. Após a exposição “Presentes: Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy”, em 2016, e a publicação do seu catálogo pelo coletivo Autoras de Cómic, surgiu uma necessidade comum de reivindicar o papel da autoria feminina, ou não masculina, e o seu envolvimento na produção e no negócio da banda desenhada. Este esforço foi rapidamente assumido pelo grupo argentino Feminismo Gráfico que, em 2019, produziu “Nosotras Contamos”, uma exposição itinerante e um catálogo, com uma abordagem temática e diacrónica. Aquando da pandemia de COVID-19, as instituições de cooperação e desenvolvimento espanholas e argentinas (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo e Centro Cultural España Córdoba)

iniciaram um diálogo sobre as experiências anteriores. O projeto deu origem a uma publicação e a uma exposição *online* intitulada *Coordenadas Gráficas*, que destaca o trabalho de autores não masculinos de Espanha, da Argentina, do Chile e da Costa Rica. A perspetiva transnacional deste último projeto ultrapassa as experiências nacionais anteriores e, mais importante, inclui uma seleção de histórias de banda desenhada que, independentemente da nacionalidade da autora, podem ser definidas como feministas. Sexismo, discriminação de género, violência de género e direitos sexuais e reprodutivos são as coordenadas comuns discutidas por este grupo alargado de autoras, que questionam a normatividade de género desde a sua própria composição. Ao apresentar as experiências associativas que deram vida aos projetos e ao analisá-las num contexto internacional, o estudo centrar-se-á na prática adequada de partilha de conhecimentos para obter um reconhecimento semelhante. Além disso, através das palavras das curadoras e das criadoras, o estudo pretende, em última análise, lançar luz sobre a produção e a circulação de obras de interesse coletivo, destinadas a recuperar o papel das mulheres na história da banda desenhada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

coletivo feminista, exposição, *herstory*, genealogia, história da banda desenhada

1. INTRODUCTION

In Spanish, *presentes* is the plural form of “present”, a multi-faceted word that conveys — as does its literal English translation— both the concepts of something existing at the time it is considered and something which is in view or under consideration. It is also a noun, meaning gift. With all its relevant differences in meaning, *Presentes* is the title chosen by the Colectivos de Autoras de Cómic for their first important project¹. In November 2016, the homonymous exhibition opened at the Real Academia de España in Rome; since then it has been on exhibition in dozens of towns, both in Europe and Latin America. The exhibition “Presentes. Autoras de Tebeo de Ayer y de Hoy” was originally organized and promoted by the above-mentioned group with the support of the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo (AECID), and then developed into a catalogue (Berrocal et al., 2016). *Presentes* is, above all, the first of three similar projects we will focus on in this review: *Nosotras Contamos* (2019) by Feminismo Gráfico, an Argentinian feminist author collective, and *Coordenadas Gráficas* (2020), which unites European and Latin American experiences.

2. THE GENEALOGICAL APPROACH

The three different experiences have many features in common: the projects were developed by women curators or women collectives. Secondly, they explore both exhibition and publishing activities and, finally, they are openly intertwined. Considering the importance of the historical element as “a kind of historical accident, a product of a

¹ On the web page of Academia Real in Rome the joke goes further with the exhibition claim and plays with the words: “female comics authors are presents. Female comics authors are *the* present”. Echoes of the same pun are to be found in Marina Abramovich’s famous extended performance “The Artist Is Present”.

specific historical situation” (White, 1978, p. 29), the projects move indeed from the acknowledgment that the history of comic books in Spain and Latin American countries has been told and made exclusively by male authors and readers. The first aim of the project was “highlighting the role of Spanish female comics artists in the comics industry” (Berrocal & McCausland, 2017, p. 135) and that would be achieved through a gender-oriented point of view combined with a genealogical approach. The latter has been defined as the “retrieval exercise of the sociohistorical memory as an investigative method” (Restrepo, 2016, p. 23).

The genealogical approach comes into play in the production of the exhibitions and catalogues and, in the case of *Presentes*, it is clearly stated in the time indication, *de ayer y de hoy* (yesterday and today). As Alejandra Meriles (2019) explains:

starting from the recovery of individual history, the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic succeeded in showing the genealogy between the women comic artists who worked and the ones now working in the comic industry. Intergenerational links are exposed as a net made up of 52 works, structured by style or topic, similar or opposed pairs. (...) The works are exposed neither in chronological nor in a lineal way (...). Although the panels drawn or scripted by women were exposed together with informative texts, the relation among style, line, or topic which united every female author did not follow any chronology. It was the frequency and the line of questioning, how stories and narrative plots were graphically treated and resolved which united women comic artists belonging to different moments of the Spanish comic industry, now delocalized and present worldwide. (p. 135)

This same genealogical perspective can be of course labeled as *feminist*, not only because of the emancipating virtues of the act of searching, selecting and compiling (McCausland, 2016), but mainly because it is applied to the deconstruction of a male-centered and male-told history of comics, where women are ostensibly absent (Acevedo, 2020). In this respect, the female authors who appear in the exhibition and catalogue of *Presentes* provided great contributions in the past, but were forgotten by history. They are now retrieved by a new feminist perspective and have finally been given the opportunity to intertwine artistic relations, as this is a “sisterhood time, a present mediated by feminist winds, a promise for a fairer, more horizontal and participated future” (McCausland, 2016, p. 39). The collectives responsible for the three experiments considered — Colectivo Autoras de Cómic, founded in Spain in 2013, Feminismo Gráfico, based in Argentina, and last but not least, the spontaneous, informal, and transoceanic join-venture formed by the curators Elisa McCausland and Mariela Acevedo — share the aim to reclaim space and make their work visible by retrieving the female author presence in the past, “upon our her-ancestors’ shoulders” (Miralles, 2014, p. 6).

3. PRESENTES

According to the curators Elisa McCausland and Carla Berrocal, the structure of both the exhibition and the catalogue pushes the genealogic proposal one step forward if compared to a few exhibitions organized before by Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic², highlighting the similarities between the works of female authors in content and form. By using different symbols and colors, the curators establish connections between the authors presented, whose relationships are based on five main thematic axes, as described in the introduction of the catalogue by McCausland, that can be translated as “what a body can do”; “playing, growing up, dreaming”; “there are other worlds and they all are inside this world”; “from the kiosk to the bookshop”; “from the bookshop to the net”. The catalogue includes two essays. The first one is by Antoni Guiral³, who signs a brief history of female presence in 20th century history of comics, starting from the middle 1930s and the Civil War, up to the so-called *magazine boom*. Guiral tries to answer the self-directed question about the reason why there have been so few female authors in the history of Spanish comics and begins admitting that “the latter is a male industry, edited by men, produced by men, and directed to male readers”. The other essay is signed by the Spanish female critic Ana Merino⁴, who points out the important role of female underground comic authors in setting new trends in feminist introspection in the United States, highlighting the difference between that movement and the recent Latin American one. Women artists seem to have been absent in a male-dominated world for a long while; feminist genealogy applied to the history of comics helps the activists involved write and draw up a completely new *herstory*. As McCausland (personal communication, 2023) points out:

what is important about feminist genealogy is the process that is itself inclusive. As stated by Patricia Mayayo in *Genealogía Feminista del Arte Español* [Mayayo, 2013], inspired by Teresa Alario and Ana de Miguel, recognizing genealogy, entering it, means challenging one of the basic cultural codes: the patriarchal tendency to conceive every work, every woman’s claim as if it came from the void, absolutely extraordinary. A far more appealing concept.

4. WRITING HERSTORY

We consider incomplete any history based on unperishable traces. (Lonzi, 1970, p. 16)

² The travelling exposition “Ellas Toman los Lapices, el Espacio y la Palabra” (Sevilla, Valencia, and Barcelona, 2016) and “Mujeres de Tinta” (Madrid, Expocomic 2014).

³ Antoni Guiral is a writer of comics and expert based in Barcelona.

⁴ Ana Merino is the director of the Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts at Iowa University; she is a poet, a novelist, a critic and a curator. Her production also includes important essays about Spanish comics such as *El Cómic Hispano* (The Hispanic Comic; Catedra, 2003) and a monography about American cartoonist Chris Ware (Sinsentido, 2015).

This sentence is included in *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* (Women's Revolt Manifesto): in this pamphlet, Italian feminist author Carla Lonzi (1970) refers to the absence of women in the productive system and in the process of creating tangible wealth, to show that traditionally feminine tasks like cleaning the house, raising kids, and general caretaking are “moves made of air”, perishable actions that cannot be considered as a *real* product, despite being at the same time essential for production to be created and become a reality. Shifting to the history of a specific art production, the experiences here analyzed stem from a similar situation. According to Antoni Guiral, as gender equality was not promoted by politics until the years of transition (from Franco's death to the late 1980s), the presence of women in the labor market, and consequently in the comic industry, was weak. Official comics industry historiography in Spanish-speaking countries included very few women. Moreover, as highlighted by several authors (Autoras de Cómic, 2017), by not mentioning feminine roles, credits have been wrongly awarded indirectly to the male artists whose presence has always been documented. Nevertheless, recent studies — such as the one conducted by Arantza Argudo Martínez (2020) — have focused on the presence of women artists in Spanish comics production and tried to “fill the void and silence perpetuated by the bibliography of art and comic studies in relation to the work of female authors in this field” (p. 10). It is nearly impossible to think of any form of cultural expression that can develop autonomously from a political setting; this statement is even more meaningful in Iberian and Latin American contexts, which witnessed harsh repressions during the time of dictatorships. While North American and French feminists began gathering around the self-produced comics experiences of the 1970s⁵, Spanish women artists still lived under Francoism. It was in recent years, under the fourth wave feminism outburst, that the French Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée contre le Sexisme (<https://bdegalite.org/>) was founded to keep the fight against sexism and gender inequality alive in the 21st century; this French collective inspired Spanish female authors to found the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic. As it is well stated in the French manifesto, feminism is “the fight for gender equality; an antisexist posture that we want to replicate in our environment, because we want comics to be a more equalitarian space” (“Sobre el Colectivo Autoras de Cómic”, n.d.). The genealogical approach of the works analyzed thus sheds light on an incomplete history of comics, one without or with very few female authors. In order to rewrite not just a *story-telling* but a *story-questioning*, the collective chose to retrieve the names that have been cancelled or made invisible (Acevedo, 2020). *Herstory* of Argentinian comics proposed by the collective Feminismo Gráfico is both ethical and aesthetic and it comes into existence through their exhibition and catalogue *Nosotras Contamos*, which follows the same diachronic and thematic criteria laid down before by the Spanish experience *Presentes*. Once again the collective resorts to a smart and allusive title, stretching the potential of language as the verb *contar* means in Spanish both *to tell* and *to count*. As Acevedo (personal communication, March, 9th, 2023) explains:

⁵ A group of female authors gathered around the experience of *Wimmen's Comix*, an underground comics anthology published from 1972 to 1992, coordinated by Trina Robbins. Something similar happened in France with *Ah! Nana*, founded in 1976 by the female authors involved in producing underground magazine *Metal Hurlant*.

Presentes was such an inspiring work. (...) It was the model we followed: we wanted to create a dialogue between authors belonging to different generations, recording contents, moods, and nuances of every time considered, bearing in mind that this should always be an open system, ready to be reformulated and to be connected to other forms. This present burst of female authors is in debt with colleagues from different eras, including those who still aren't in the catalogue, because they were obscured by the shadow of fathers, brothers, and husbands, who went into history. (...) Many women were colorists or scriptwriters and they were cut out from history. Our genealogies want to make these absences visible, although we are well aware that they will never be exhaustive lists.

In a geographic context where “graphic narratives have become an important artistic space of feminist resistance” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 166), the catalogue of Feminismo Grafico inherits the Spanish experience. The catalogue insists on the *herstoric* perspective with a general timeline opening the book and a clear temporal organization of the forgotten production of female comics, divided into four chapters which introduce the protagonists of comic *herstory* as “las pioneras” (the pioneers), “las okupas” (the squatters), “las fanzineras” (the zinesters). It is impossible to ignore how this experience contributed to the construction of a “*feminine territoriality* as coined by the Spanish comic scholar Ana Merino (...) which helped to promote an awareness of the field’s genealogy, historicity, and interconnectivity” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 169). The catalogue provides a sort of *legenda* made of symbols to which the curator refers to as “thematic spots” (Acevedo et al., 2019, p. 9). These become fundamental to connect the work of the aforementioned artists and to create a conceptual net and a virtual dialogue, enhancing the meaning of their unrecognized presence in male-gazed history of comics. Promoting the construction of an antisexist environment leads to the creation of a space where non-stereotyped gender identities are included. Argentinian authors belonging to the collective Feminismo Gráfico, who promoted *Nosotras Contamos* (again as a travelling exhibition and a catalogue), state :

woman as a category was too tight to include mates who don’t identify just as women, but lesbian, non-binaries, or dissident. We use *female authors* not to define a closed space where to catalogue the works of our colleagues, but as a fragile border that we have been drawing together. (Acevedo et al., 2019, p. 6)

5. JOINING FORCES

The following step was obvious: the Centro Cultural España-Córdoba⁶ fostered dialogue between Spanish and Argentinian experiences dedicated to the construction of female comic authors’ genealogies. Elisa McCausland and Mariela Acevedo, who had

⁶A mixed institution formed by the Agencia Española para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo and the Municipalidad de Córdoba.

been among the curators of the former experiences, joined forces and together with Paloma Domínguez Jería and Isabel Molina from Chile and Iris Lam from Costa Rica, created a “transnational *herstoric* initiative” (McCausland et al., 2020). *Coordenadas Gráficas. Cuarenta Historietas de Autoras de España, Argentina, Chile y Costa Rica* (Graphic Coordinates. Forty Comic Strips by Authors from Spain, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica) is the experiment in which the sisterhood among women and LGBT representative comic authors becomes transnationally real, as well as “the first broader investigation of female comic production in Latin American from a transnational perspective” (Wrobel, 2023, p. 169). The book is a sign of the untold, yet unfolding *herstory* and, more importantly, it represents a space where women comic artists can meet and talk to each other, defining themselves as a large community, a net that is expanding beyond gender and geographic borders, an ongoing genealogic construction. The hybrid character of the single comic author’s groups — institutional, academic, activist — is not a limit but a booster in the development of this third catalogue. Unlike the previous experiences, among the pages of *Coordenadas Gráficas* longer *historietas* (comic strips) are included and shown in the virtual exhibition; in fact, along with the author’s profile, one or two brief comic stories are presented. The catalogue is divided into four parts corresponding to the different countries, opening with a focus on Argentinian national comics history. The approach is now openly feminist, as the curators have declared and considered in their previous works how male presence in the comics industry determined women’s absence; in their introductions to the recompilations, words such as “underestimation”, “omission”, “legitimization”, “revelation”, “patriarchy”, “misogyny”, “resistance”, “plurality”, and “self-recognition” reveal a new shared awareness (McCausland et al., 2020).

6. COMMUNITY AS A BODY LEARNING TO FIGHT

When I started to promote the Colectivo de Autoras de Cómic, I had no clue, I didn’t consider myself a feminist. For me, it was just a way to answer the omission we suffered as women comic artists. Then I started becoming aware as a lesbian and a feminist. (Berrocal, personal communication, February 21, 2023)

An important contribution regarding the relationship between the narrative in comics and feminism comes from Hilary Chute’s (2015) works. Interested in demonstrating “how texts in comics model a feminist methodology in their form” (p. 200), Chute is interested in the representation of the body; in graphic narratives, the proliferation of bodies and in general the process of embodiment of different selves in the space of a single page and sometimes overlapping in time, marks a feminist narrative practice. As she writes, “the form of comics powerfully addresses itself to the linkages between life-writing and feminist theory” (Chute, 2015, p. 200). If we shift from the space of the page of an autobiographic comic to the space of an exhibition — whether real or virtual — that presents the existence and the work of women comic artists who have been retrieved

from the official historiography of the medium, it may be easier to understand how these genealogic reconstructions of different and intertwined *herstories* go beyond the simple didactic purpose to eventually generate self-knowledge and collective awareness. We share Sánchez's (2023) definition of "comics as models of the Latin American territory (...) a reading that conceives memory as a display, (...) a representation of facts, bodies, and truths, corporal stability of the witness and the characters of the comics" (p. 150). According to this interpretation, the exhibitions and the catalogues — as well as comics — can be seen and read as the sparks of a new sisterhood, a *corpus*, to which the readers or the visitors can award the same power as the single comic reading experience can have on an individual level in the creation of feminist self-narrative. Studying the show *Presentes* as a "virtuoso montage example", Alejandra Meriles (2019b) comments:

the pedagogic effect of this (exposition) design is double. Not only they are writing the story of a community which, until now, could not recognize itself, but they are showing how the historical account written on the wall of a museum today, was yet there yesterday, in the pages of comics. (p. 1)

The initial genealogical approach has now acquired a solid, worldwide geographic dimension. The shared coordinates are both temporal and spatial and the projects themselves convey a significant double nature, which reminds us of the cross-discursiveness of the language itself of comics, a medium in which we are asked to look at pictures and read words, and vice versa. As the curators of *Coordenadas Gráficas* remark, "as genealogical instruments, the projects emphasize the relevance of women in comic history, but more importantly, promote the expansion of the medium and allow its protagonist to recognize as a sisterhood, without borders" (McCausland et al., 2020).

Presentes, *Nosotras Contamos*, and *Coordenadas Gráficas* are the main parts of a constantly evolving body, learning to understand itself as a shared "under construction territory (...) promoting visibility from collectiveness, counting on its tendency to create community" (McCausland et al., 2020, p. 10).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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