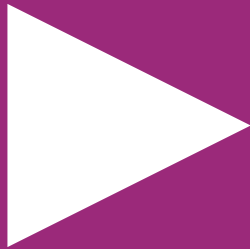


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Sexualities and Leisure





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COMIC PORNOTOPIA: THE THEATRICALIZED FICTION OF SEXUALITY IN *MAGDA*, *DEUS AOS DOMINGOS* AND *GAROTA SILAT*¹

| Edmilson Miranda Jr²

Abstract

This paper employs Paul B. Preciado's concept of pornotopia, along with Theresa Tensuan's critical approach to comics, to analyze the representation of the characters Magda, Deus and Garota Silat, created by the comics artist Rafael Campos Rocha. The investigation also employs the perspective of Marlucy Paraíso, in which the three characters are protagonists in cultural texts oriented to leisure and entertainment. Based on the content analysis methodology outlined by Bardin, pornotopias are posited as models of masculinity invented for the production and consumption of pleasure by way of their presence in comics simultaneously reproductive and critical of that very masculinity. In this view, the representation of the female body reproduces Preciado's theatricalized fiction of sexuality and, at the same time, challenges this fiction through presenting discourses that interface with discourses of decoloniality, questioning hegemonic patriarchal symbolic structures. In this sense, the characters confirm Tensuan's reading of the comics, offering a vision of performative practices, family rituals and cultural conventions that articulate individual and collective differences in the context in which they are inserted, the context of a Brazil permeated by complex disputes over the culturally constructed concept of gender.

Keywords

Comics; Decoloniality; Entertainment; Leisure; Pornotopia.

¹ Paper presented during the VIII International Congress on Cultural Studies: Sexualities and Leisure.

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Intentions

Rafael Campos Rocha is a comic book artist, screenwriter, writer, and visual artist. His production as a comic artist came to prominence with the character “Deus, essa gostosa”, which began in the pages of *Ilustríssima*, the cultural supplement of the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, and was published in 2012, by the Quadrinhos e Cia imprint of the publisher Companhia das Letras. Since then, the character has been published again in the issue *Deus aos Domingos* (Rocha, 2018) by Veneta. I propose the analysis of the character Deus in the work *Deus aos domingos* (Rocha, 2018), together with two other publications by the same author, in which the protagonists are also non-white women: *Garota Silat* (Rocha, 2022), initially published in the author’s Instagram profile and *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) published by the Quadrinhos e Cia imprint of the publisher Companhia das Letras.

Deus aos Domingos (Rocha, 2018) features the creator of the universe, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, black woman, football fan, and sexually uninhibited. In *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) is an adventure that mixes science fiction and terror, starring a black woman, born in Paraíba – a state in northeast Brazil – and endowed with powers obtained by fusing with an alien in the shape of a giant cockroach. *Garota Silat* (Rocha, 2022) is a transgender woman, Indonesian, an expert martial arts fighter and inserted in pornographic plots. This text focuses on how the three works address identity issues – specifically feminist issues linked to racism and xenophobia –, supported by the idea that comics can reproduce symbolic structures that guide certain subjectivities, while challenging the reader to question these structures (Tensuan, 2020).

Therefore, to understand cultural transformations marked in comics, I use Tensuan’s approach (2020), which relates aesthetic formulations of subjectivity and practices of social transformation in comics. It is added the Afro-futurist perspective – assumed here as an analytical filter – to discuss how the works present cultural differences and issues related to gender, race, and sexuality, expressed in the imagistic representation of the protagonists.

Comics register difference

Tensuan (2020) investigates how comics register difference in their productions, “in particular how the represented *bodies* in comics manifest hierarchies of difference” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 140). In this sense, the three

characters analysed and the plot in which they are inserted manifest the patriarchal logic about the female body, at the same time as they challenge such logic, placing non-white women in a position of power in front of the other characters in the plot. From an Afrofuturist perspective, the works register differences when they propose alternatives to the power relations instituted for women in hegemonic culture. Specifically: for a Black woman, as happens with the character Deus; for a Brazilian northeastern woman, as happens with Magda; and for a transgender Indonesian woman, as is the case of the character Kali in *Garota Silat*.

By Afrofuturism I refer to aesthetic expressions marked by a blunt criticism of the racial issue, whose term is coined in the United States (Dery, 1994) and is spreading as a culture of resistance in different countries. It is a “global aesthetic movement that encompasses art, film, literature, music and scholarship”. (Yaszek, 2013, p. 1). Afrofuturism is understood as “speculative fiction or science fiction written by Afrodiasporic and African authors” (Yaszek, 2013, p. 1) who dramatized the racial issue by inventing a bright future for people of colour living in a technocultural world.

To guide the elements that structure the analysis of the works I seek to obtain by content description “indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/reception” of the messages (Bardin, 2011, p. 48). That is, the content analysis, conducts this investigation to explore “other realities *through the* messages”. (Bardin, 2011, p. 50). For this, the analysis describes specific details contained in the works seeking to answer the following questions: To what extent can ideas that reinforce the theatricalised fiction of sexuality, or images produced by these ideas – which reproduce this biased and loaded fiction of patriarchal macho imagery – serve to produce a critique of these very images? Would it be possible to perceive these pornographic images – from the way they are presented, in an almost caricatural way –, as a criticism of the patriarchal tropes they reproduce?

When analysing the context built for the narratives of the three characters: Magda, God, and Kali, it is possible to realize that they are involved by a content that flirts with caricature, by exaggerating the eroticization of the female figure. While it also approaches the decolonial proposal, criticizing symbols of Western capitalism printed in the “imaginary of the modern/colonial world” (Mignolo, 2012, p. 3).

In *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) the role occupied by the protagonist – whose name gives the work its title – is aligned with Afrofuturism because it is about a black woman in a dystopian future, a position that presents deeper layers in the Brazilian cultural context. This is because Magda is a northeaster immigrant, coming from outside the Rio-São Paulo axis, established in the Brazilian imaginary as a concentrator axis of political and economic power in the country.

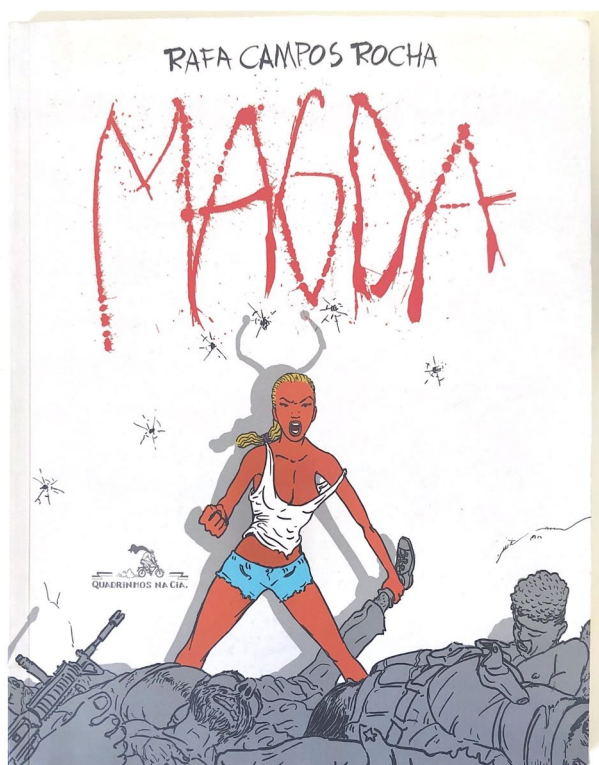


Figure 1 – Magda

Another Afrofuturist aspect is the environment created for the narrative: a future in which the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are plagued by an infection that turns people into zombies. In this future, Rocha imagines the consequences of contemporary Brazilian inequality. We see how the work questions established representations of power by proposing to imagine them in an alternative environment. As Tensuan explains, comics are capable of renegotiating dichotomies produced in the hegemonic imaginary:

Comics renegotiate the dichotomies created between high and low, news and entertainment, self and other as a means of tracing circulations of power and reverberations of violence and of recasting a reader's understanding of how certain narratives and visions gain cultural currency while others are cast to the margins. (Tensuan, 2020, p. 141)

The narrative of a collapse of the Brazilian economic centre presents an alternative to the project instituted by the “modern European / Euro-North American / colonial capitalist / patriarchal world system” (Grosfoguel, 2009, p. 1) and does so when it imagines a deviation in the expected direction for the state of the historically constructed concentration of resources in Brazil. This type of deviation guides the decolonial perspective.

Decolonial thinking emerges as reflections proposed by authors sensitive to Latin American realities and emerging from the set of productions within the field of Cultural and PostColonial Studies. Decolonisation is a diagnosis and a prognosis removed and not claimed by the *mainstream* of postcolonialism, involving several dimensions related to the colonality of being, knowing and power. To explore these dimensions, we can trace a path from Cultural Studies through the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group to the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group.³ Between the Asian and the Latin American groups lies the postcolonial critique, which “characterises the capitalist system as a cultural system” (Grosfoguel, 2009, p. 60). It is from this critique that the questions discussed by the Subaltern Studies Groups, which nourish decolonial thought, are established. The point of debate that leads to the decolonial perspective is the privileging of the “Western epistemic canon by the South Asian subaltern school”. (Grosfoguel, 2009, p. 43). It is Mignolo (2012) who uses the concept of colonial difference to expose this process. As he describes it, colonial difference began when “Spanish missionaries judged and ranked human intelligence and civilization”. (Mignolo, 2012, p. 3) this “was an initial moment in the configuration of the colonial difference and the building of the Atlantic imaginary; which will become the imaginary of the modern/colonial world.” (Mignolo, 2012, p. 3) It is even in this difference that the imposition of a racial structure of domination is installed, what Aníbal Quijano

³ Based on the organization made by Ramón Grosfoguel (2009), according to him “With very few exceptions, most postcolonial theorists come from the humanities, from areas such as literature, rhetoric and cultural studies. Only a small proportion of scholars in the field of postcoloniality come from the social sciences, notably anthropology.” (Grosfoguel, 2009, p. 59)

called the coloniality of power: the “imposition of the idea of race as an instrument of domination” (Quijano, 2005, p. 136).

In *Deus aos Domingos* (Rocha, 2018), the character is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, as she is the creator of the universe. Her narrative proposal directly challenges the Western Christian imaginary by presenting an opposition to the image of God as a white man. This is because the idea of God represented as a black woman confronts the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2005, p. 136) in the sense of exposing the hegemonic logic as a constructed imaginary that can be reimagined. Thus, if for the colonial logic the idea of race subjugates certain groups, placing a representative of this group as the image of the Christian God subverts this logic, pointing out its contradictions.

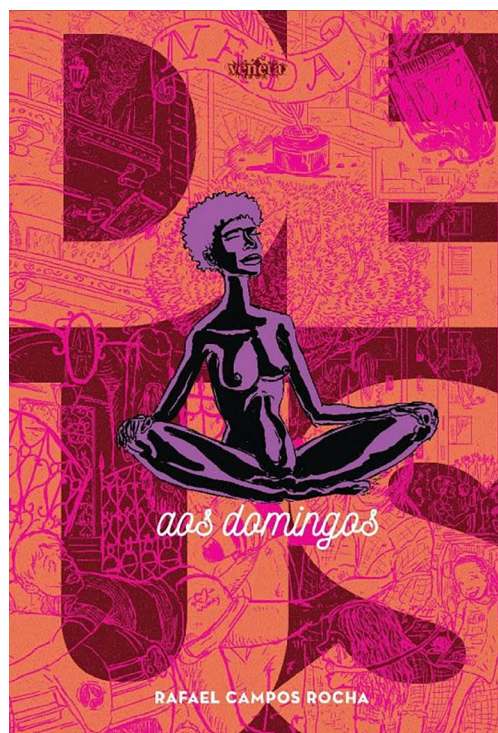


Figure 2 – Cover of *Deus aos Domingos* (Rocha, 2018)

At another point in the narrative, Afrofuturist elements stand out. God is in a future in which Eurocentrism has given way to a world in which Europe does not represent an economic and cultural centre. We see the protagonist

arguing with her girlfriend about the Swiss, who in this reality are “the only humans who still work as security guards! They say they can even use violence” (Rocha, 2018, p. 28). What seems to be prejudice against white people – an ironic inversion of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2005, p. 136) – is presented, and the conversation goes on to explain that in that future capitalism has been replaced by another system, demonstrating a world that has undergone profound cultural changes. On that page we read:

(...) this symbol they have on their foreheads... / It is a euro... the last European currency before the “final crisis of capitalism” / Every Swiss, when born, receives this tattoo, a reminder of their great past, when they were called “the guardians of capitalism”. (Rocha, 2018, p. 28).



Figure 3 – God appears in a future without Eurocentrism

In the pages of the issue, one sees other moments of the infinite existence of God, in which it is possible to identify the decolonial discourse. The text inverts currently hegemonic logics, such as the idea of submissive black women, and imagines future possibilities in which currently marginalised groups assume the dominant position. It presents a power dispute fought in the field of the imaginary.

In *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) the decolonial discourse also presents itself. The narrative choices for the composition of the argument of the work contribute to observe a discourse that seeks to combat the “world system” (Grosfoguel, (2009, p. 1) proposing a critique of the prejudice against northeasterners by a southeastern economic elite. Prejudice connected to the racism instituted in contemporary Brazilian society.

According to Lélia Gonzalez, we live with the result of a sophisticated procedure of denial of racism in Brazilian society, something that serves in a “disguised” way (Gonzalez, 1988, p. 72) to the country’s “whitening” project, “the Latin American racism, sufficiently refined to maintain blacks and Indians in the condition of subordinate segments within the most exploited classes”. (Gonzalez, 1988, p. 73). Gonzalez (1988) agrees with postcolonial and decolonial critical reviews by questioning power relations that remain still operating in tune with colonial logic and revealing the presence of groups that, although officially free, remain “subaltern” in discourse; “defined as a difference from the elite.” (Spivak, 2010, p. 60). In *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) this conflict is in the protagonist’s discourse:

(...) you couldn’t crush me before when I arrived from Paraíba. You could not do it when you had the diploma bought by Dad and the clothes bought by the diploma. And you won’t succeed now that you are nothing but meat. White meat, soft and spoiled from the South-East, that’s what you are. (Rocha, 2016, p. 84)

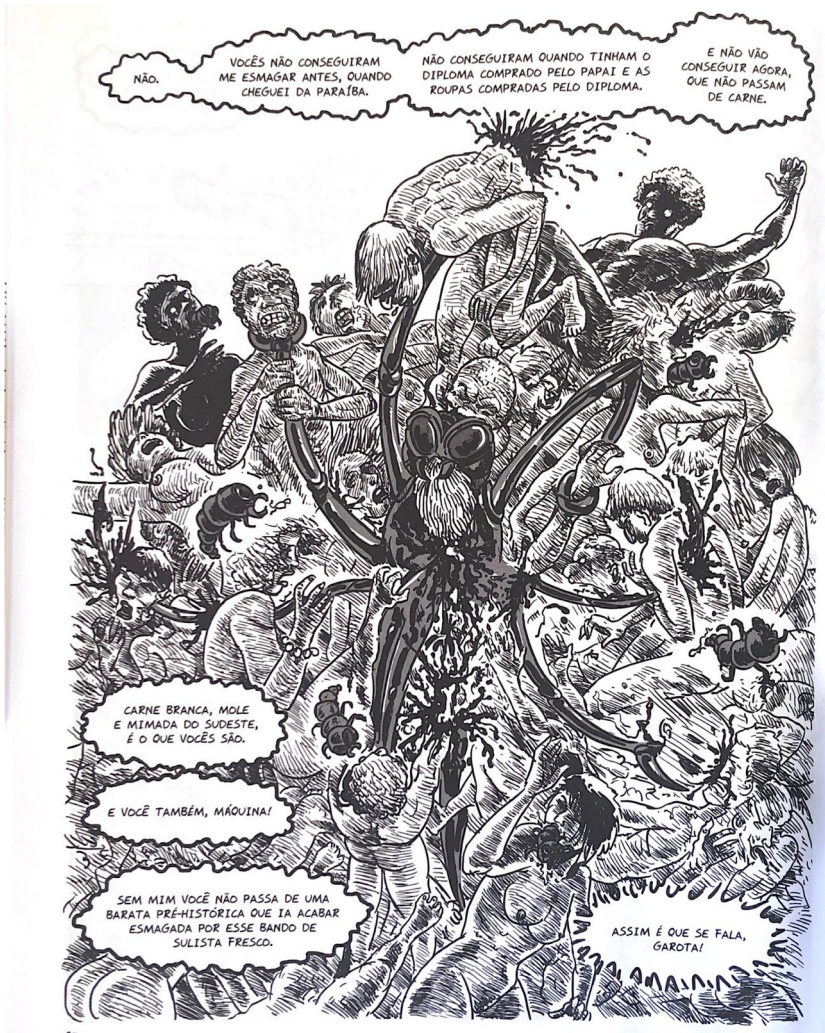


Figure 4 – Northeast resists

Magda challenges the concentration of resources in the southeast of Brazil, vociferating her indignation at the climax of the adventure. This speech also challenges the predominance of white protagonists in comics. In this sense, the text claims a voice for a subalternized group in Brazil: the northeasterners. This group, not by chance, is mostly black and carries with it aspects of the epistemologies spread by the African diaspora in the country (Gonzalez, 1988).

However, while it discusses the prejudice against northeasterners in Brazil, the iconography chosen for Magda echoes patriarchal voices, when it places the protagonist in graphic positions that reproduce the discourse of the theatricalized fiction of sexuality discussed by Preciado (2020). The protagonist's poses echo the imagery constructed in the US by *Playboy*, which appeals “directly to the sexual desire of the readers” (Preciado, 2020, p. 27). This is an imaginary produced in a specific historical context, which is established as the *Playboy* pornotopia of the 1950s and conditions “the current proliferation of other multimedia pornotopias that assert themselves as the future forms of sexual commerce” (Preciado, 2020, pp. 218-219).

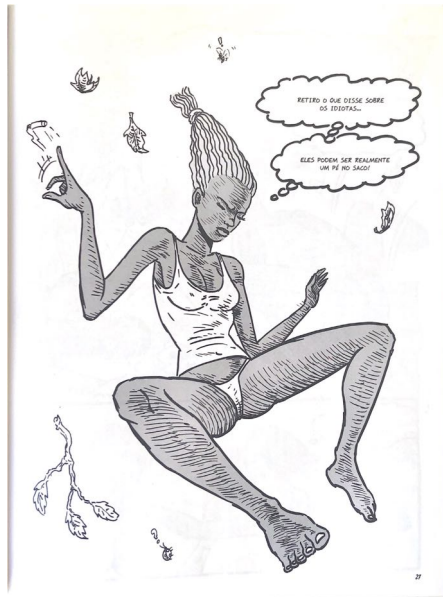


Figure 5 – Theatricalised fiction of sexuality

The concept of Pornotopia (Preciado, 2020) concerns the construction of a model of masculinity. It is about the fabrication of “a mythical masculinity capable of withstanding the crisis of heterosexuality in the twentieth century and of standing up to the threats of female liberation and transgender utopia” (Preciado, 2020, p. 217). To elaborate what pornotopia would be, Preciado resorts to Foucault’s concept of heterotopia: “provisional counter-spaces, where moral rules are suspended and where another temporality is in force” (Facioli, 2011, p. 218), for example brothels, in which morality gives way to

other customs, instituted specifically for that environment. Thus, the pornotopia establishes singular relations between a space, sexuality, pleasure, and technology, implying a change of sexual and gender conventions, which, in turn, produces sexual subjectivities derived from this change.

Therefore, what we see as a choice of representation in the image of Magda, is also present in the representations of God and Kali, the *Silat Girl*, demonstrating the presence of pornotopia, recurrent in the work of the creator of the characters. If in *Magda*, this aspect of the theatricalized fiction of sexuality is shown in the poses and highlights chosen for the character, this sexuality is more direct in God's stories, and assumedly pornographic in *Silat Girl*.



Figure 6 – Exposure of sexuality of the character God

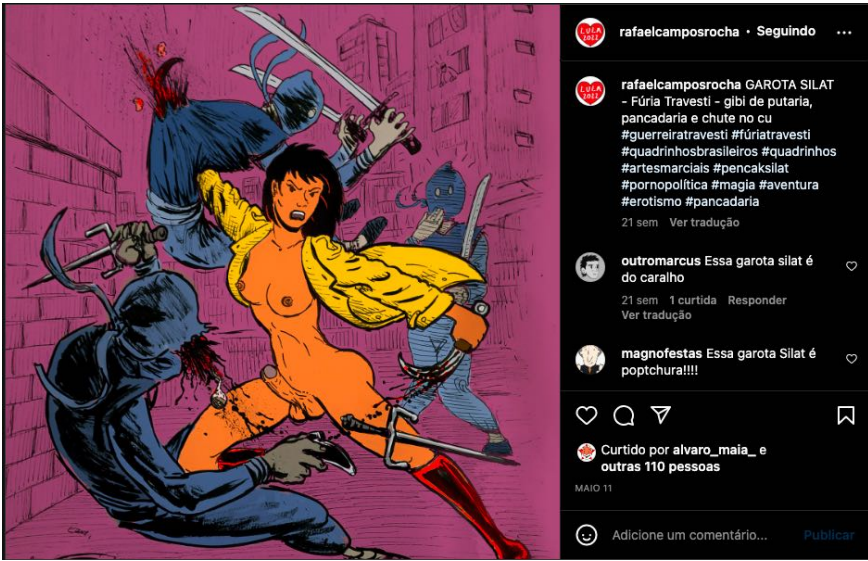


Figure 7 – *Garota Silat* is an assumedly pornographic story. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdbhY8lOmjA/> Accessed on 12 October 2022

In *Girl Silat* (Rocha, 2022), we have the story of an “enchanted being with both female and male characteristics.”⁴ The author mixes elements of Indonesian culture, with clichés of spy stories and fantasy, to elaborate the adventures of a transgender woman. Rocha chooses to present her stories in short pornographic tales, focusing on the virility of Kali, the name of the character who was initially presented only with the generic pseudonym that titles her series. However, the simplistic character of this premise is articulated with the critical stance of the text. This is because references to decolonial thought are evident in the themes and characters that make up the narrative. For example, in the image that parodies Delacroix’s painting, *Liberty leading the people*, from 1830. The phrase that fills the flag raised by the protagonist stands out: “The revolution will be Latin, African, Asian & Transvestite!”

⁴ As described by the author in a post on his Instagram profile. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CerOTWSOB-v/> Accessed on 12 October 2022.

nolo, 2012, p. 3). Subversion that happens from the extrapolation of customs and normalized relations. The decolonial critique appears, therefore, in the caricature.

The caricatured exaggeration can be exemplified by the villains of *Garota Silat* (Rocha, 2022) They are: an organization called NATO, a clear reference to the Atlantic Alliance created against the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Cold War; Biden, a direct reference to the current US president; and Daniel Créu, a parody of Daniel Craig, the actor who plays James Bond, a symbol of masculinity in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.



Figure 9 – Parody of James Bond. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfrPswCIP-2/> Accessed on 12 October 2022

In the last narrative arc posted on Instagram, the James Bond parody is represented as a submissive character dominated by the protagonist Kali. In this sense, the caricature proposed in this choice of approach for the characters seems to argue against the *status quo*, inverting the sense of narratives guided by patriarchal narrative tropes, that is, placing a symbol of masculinity in the place of submission in relation to the protagonist. This episode shows that Kali’s mission would be to seduce the manly spy, that is, despite her evident physical power as a martial artist, the protagonist uses a sensual dance to achieve her goal.



Figure 10 – Sensual dance. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce6QbHquJQp/> - Accessed on 12 October 2022

Thus, it should be noted that *Garota Silat* repeats the dynamic presented in *Deus aos Domingos* and *Magda*, this because, unlike the episodes in which Kali performs as a heroine of action – whose strength and skill are greater than that of her opponents – in this episode, her power is limited to her sexuality. It is demonstrated, therefore, the dichotomy between the critical aspects exposed in the narratives and the reaffirmation of a stereotypical female sexuality, mainly when it refers to the figure of the black woman, “represented by the macho and racist iconography as freer and more liberated”. (hooks, 2019, p. 134). In this sense, Rocha’s comics articulate representations of power. This is because, “they renegotiate dichotomies (...) as a means of reformulating the reader’s understanding” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 141). That is, the stories oscillate between decolonial criticism and exaggeration in the reproduction of patriarchal concepts, using this reproduction as a caricature that exposes these concepts and questions their validity.

Leisure and difference

Culture exerts an epistemological weight that guides the organization of leisure activities, even acting in the languages and postures used by institutions, groups and individuals that promote leisure practices or that practice them (Paradise, 2010). Thus, approaching a leisure activity as a cultural text can help to understand the effects that certain leisure practices have on the bodies of individuals subjected to their expressions.

Magda (Rocha, 2016) plays with the effects of leisure practices in her narrative when she proposes a dialogue of resistance with Brazilian northeastern women, who are sensitive to her reading in a different way than would be male readers, especially if original from other regions of Brazil.

It's immediate. I see everything. The life of that building and the life of my kidnapper. And of the nest. And of the machine. Your enormous life, all at once. Not as we tell our lives to each other. A slow conversation, full of coyness and respect. It's not a conversation. It's a rape. Like when men talk. No modesty, no interest in the listener. It's a rape, but I'll resist. Like I resisted university, school, and work. I will resist. And then I'm going to kill all of you. (Rocha, 2016, p. 97)



Figure 11 – Magda resists

The author shares his perception about an intimacy he does not know. We read the story from inside Magda's head; therefore, we see the universe that is presented to us under what, according to the author, would be the look of a black Brazilian northeastern woman. To do so, Rocha touches on the issue of aggressions done to women from the Northeast and how, for these women,

to exist means to constantly resist, from childhood to adulthood. With this approach, we can observe an example of a comic strip that extrapolates to reveal shared visual codes. This is because, according to Tensuan, by over-exposing cultural conventions, “comics can show how narrative tropes and visual codes both assemble a recognizable world and challenge assumptions about the world beyond the comic frame” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 141). That is, comics not only expose cultural conventions, but also challenge those conventions, as seen when the work addresses the issue of racism:

Your João Pessoa birth certificate, I know! A delicious historical irony, don't you think? Remember Alessandro? That racist biologist who wanted to test his DNA because he didn't believe a northeasterner could have the “science gene”? Voilá! Alessandro here! Contaminated and serving as a guinea pig for us to analyse his DNA, blood and whatever else his body can handle to provide us with! / I have to admit. It tastes good, yes. (Rocha, 2016, p. 74)

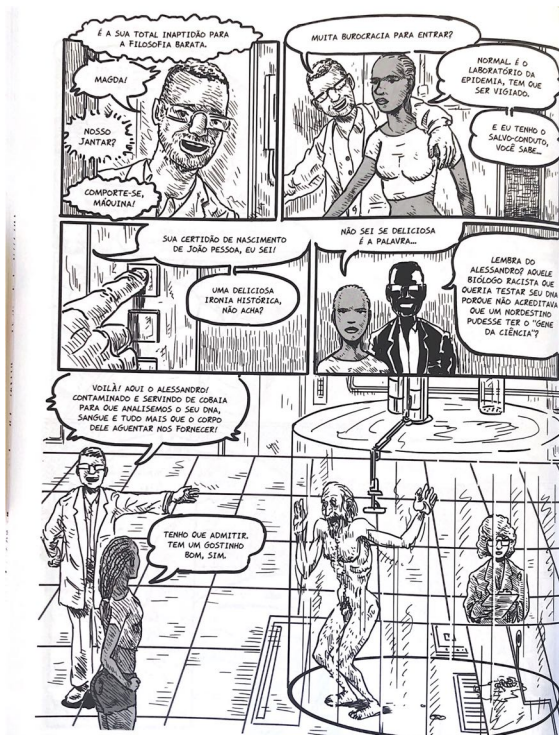


Figure 12 – Structural racism

Therefore, although comics act within a process of reaffirmation of what Audre Lorde defined as “mythical norm (...) generally defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian [sic], and financially secure” (Lorde, 1984, p. 116), there are comics that fall outside this norm. Or, as Tensuan explains, “Comics, through the juxtapositions embedded in their very form, can convey the complexities and unexpected congruences revealed by a located politics of difference” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 146).

Thus, guided by the Afrofuturist perspective, I align *Magda* (Rocha, 2016) *Deus aos Domingos* (Rocha, 2018) and *Girl Silat* (Rocha, 2022) through the eyes of Marlucy Paraíso (2015) as cultural texts that contribute to think curricular forms turned to leisure and entertainment. Texts that, instead of imprisoning, reactivate forces, in the sense of commitment to ethnic-racial relations and other identity issues that constitute “the problematic of difference”, in which we are inserted. (Paraíso, 2015, p. 50) in which we are inserted. For this, I start from the understanding that the cultural text is a practice of productive signification directly involved with power relations, which generates behaviours and guides processes of subjectivation (Paraíso, 2010). This thought is assumed here to be in line with Tensuan’s approach (2020) regarding Comics. That is, comics carry the potential for a politics of difference, “they challenge a reader to see the world differently in a better sense” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 148).

Magda (Rocha, 2016), *Deus aos Domingos* (Rocha, 2018) and *Girl Silat* (Rocha, 2022), act on both fronts: both echoing the protocols that structure the life of the modern middle class and challenging them. This is because they are works that are also inserted in the same heteronormative space as other comics “thus showing how practices of representation both arise from and contribute to ideological frameworks as well as aesthetic traditions” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 144). They are, therefore, valid examples of comics that contribute to “give shape and form to emerging subjectivities” (Tensuan, 2020, p. 148) and, from these, propose alternatives for the future of those who express these subjectivities.

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Broad and polyhedral, «Sexualities and Leisure» is a theme that proposes an articulation, not yet much explored in-depth, between the topic of sexualities and the topic of leisure within the scope of Cultural Studies. It is a topic that poses epistemological and methodological problems on which it is important to reflect and that calls for an effort to think about the dynamics of culture in contemporary society. The works gathered in this volume focus on the aforementioned articulation, from different perspectives and through different access routes. And they represent a contribution to the deepening of reflection and research on the proposed theme.

