Katharina Ranefeld

Use of myth in Brazilian Feminist Comics and Cartoons

Dissertação de Mestrado

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Advisor: Profa. Denise Berruezo Portinari
Prof. Carlos Eduardo Felix da Costa

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Abstract

Ranefeld, Katharina; Portinari, Denise Berruezo (Supervisor). **Use of myth in Brazilian Feminist Comics and Cartoons.** Rio de Janeiro, 2025. 86p. Dissertação de Mestrado - Departamento de Artes & Design, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This thesis examines the intersection of myth, feminism, and comics in Brazil, exploring how myths about women are constructed, perpetuated, and challenged through visual storytelling. By applying Roland Barthes' semiological approach to myth, this study identifies recurring themes related to beauty, body, sexuality, motherhood, and mental health in feminist comics and cartoons. The research is conducted through a combination of visual analysis and practice-led inquiry, using examples from prominent Brazilian feminist cartoonists, as well as the author's own artistic practice.

The study traces the historical development of feminist comics, from early political caricatures to contemporary webcomics, highlighting the challenges and achievements of female cartoonists in Brazil. It also addresses the broader socio-political context in which these comics are created, considering issues of gender, race, and representation. By analyzing visual language and recurring symbols in contemporary Brazilian feminist comics, this thesis reveals how feminist comics re-signify traditional myths, transforming them into tools of resistance and empowerment.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding of comics as a form of feminist discourse and artistic activism. It demonstrates how visual narratives serve not only as reflections of societal struggles but also as means of rewriting dominant ideologies.

Keywords

gender, stereotype, female characters, design, comics, graphic design;

Resumo

Ranefeld, Katharina; Portinari, Denise Berruezo. **O uso do mito em quadrinhos e charges feministas brasileiras.** Rio de Janeiro, 2025. 86p. Dissertação de Mestrado - Departamento de Artes & Design, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Esta dissertação examina a interseção entre mito, feminismo e quadrinhos no Brasil, explorando como os mitos sobre as mulheres são construídos, perpetuados e desafiados por meio da narrativa visual. Aplicando a abordagem semiológica de Roland Barthes ao mito, este estudo identifica temas recorrentes relacionados à beleza, corpo, sexualidade, maternidade e saúde mental nos quadrinhos e cartuns feministas. A pesquisa é conduzida por meio de uma combinação de análise visual e investigação baseada na prática, utilizando exemplos de cartunistas feministas brasileiras proeminentes, bem como a própria prática artística da autora.

O estudo traça o desenvolvimento histórico dos quadrinhos feministas, desde as primeiras caricaturas políticas até os webcomics contemporâneos, destacando os desafios e conquistas das cartunistas no Brasil. Além disso, aborda o contexto sociopolítico mais amplo em que esses quadrinhos são produzidos, considerando questões de gênero, raça e representação. Ao analisar a linguagem visual e os símbolos recorrentes nos quadrinhos feministas brasileiros contemporâneos, esta dissertação revela como esses quadrinhos ressignificam mitos tradicionais, transformando-os em ferramentas de resistência e empoderamento.

Por fim, esta pesquisa contribui para a compreensão dos quadrinhos como uma forma de discurso feminista e ativismo artístico. Demonstra como as narrativas visuais servem não apenas como reflexo das lutas sociais, mas também como meio de reescrita das ideologias dominantes.

Palavras- chave

gênero, estereótipo, personagens femininos, quadrinhos, design gráfico;

1 Introduction: The woman, as an artist, is a woman

I am a cartoonist. One day, not so long ago, I looked at my work and realized what must have been obvious to everyone else: I was only drawing women. And every one of them was a facet of myself, a part of me in a specific time or place in my life.

Before, I must admit that I had never been particularly interested in feminism or any kind of gender perspective, but when I realized that all this time my identity as a woman had been a big topic in my art, I started to examine female Comic characters in popular narratives more closely, especially those that were considered “strong” characters. I saw strong women on either side of the spectrum, both fighting and committing crimes. What united them was that they all wore spandex. Not only were they highly sexualized, but also, in most cases, following a rather masculine tradition of strength. It seemed that popular female heroines were always either the iteration or the antithesis to a male norm. My own art obviously pertained to a different category. I was very intrigued by this and therefore I chose this line of inquiry as the initial theme for my thesis project. This project opened up to me the universe of feminist Comics, where all sorts of women and all sorts of realities and perspectives abound. For a long time, sadly, they were hidden from the view of the mainstream comic audience. Here I found character and narrative designs that resembled my own and many more. They are a reflection of women's lives, of seen and unseen struggles and a fascinating interplay of myth and visual language that is waiting to be, as Roland Barthes jokingly would put it, "deciphered".

One could say that this project was born out of a vague sense of injustice and a lot of naivité. Little did I know back then that every single one of my observations on popular culture had already been the subject of more than a century of feminist debate. Finally, the research for this thesis allowed me to discover authors such as

Gayle Rubin and Laura Mulvey, who put into words what I was feeling about the sexualization and othering of women. I realized that the Riot Grrrls were embracing our bitchiness and our obnoxious shrill laughter long before I even had the thought. And the one that personally touched me the most, I found Hélène Cixous and her account of woman as her own category in “The newly born woman” (Cixous; Clement, 1986) and “The Laugh of the Medusa” (Cixous, 1991). This project is not only a connection of variables, a scientific study for academic progress, but has been a sort of initiation into an ongoing historical struggle and an awakening to my identity as a feminist. It is inextricably connected to my identity both as an artist and a woman.

This project is going to deal with feminist art in Brazil, more specifically, Comics. Comics are a broad concept, but it usually includes one of the following attributes: stylization, text and sequence. Comics are a subcategory and are a sequential narrative of images. It can be said that “space does for Comics what time does for film” (McCloud 1993, 7). According to Comics scholar Thierry Groensteen, one aspect that stands out among the genre's enormous versatility is iconic solidarity—the presence of interdependent yet separated images. This is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition that allows a wide variety of artwork to be assembled within the conceptual frame of the Comics system (Groensteen 2008, 129).

Comics have long served as a mirror to society, reflecting its values, struggles, and evolving ideologies. Since their inception, it has been intertwined with politics, offering a platform for commentary and critique on pressing social issues. Tracing back its history, one can see its involvement with political debate as well as with pop culture. Among the various movements that have found expression within Comics, feminism stands out as a powerful force, shaping both the content and reception of this medium. In fact, until recently most female cartoonists were only able to distribute their work thanks to feminist structures and publishing outlets, the mainstream Comic business being a predominantly male industry to this day. In Brazil, there is and has been a vibrant feminist art culture, whose artists often deal with the double burden of struggling to survive in an (urban)

environment that is often violent and discriminatory (Melo; Portinari, 2019, p. 16). On the other hand, Comics have been used in various ways to demean and to advocate against women's liberation, ever since the days of the suffragette movement. It is safe to say that the history of the women's right movement has been a war of images and in this thesis, we are going to shed some light on both sides of it.

The debate on women's rights and their role in society revolves like no other around conventions, traditions and norms. Therefore, a lot of it, deliberately or not, is held in the language of myth. The goal of this thesis is to examine and categorize the appearance of these myths about women in Comics and Cartoons and understand their dynamic. The term "myth" in this thesis will be used as defined by Roland Barthes in his seminal work "Mythologies", which is a study of the modern - or, as he puts it, the "bourgeois" myth - the hegemonic form of myth that has shaped the imaginary of modern occidental societies.

Comics have a communicative power that goes beyond conventional means and deserves special attention. Some even argue that due to its reliance on icons it comes close to a universal language (McCloud 1993, 58). Incidentally, one of the early reasons it started to be used in the feminist movement was to appeal to women that were not literate (Streeten 2020, 17). It is exactly this language of icons that will be at the core of this thesis' research. Through a semiological visual analysis, as well as the documentation of my own artistic process, I intend to uncover the myths that are being used in Comics depicting women.

Barthes offers three different approaches to deciphering myth (Barthes 1991, 127). For the first approach, I will identify concepts that are repeatedly coming up in debate on women's issue (most of which concern the body, such as beauty, sex, fertility, mental health etc.) and then look for their form in various examples of Comics. For the second approach, I will start out with the visual analysis and find the myths that stand behind certain recurring icons or their respective modifications within an artwork. And lastly for the third approach, which deals with the process of signification itself, I will reflect on my own artistic process

and the assumptions and associations made while creating a drawing.

The topic of this thesis is Comics as a reflection and extension of the debate on women's rights, with a focus on the instrumentalization of myth which is inspired by Roland Barthes' conception.

The problem in question is to attain an increased awareness of the power and usage of myth in the feminist debate and Comics as its instrument, both as a reader and creator.

The subject of research is Comics and Cartoons in many forms of production, be it books, magazines, postcards or webcomics, with a focus on Brazilian feminist cartoonist. The subject will also include the author's own production, which gives unique access to the art process and the act of signification.

The orienting questions refer to the interactions and congruity of the areas of research as well as assumptions that arise during the literature survey. Which myths about women are recurring in Comics and how do they manifest themselves? Is their use on purpose or unintended? Can the same icons or myths be instrumentalized to different ends?

The general objective is the identification and interpretation of myth in Comics. Myth is a notoriously subjective matter and there will never be one correct interpretation. Therefore, I intend to use historical and socio-political context as well as the artist's background as my guidelines. Other than that, I will follow Barthes approach to "decipher" myth, which he himself uses in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, but which nonetheless serves as a rational starting point (Barthes 1991, 127). The irony related to his use of the term has to do with the fact that Barthes'structural approach is not a hermeneutics in the classical sense of the word – a decoding of an underlying meaning, that would be found "behind" or "beneath"the sign – but rather the (re)construction of meaning that takes the sign as its starting point.

Specific objectives are to identify and outline distinct topics of debate regarding the feminist movement and connect them to Comics that deal with those specifically. The artists who are thus identified will need to be contextualized historically, socially and politically and then their work will be subject to a visual analysis following the guidelines of Barthes, Dyer and McCloud. Another objective is to document and reflect upon my own artistic process.

The justification for this project stems largely from the combination of different areas of study.
Myth, Comics and the feminist debate are all rather broad topics that encompass many aspects, procedures and meanings and transpire in our society and everyday lives. The literature survey finds that their individual relations have already been subject to research. There is some work on myth in Comics, on Comics in the feminist debate and also, extensively, on myths about women. However, combining the three of them offers the chance to look at a more specific complex of action and meaning, which may uncover interrelations that have not been considered yet. I notice that especially notions of beauty and sexual attraction become a playing ball between these poles, with many signs being used in a fluid and organic manner. A lipstick, for example. A lipstick in Comics or in a cartoon means the woman dressing up, because she feels she wouldn't be enough without it. It is also the woman dressing up, because she won't hide. It is both the penis and the dildo. It can all mean the same or completely different things, depending on where you locate it in this three-dimensional system. In "Three Guineas" Virginia Woolf thought of reinventing English in order to be able to tell a different story (Le Guin, 1989, p. 205). I argue that, in their instrumentalization and re-signification of myth, feminist artists are doing just that: re-inventing a language in order to describe their true reality.

The research methodology is qualitative, exploratory, descriptive, but also practical, by documenting and reflecting upon the author's own artistic process. To this end, principles of art-based research will be applied. Literature advocating for this approach abound, but as a framework I intend to use 'Art practice as research' by Graeme Sullivan (Sullivan 2005) and 'Practice-led Research,

Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts' by authors Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Smith & Dean, 2009).

This first chapter defines comics and their visual language, distinguishing between cartoons, comic strips, and graphic novels, referencing scholars like Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and Will Eisner. It also introduces the role of feminist comics in political discourse, drawing from theorists like Barthes and Mulvey.

Tracing the evolution of feminist comics in the United States and Britain, from suffragette-era satirical drawings to underground comix and graphic novels, the third chapter highlights key figures like Trina Robbins and Nicole Streeten. It also discusses movements like Riot Grrrl and third-wave feminism, referencing authors such as Angela McRobbie and Ariel Levy.

This fourth section looks at the history of feminist Comics in Brazil, detailing the emergence of feminist cartoonists, from early pioneers like Nair de Teffé and Patrícia Galvão (Pagu) to contemporary webcomic artists. It references scholars such as Gonçalo Júnior, Crescêncio, and Ramos & Carmelino, alongside key figures like Ciça, Conceição Cahú, and Crau da Ilha.

Applying Roland Barthes' theory from *Mythologies*, the fifth chapter explores how comics use myth to reinforce or challenge societal norms. It highlights the role of visual storytelling in shaping feminist discourse and draws connections to thinkers like Gillian Dyer and Terry Eagleton.

The sixth chapter deals with methodology. The research combines visual analysis and practice-led inquiry, drawing from Barthes' semiology, Gillian Rose's visual methodology, and Graeme Sullivan's concept of art as research. It also engages with Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean's *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*.

Finally, we get to the analysis. The seventh chapter categorizes recurring myths in comics—such as those related to beauty, sexuality, and motherhood—analyzing their visual representation. It references Naomi Wolf on beauty myths, Simone de

Beauvoir on othering, and includes an analysis of contemporary feminist cartoonists like Helô D'Angelo, Carol Ito, and Lovelove6.

2 Theory: Myth, Women and Comics- a triangle of power

Comics, as a medium of visual storytelling, occupy a unique space in the realm of art and literature. They are a complex amalgamation of images and text that, when combined, create meaning and narrative. However, a precise definition of "Comics" requires distinguishing it from similar forms such as Comics, Comic strips, and caricature. By drawing on key theoretical contributions from scholars such as Thierry Groensteen, Scott McCloud, and Will Eisner, we can better understand the distinctive nature of comics.

2.1 Defining Cartoons and Comics: A Disambiguation

Comics are a form of narrative expression that combine images and text in a sequence, with the intention of conveying a story or message (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). While comics can take various forms, the defining characteristic is the interplay between visual imagery and written language, typically through panels arranged in sequence. This sequentiality allows for the unfolding of time, movement, and narrative progression, which is central to the medium (Eisner, 1985, p. 10). The combination of visual and textual elements creates a unique experience that relies on both modalities to convey meaning, with each enhancing the impact of the other.

In his seminal work Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud (1993) offers a definition that emphasizes the visual component of comics, stating that comics are juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence (p. 9). The emphasis on the sequence is critical, as it underscores the need for a temporal and spatial organization that allows comics to communicate stories or ideas across time. Comics can range

from short, self-contained stories to long-form narratives, and they can be found in a variety of formats, including books, webcomics, and graphic novels. The mentioned juxtaposition is also an important artistic tool, best described by McCloud's catchy observation: “Space does for Comics what time does for film” (McCloud 1993, 7). While "Comics " refers to the artistic style or techniques used in creating comics, "comics" as a medium refers to the structured, sequential arrangement of both images and text. Comics encompass the aesthetic and stylistic choices—such as line quality, color palette, and visual composition—used by artists to create a specific mood or character design within the comics format. Comics can be expressive and varied, ranging from highly realistic depictions to abstract or exaggerated forms (Groensteen, 2007, p. 37). However, it is important to note that Comics alone does not constitute comics. Comics must involve the sequential arrangement of these artistic elements to create meaning (Eisner, 1985, p. 39).

Given this definition, it can be said that graphic novels are essentially a type of comic, but with a few key distinctions that set it apart, primarily in terms of format, length, and narrative depth. They are longer, more complex, and more self-contained than the typical comic strip or serialized comic book. Graphic novels allow for more in-depth character development, intricate plots, and themes that might not fit within the shorter format of a comic book or strip. For example, Maus by Art Spiegelman or Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi are graphic novels that tackle complex themes like memory, identity, and historical trauma, something that might be harder to achieve in shorter comic forms. However, it's important to understand that a graphic novel is still fundamentally a comic in terms of its use of sequential art to tell a story.

Comic strips, as a subcategory of comics, are typically shorter, episodic works that usually appear in newspapers or magazines. The compactness and brevity of comic strips make them different from longer-form comics, which have the freedom to develop more intricate stories and character arcs. However, they still may use recurrent characters or develop their arcs over many episodes.
Cartoons (setting aside the secondary meaning of animation and focussing on still images) are usually single panel works or very short sequences (sometimes a few

panels) that focus on humor, satire, or caricature. Cartoons often use exaggerated visuals and simplified, humorous text to make a point, often with a punchline or commentary on contemporary events, politics, or social issues. While cartoons can be serialized or thematic (like political cartoons), they typically do not have the narrative depth or character development found in comics. Caricatures, on the other hand, can be a component of comics (particularly in political cartoons), but they do not rely on the sequential interplay of images and text to tell a story. Caricature focuses on the visual distortion of a subject's physical or behavioral traits, often making it a single-image form rather than a sequential one. While caricature can be employed within comics, it does not define the medium as a whole. In fact, caricature can often be seen as a subset of Comics, used in comics to convey humor, critique, or commentary (Groensteen, 2007, p. 123).

In conclusion, comics are defined by their use of sequential imagery and text to create meaning, often centered around narrative storytelling. While Comics refers to the stylistic and visual aspects of the medium, comics as a whole involve the systematic arrangement of images and words in sequence to communicate ideas. Comic strips are a specific, episodic form of comics, often constrained by space, while caricature is a visual technique that, though often incorporated into comics, does not itself constitute the medium. Graphic novels are a more self-contained form of comics that allow for a deeper narrative. Understanding these distinctions helps clarify the nature of comics as a form of communication, one that has evolved over time to become a major cultural and artistic force.

The categories of the cartoonosphere are difficult to distinguish and define as it is, and even more so when translating from another language. Since this thesis will focus on Brazil, it is essential to define the corresponding terms. *Histórias em quadrinhos* (HQs), which also go under the name of *banda desenhada, gibi,* or simply *quadrinhos* are a beloved vessel of Comics in Brazil and, upon mentioning them, many people will immediately tell you about their favourite childhood *HQ*s. They are stories told by a sequence of images combined with text- the literal translation is "stories in little squares". The term most closely corresponds to Comics in English. The hugely popular *Turma da Mônica,* probably Brazil's most notable export in this field, also belongs to this category. Their shorter version is

the *tirinha*, a Comic strip. A *charge* is usually a single panel work that uses satire and humor to address a certain concept, event or person. It is short, usually only comprising one image, and often found in newspapers or magazines. It sometimes, but not necessarily, uses caricature (Rabaça, 2002, p.126). Here, the translation cartoon will be the most fitting.

Artists usually do not easily categorize by nature, even less so in a fluid and modern genre such as comics. Artists that publish comics will often also publish cartoons and vice versa. In need of specifications for a cohort that will form the base for this analysis and considering the review above, I have defined the following criteria: The analyzed artists must be female cartoonists (*cartunistas*) from Brazil, that publish both cartoons and comics (also including graphic novels). The place of publication can be printed or online, however, they have to be active in recent years and have earned some kind of recognition outside their immediate community (for example through articles, interviews or awards). If we were to analyze the storytelling or character evaluation of these artists, it would make sense to limit the scope of research to just Comics or just Cartoons. But since the goal is to analyze myth, a therefore the visual language as a whole, it would be ill advised to cut out a big part of an artist's production based on sequence. The decision to analyze both the artists sequential works, as well as their single-panel ones comes with the matter of research- the visual language.

For ease of reading, in the more general sections the use of the term "Comics" will comprise cartoons as well. The artists will be referred to as Cartoonists, since Cartoonists is a broader term according to this definition.

2.2 The History of Feminist Comics in the US and Britain

Ever since the invention of the genre, Comics has served as a political outlet, revealing everyday life and commenting on public debate. It has also played a role in the women's rights movement, both in favor and against it. Especially feminist Comics is closely related to its political counterpart. In fact, until recently female artists were mostly only able to publish because of platforms provided by feminist

initiatives. They still rarely get the recognition they deserve and remain notoriously underrepresented (Streeten 2020, ix). This chapter will give an overview of the development of Comics in relation to the feminist movement over the last decades. It will also comment on the Comics employed to counter the movement and the depiction of women in them. One thing can be said from the start: the history of feminist Comics is the history of feminism itself.

Brazil was one of the first countries in the world to adopt the concept of a narrative of sequential illustrations, with works by Ângelo Agostini published as early as the 1860s (Goncalo Júnior, 2004, p. 82). However, the first comics and the idea of incorporating them into journals were imported from the United States, as described in "A Guerra dos Gibis" ("War of the Comics") by the journalist and cultural critic Gonçalo Júnior (Goncalo Júnior, 2004, p. 19). They continued to shape the crescent Brazilian Comics scene from there. The United States are known to successfully export their culture and with the Golden Age of Comic books just around the corner, this industry was no exception. In his address to the Popular Culture Association National Confernece in 1999, the author Waldomiro Vergueiro sums up the influence that the United States comics culture and industry have on the (developing) world, arguing that the dominance of the U.S. comics industry has created significant challenges for comic artists in developing countries, as its globally appealing stories, lower production costs, and extensive marketing strategies make American comics more accessible and profitable in foreign markets. As a result, Brazilian comics history reflects the overwhelming presence of North American comics, both in newspaper strips and comic books, limiting opportunities for local creators. An example for this are the Brazilian super-heroes published in the 60s and 70s with titles such as Escorpião (Scorpion), Targo, Hur, Fikon, Super-Héros, Raio Negro (Black Ray), which are copied from the US industry and show little actual relation to Brazilian reality (Vergueiro, 1999, p. 3). The focus of this thesis is the Brazilian Comics scene, however, given these arguments, it can be worthwhile for contextualization to also take a look at comics history in the United States. This chapter will take into account British production in this realm as well, since they are intertwined in the anglophone sphere of influence. To do so, I have chosen works recounting and analyzing the history of feminist Comics in the United States and the UK, with

authors Nicole Streeten and Trina Robbins as major references. Both of them are Cartoonists themselves and actively participate(d) in the feminist Comics scene, both in an activist and an academic sense. I considered it vital in my choice of literature for the history to be recounted by its participants, because they can offer an insight into those parts of it that did not make it into common awareness.

The earliest political use of Comics coincided with the rise of the suffragettes. In London, The Suffrage Atelier (1909–1914) encouraged artists to support women's enfranchisement through visual publications (Streeten, 2020, p. 14). However, most Comics of the time mocked suffragettes, portraying them as unattractive and angry (Streeten, 2020, p. 18). These visual battles reflect the ongoing struggle for women's societal place. Early women creators, such as Rose O'Neill with her "Kewpies" and Nell Brinkley with her "Brinkley Girls," produced works that both celebrated femininity and critiqued societal norms of their time (Robbins, 2013, p. 7, 29).

Early Comics were often racist, misogynistic, and violent until the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Wertham argued that Comics corrupted youth through depictions of violence and sex, prompting the creation of the "Comics Code," which imposed moral guidelines (Streeten, 2020, p. 19). While the Comics Code sought to address societal vices, it arguably reflected symptoms of broader cultural issues rather than their causes. This era also saw a decline in opportunities for women, with major publishers focusing increasingly on male-centric superhero narratives (Robbins, 2013, p. 91).

In the 1960s, the countercultural movement embraced Comics to promote anti-racism and anti-war messages. Underground "comix" challenged the Comics Code but often perpetuated sexism, making feminist spaces crucial for female contributors. Notably, feminist Comics found their distinct voice in the 1970s, organized in collectives that prioritized collective strength over individualism. These Comics often used satire and aggression to address issues like equal pay and abortion rights, amplifying key feminist demands (Streeten, 2020, p. 22, 61). For example, a protest at the 1970 Miss World pageant was depicted in comic form. Women's underground comix of the 1970s also tackled political and social

issues from a female perspective, reflecting the larger feminist movement (Robbins, 2013, p. 123). One of the biggest names of the underground comix scene is definitely Robert Crumb, who remains famous to this day and whose work will be discussed later on. His sometimes grotesque and semi-pornographic depictions of women have been criticized by many as sexist and misogynist. On the other hand, when we look at the work of Julie Doucet, an internationally acclaimed feminist cartoonist, we also see a somewhat derogatory depiction of a woman. If this work was not read in its context of a feminist publication, it could be understood as misogynistic. This observation already hints at something that will become crucial in the analysis later on: Misogynist and feminist cartoonist often use the same icons and symbols, and even the same myths. Therefore, it needs to be carefully observed to what end, in which context and for which audience they are being used.

A minor but still important detail is that Doucet got much of her early visibility through Crumb's endorsement and by being featured in his magazine Weirdo. What does this tell us? To say the least, the world of art is not simply black and white and both Crumb's and Doucet's legacy are something to be discussed for years to come.

Figure 1: Both Crumb and Doucet portray women in a seemingly derogatory way, but to very different ends.
Source:https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/signed-complete-robert-crumb-comics-1996973093 (left), https://www.cbc.ca/books/dirty-plotte-the-complete-julie-doucet-1.4783800 (right)

During the 1980s, feminist Comics became more institutionalized. Magazines and academic platforms supported feminist artists, but criticisms arose about losing touch with grassroots feminism (Streeten, 2020, pp. 112, 124). The rise of intersectionality, coined in 1989, acknowledged overlapping forms of discrimination based on gender, race, class, and sexuality (Streeten, 2020, p. 108). Lesbian and non-white artists gained visibility, reflecting broader inclusivity within feminist movements (Streeten, 2020, p. 24, 117). Feminist Comics also challenged anti-gay legislation, such as Section 28 in the UK, which banned the promotion of homosexuality (Streeten, 2020, p. 133). Nonetheless, women continued to push boundaries during this time, with figures like Dale Messick creating strong female characters such as Brenda Starr who broke traditional gender roles (Robbins, 2013, p. 61).

The 1990s introduced Third Wave feminism. Third Wave feminism is sometimes deemed less political and sometimes seen as more of a lifestyle or an attitude (Streeten 2020, 159). It is often criticized as being manufactured, individualistic and commodified. Others see great potential in this new generation of feminism and describe it as more intersectional, more aware and more seen than ever (Buarque de Hollanda 2018, 12). At this point, it might be time to abandon the concept of a seasonal feminism that washes over society every once in a while and instead embrace the more organic notion of the “feminist tide”, which originated in Latin America and is already being employed by certain scholars (Côrtes & Portinari 2022, 36). However, we will go on temporarily using the “wave”category which is also employed by the authors used as our source for establishing this timeline.

The Third Wave was marked by younger generations who embraced punk-inspired rebellion through the Riot Grrrl movement. It began in the early 1990s in the United States, combining punk music, zines, and political activism to address issues such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. Riot Grrrls combined DIY fanzines, loud activism, and unapologetic defiance to discuss social injustice and everyday female experiences (Marcus, 2010, p. 56). Their art often employed shocking or carnivalesque styles, reflecting their bold attitudes (Streeten, 2020, p.

158). Commercialization, however, became a double-edged sword, as feminist values entered mainstream culture. Bands like the Spice Girls, a British pop girl group that emerged in the mid-1990s, were promoting a message of "Girl Power"—a form of mainstream feminism emphasizing sisterhood, confidence, and independence among young women. But this also sparked debates about authenticity versus commodification. Angela McRobbie, author of the book “The Aftermath of Feminism” puts it like this: “the superficial does not necessarily represent a decline into meaninglessness or valuelessness in culture” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 137). As a feminist and an artist, I have come to believe that the commercialization of female empowerment is probably inevitable, and it is better to take advantage of it than to try and fight it.

Figure 2: Riot Grrrl can enter the mainstream- as long as she is sexualized.

Source: https://www.previewsworld.com/Catalog/SEP161985

One of the most notable embodiments of Riot Grrrl as a Comic character has got to be Tank Girl by Jamie Hewlett, one of the most famous cartoonists of the 90s and today. Despite being independent and confident, Tank Girl's sexualization highlighted tensions between feminist representation, societal beauty standards and the male gaze. This begs the question: Is Tank Girl feminist? It opens up a whole Pandora's box of unresolved debates within feminist discourse, many relating to the so-called "sex wars" (which will be discussed later in this thesis). Basically, Tank Girl is a woman that enjoys violence and guns. Does that make her a feminist? Admittedly, she is independent and confident, however what comes across is that apparently you have to be generally very radical in order to achieve this status as a woman. Also, another noteworthy fact, while being independent and confident, she manages to stay extremely attractive. So, whose fantasy are we seeing, really? It is easy to fall into the trap of calling something "feminist" just because it inverses gender stereotypes.

However, Hewlett's art is popular with women too and, much like with the Spice Girls, it is essentially promoting a feminist attitude by wrapping it into conventional, male-gaze beauty standards. Women, especially those that aren't sensitized by feminist ideas yet, are not immune against societal beauty standards and they are likely to look up to a woman they consider attractive and want to emulate her. In the end, sex sells (also to women) and if in this case it sells an independent non-conformist female role model, then, once again, the end justifies the means. All that being said, Tank Girl is a prime example of the multilayered playing field of messaging, context, appropriation and commercialization that feminist narratives have to navigate, and which has to be considered when interpreting them.

In the 2000s, "Raunch Culture" emerged, a societal trend that promoted overtly sexual representations of women, often encouraging them to objectify themselves under the guise of empowerment (Levy, 2014, p. 3). There is also a gradual growth of women's contributions in this era, including the increasing acceptance of graphic novels as a respected literary form (Robbins, 2013, p. 139).

The rise of graphic novels further expanded feminist Comics . Often autobiographical, these works addressed identity and trauma, continuing the feminist tradition of "the personal is political" (Streeten, 2020, p. 214). Titles like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* exemplified this approach, alongside educational graphic novels on feminist history (Streeten, 2020, p. 25). Despite all challenges, feminist Comics continues to thrive, documenting, critiquing, and shaping the ongoing feminist movement.

2.3 The History of Feminist Comics in Brazil

Brazilian feminist comics, which is the focus for this thesis, has a rich and dynamic comic book tradition, from its early days of political satire to the growth of graphic novels, with feminist voices playing a crucial role in shaping the narrative landscape. While Comics in Brazil has often been viewed as a medium for popular entertainment or political discourse, it has also been a powerful tool for social change. Female cartoonists have used their craft to challenge gender norms, confront inequality, and push for women's rights and it is their story that I would like to analyze for this thesis.

While doing the literature review for this chapter I found a small but growing and well connected base of people that keep the legacy of feminist Brazilian cartoonists alive. Small online magazines, such as Revista Pirralha and Mina de HQ, make a point of regularly updating their content and highlighting female artists of the past and present. Most of the historical accounts I found online were a timeline of names, the most famous feminist cartoonists of the past century, the only ones that had made it into print publishing and thus history. I contacted the editors of Revista Pirralha and asked if they could put me in touch with any artists, in the hopes of finding a hidden community that was not reflected online. Marvelously, Crau da Ilha, a cartoonist that is famous for publishing in critical magazines during the military dictatorship and that stands out for realizing a joint, all-female Comics publication in 2014, the "Perequitas", agreed to talk to me on the phone. Given her relation to Revista Pirralha and own account of the Brazilian Comics community, I became confident that the recurrent names of artists I had read earlier were by no means random footnotes of editorial history, but the actual pillars

of Brazilian feminist Comics. With this as my base, I started the academic literature review. There does not seem to be a comprehensive work that tells the entire history of feminist Comics in Brazil, such as the ones used in the chapter on the United States and UK. However, I found a sizable body of individual works concerning specific artists. Doctoral theses or journal publications, like for example Crescêncio (2021), Boff (2014) and Ramos & Carmelino (2023), have provided me with detailed information and cultural cross-references that were very valuable for writing this chapter.

The history of female cartoonists in Brazil dates back to the early 20th century, with pioneering figures who helped shape the field of caricature, cartoons, and comics. Nair de Teffé (Rian), one of the first Brazilian female caricaturists, made her mark in the early 1900s, publishing in major illustrated magazines like Fon-Fon and O Malho. Later, Hilde Weber, a German-born artist who arrived in Brazil in the 1930s, became renowned for her political cartoons and contributions to both the press and art world. These early artists, though limited in number, laid the foundation for women in Brazilian graphic humor (Camargo, 2022). One of the pioneering female cartoonists in Brazil was Patrícia Galvão, known as Pagu, who created politically charged comics in the 1930s that challenged traditional gender roles (Boff, 2014, p. 38). Her work laid the groundwork for future generations of female cartoonists to address social and political issues through their art.

Figure 3: Pagu

Source: https://historiahoje.com/pagu-musa-das-historias-em-quadrinhos-no-brasil/

In Brazil, during the second half of the 20th century, more women entered the field, often

using their work to express social, political, and cultural views. For example, Maria da Conceição de Souza Cahú, who gained fame in São Paulo, was known for her "pen and ink" portraits (Revista Piralha (b), 2022) , contributing to publications like *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha De S. Paulo*, and *Gazeta Mercantil*. She won the 21st *Piracicaba Humor Salon* award in 1992 for her comic *Uma História de Amor* (Crescêncio, 2021, p. 156).

She played a significant role in the feminist newspapers *Brasil Mulher* and *Nós Mulheres* between 1976 and 1978. Despite her talent and recognition in the Brazilian press during the 1970s and 1980s, Cahú remains largely absent from studies on graphic humor and comics in Brazil, even among scholars focused on women artists. Her work in these feminist newspapers reflects her engagement with feminist causes during the Brazilian dictatorship. The feminist press of the 1970s served as both a feminist laboratory and a space for collective militancy, with a clear left-wing and feminist worldview. Cahú was a constant presence, creating illustrations, graphic humor, and comics (Crescêncio, 2021, p. 155). She contributed to magazines like Abril,

Figure 4: Cahú

Source: Brasil Mulher, n° 9, outubro de 1977

Cecília Whitaker Vicente de Azevedo Alves Pinto, known as Ciça, is a pioneering Brazilian cartoonist who made significant contributions to the country's comic strip landscape. Born on May 2, 1939, in São Paulo, she became a prominent figure in the Brazilian press. Ciça's career in comics began in the late 1960s, with her most famous creation, *O Pato* (The Duck), debuting on May 14, 1967, in the Jornal dos Sports. The series occupied nearly an entire page, featuring 15 comic strips that introduced her unique style and perspective. *O Pato* gained popularity for its witty commentary on everyday problems and social issues, using animal characters to reflect on human society (Ramos; Carmelino, 2023, p. 7-8).

Her feminist legacy is particularly evident in her contributions to alternative feminist newspapers of the 1970s. Her character Bia Sabiá, featured in feminist publications, played a role in reshaping perceptions of women's roles in Brazilian society. Despite her significant contributions and historical importance, Ciça's work has been underrepresented in many compilations of Brazilian graphic humor and comics. Her career during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) is noteworthy, as she used subtle humor and metaphor to critique the regime, often evading censorship through her seemingly simple artistic style (Ramos; Carmelino, 2023, p. 6).

Figure 5: Ciça

Source: Nós Mulheres, n. 1, jun. 1976, [p. 2]. Disponível em:

https://www.fcc.org.br/conteudosespeciais/nosmulheres/arquivos/NosMulheresn1.pdf

Other notable figures from this era include Giselda Melo, who worked in children's comics in the 1940s, and Crau da Ilha, who helped create a space for female cartoonists in the 2000s (Revista Piralha (b), 2022). Crau da Ilha, also known as Maria Cláudia França Nogueira, is a Brazilian cartoonist and visual artist who has played a significant role in

promoting women's presence in the Brazilian comics and graphic humor scene, as we will see later on (Revista Pirralha (a), 2022). Born in 1956 in São Paulo, at 18 years old she showed her work to the cartoonist Fortuna wo was the editor of the magazine "O Bicho" at the time. She was accepted into the artistic team and started working alongside renowned Brazilian cartoonists such as Angeli, Laerte, Chico Caruso, Jaguar and Fortuna himself. Later on, she would also work for magazines such as *Grilo, Balão* and O *Pasquim*. These magazines were known for their critical stance on the military regime and Crau was not only promoting feminists' ideas but, just like the other artists, putting herself at risk by criticizing the dictatorship. This kind of double "responsibility" is characteristic for female cartoon artists in Brazil during that time and can also be observed in works by Cahú or Ciça. After this, Crau largely gave up on professional cartoon work, as she needed to pursue a career that could provide for her growing family. However, she has been a prominent supporting figure for feminist cartoonists ever since then. She is living in Ilha Bela since 1977 (Ribeiro 2019).

The 1970s and 1980s saw a significant shift in the representation of women in Brazilian comics. This period coincided with the rise of the second wave of feminism and the gradual democratization of Brazil. Cartoonists began to create more complex female characters that defied traditional stereotypes. For example, Angeli's character Rê Bordosa, while controversial, represented a departure from the conventional portrayal of women in comics (Boff, 2014, p. 6). While not being explicitly feminist, the character of Rê clearly aligns with the Punk aesthetic and Riot grrrl mindset that was fashionable at the time.

Figure 6: Rê Bordosa
Source: Pilulinhas Porretas" e feministas de Conceição Cahú nos jornais Brasil Mulher e Nós Mulheres

During the 90s, DIY feminist zines and the riot grrrl identity grew into a powerful subculture in Brazil (Melo; Portinari, 2019, p. 32). In fact, the practice continues to this day, as Camila Olivia de Melo shows in her research (Melo; Portinari, 2019). Once again,

when feminist practices meet Brazilian reality, a form of double responsibility is created: Melo's research connects the urban experience of violence, fear, and solidarity to the creative and subversive practices of feminist zine-making, emphasizing how these small acts of resistance help create networks of care, community, and political action (Melo; Portinari, 2019, p. 16).

In 2014, Crau da Ilha realized the idea of bringing together women cartoonists in a single publication, which resulted in the creation of the magazine *As Periquitas* (The Parakeets). This collective work united different generations of female artists in an experience of female empowerment, aligning with the identity-focused spirit of the new century. The magazine featured 20 female cartoonists, including veteran artists like Ciça and Mariza, alongside younger talents such as Cláudia Kfouri and Natália Forcat. The 96-page book-magazine also included an extensive interview with cartoonist Laerte. Crau da Ilha views *As Periquitas* as a bridge connecting various generations, times, and places. She notes that women's art has evolved over time, with newer generations developing their own unique language. The artist observes that charge, cartoon, and comics may not be the same today as they were in the past. Importantly, *As Periquitas* served as a landmark in Brazilian cartoon history, with many of its participants, still active today, paving the way for women illustrators and Cartoonists in the professional field. This initiative by Crau da Ilha contributed to the growing presence and recognition of women in the Brazilian comics industry, which has seen significant progress in the 21st century (Revista Pirralha, 2022).

The most prominent feature of this publication was Laerte Coutinho, known simply as Laerte. She is one of the most popular Brazilian cartoonists, renowned for her creation of comic strips such as *Piratas do Tietê* ("Pirates of the Tietê River") and her contributions to the Brazilian underground comics scene of the 1980s. Laerte's case is special because she was assigned male at birth and during most of her career she identified as such and occasionally employed stereotypes against women in her work. In 2009, she publicly embraced her identity as a transgender woman and has also incorporated her transformation in her work (Campanario, 2018).

Figure: Work by Laerte

Source: https://medium.com/@labdejornalismo/uma-noite-com-laerte-8e01d223025b

The increasing presence of women in Brazilian comics has not been limited to alternative or independent publications. Mainstream comics have also seen changes, with characters

like Mônica from Maurício de Sousa's comics evolving to reflect more contemporary ideas about gender roles (Boff, 2014, p. 118-120). While women have gained considerable ground in comics, their representation in political cartooning remains limited (Boff, 2014, p. 6). The situation in political cartooning continues to be challenging, also due to the overall decline of cartoons and caricatures in print journalism, affecting both male and female artists.

Melo already emphasizes the importance of self-publishing that DIY zines had and the relative freedom it granted to Brazilian underground culture in recent years (Melo; Portinari, 2019, p. 16). Webcomics mark yet another step on this road to independency, as they represent an emerging digital genre influenced by technological advancements and the diversification of online platforms. Rooted in traditional comic books, webcomics adapt to digital environments, offering unique compositional patterns and linguistic traits (Oliveira, Barbosa, 2024, p. 6). These characteristics highlight webcomics as a flexible, creative medium that fosters multimodality and democratizes artistic expression (Oliveira, Barbosa, 2024, p. 2).

Research on contemporary Brazilian and Argentine webcomics reveals their thematic and aesthetic diversity, facilitated by digital platforms like blogs and websites. These platforms enable greater interaction between creators and audiences, allowing for creative freedom outside traditional publishing constraints. Artists leverage digital tools to experiment with visual storytelling, incorporating sound, motion, and interactivity while exploring alternative narrative structures (Vazquez; Dos Santos, 2017, p. 193). In Brazil, webcomics thrive amid a declining print comic industry. Blogs and social media provide emerging artists with opportunities for direct audience engagement and innovation (Vazquez; Dos Santos, 2017, p. 194).

The rise of webcomics and online platforms has significantly impacted the visibility and reach of feminist cartoonists in Brazil. The Lady's Comics website, launched in 2010, played a crucial role in promoting and disseminating the work of women cartoonists and Cartoonists under the slogan "Comics are not just for your boyfriend" (original: “HQ não é só para o seu namorado”) (Crescêncio, 2021 (b), p. 1). This initiative, along with others like Mina de HQ, reflects a broader trend of feminist discourse and gender-related issues gaining prominence in contemporary women's comic production in Brazil.

The internet has become a vital tool for feminist reflection and a privileged medium for showcasing the work of women in comics and graphic humor. Brazilian artists such as

Helô D'Angelo, Love Love6, Carol Ito, Lila Cruz, Bruna Maia, and Sirlanney have found a platform to address feminist and gender issues through their art. This online presence has allowed artists to reach audiences and sustain their work without relying on traditional publishing channels, which have historically undervalued women's contributions (Crescêncio, 2021 (b), p. 2).

The internet has also facilitated the formation of discussion groups and communities centered around women in comics, such as Mulheres nos Quadrinhos, Mulheres em Quadrinhos, and Zine XXX. These online spaces have allowed for greater visibility of women's work in comics, especially for artists outside major urban centers. Furthermore, the internet has become an important archival tool, preserving works that might otherwise be lost or overlooked by traditional publishing channels (Crescêncio, 2021 (b), p. 4-5).

The emergence of webcomics and online platforms has thus provided feminist cartoonists in Brazil with unprecedented opportunities for expression, community-building, and preservation of their work, challenging the historical marginalization of women's contributions to the Comics form.

2.4 The Power of Myth

The language of Comics is made up of icons that evoke meaning. Signs, that is. Furthermore, Comics that enter the feminist debate will typically evoke or question social norms and ideologies, be it on voting rights, sex, beauty or mental health, among many other issues. This combination, given the definition by Barthes which will be discussed in this chapter, decidedly predicts the appearance of myth. Myth, as will be seen later, is a vessel of discourse which can be turned into a powerful tool if employed to further or prevent a cause. Therefore, it will be the focus of the visual analysis.

In the second part of his book “Mythologies”, Roland Barthes provides an ample and detailed description of what can be considered a myth. According to the author, myth is a type of speech, a message, a system of communication, a

semiological system, a metalanguage, a value (Barthes 1991, 124). He also describes the following process: Meaning is supplied to forms and signs by history, thus creating myth (Barthes 1991, 125). Myth then goes on to transform history into nature (Barthes 1991, 128). Hence, myth deprives its object of history (Barthes 1991, 152). Simply put, myth has the power to turn historical conflict into a natural non-problematic reality that has seemingly always existed. In connection with the feminist debate, this characteristic is crucial.

In order to achieve a working definition, it is first necessary to work out the essence of what Barthes is saying in his essay:

Semiology, as postulated by Saussure, is the study of signs, which deals with the problem of meaning. As such, it concerns itself less with the facts of a given object of research, but rather with the values that are attached to it (Barthes 1991, 110 and 122). This allocation of values can be seen as the relation between two terms, the signifier and the signified. For example, a signifier could be "roses" and its signified would be "passion". Together they form a third term, which is the sign (Barthes 1991, 111). However, this sign, by way of its social use, will in turn become attached to a certain value and a meaning. In semiological terms, it will become the new signifier in a second semiological system that is stacked upon the first (Barthes 1991, 113). The resulting metalanguage is what is called myth (Barthes 1991, 114). In the mentioned example, the sign, which is the combination of "roses" and "passion", will become the signifier for the myth of "love".

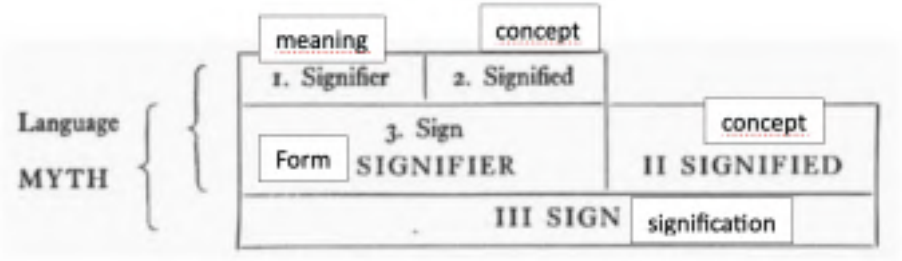

Figure 8: When talking about myth, Barthes allocates new names to each term. They are added here in the text boxes.

Source: Barthes 1991, 113

Myth is a type of speech and therefore always conveyed by discourse (Barthes 1991, 107). However, discourse does not exclusively consist of words, but in fact, can be any significant verbal or visual unit, be it an article, a photograph or an object (Barthes 1991, 109). Since myth cannot be defined by its material (Barthes 1991, 108), there is little use in limiting the field of observation to only certain types of speech, as it is not a defining variable. On the contrary, the repetition in different forms allows for the decryption of the myth, as it "is the insistence of a kind of behavior which reveals its intention" (Barthes 1991, 119).

Myth is based on signs and signs are made up by convention, ideology and essentially, norms. Whenever myth is used it will always evoke at least one of the above. Its existence depends on the presence of these forms of social knowledge in the audience. Therefore, it is a powerful tool to, either unconsciously or deliberately, endorse or question said conventions and norms. One and the same myth can be employed to make completely different statements. It can therefore be used in favor or against the same cause, depending on its context. I will now go on to give some examples of myth in everyday life and describe how they can be used to manifest norms, even those that are the opposite of what seems to be on the surface of the image.

In order to illustrate the ambivalence and versatile instrumentalization of myth, let us now look at a modern example: The Digital Nomad. Work from wherever you are! In neoliberal subjectivity, this is read as a promise of liberty and individual freedom of choice. We are blind to its obvious downside which is having to work from wherever you are. Or be it, the intrusion of work into all other parts of life.

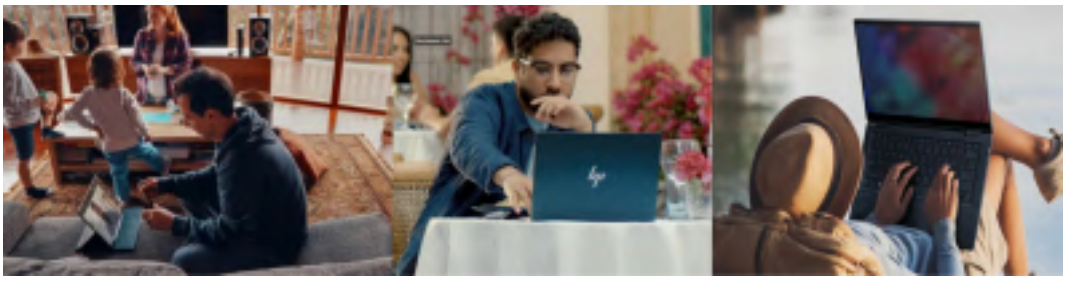

Figure 9: Digital Nomads- This myth frequently comes in the form of people smiling at laptops while being next to their children, at a café or the lakeside.
Source: https://www.hp.com/de-de/home.html

This myth frequently comes in the form of people smiling at laptops while being next to their children, at a café or the lakeside. The Digital Nomad is a prime example of how myth can superficially propagate individual freedom while actually promoting the opposite, the growing space that neoliberal institutions take up in daily routines.

As we have seen, the definition of myth is quite complex. However, it is important to understand its power and how it infiltrates every aspect of our lives without us realizing. Because this power is being instrumentalized in Comics and that is one of the reasons justifying the analysis in this thesis. But how exactly can myth be analyzed? This questions will be answered in the following chapter on methodology.

3 Methodology: Interactions between observation and art

The study of myths in comics and cartoons reveals how visual storytelling shapes cultural narratives and ideologies. This chapter details the methodology used to identify and analyze these myths, drawing on semiology to examine the meanings embedded in signs and symbols. By combining visual analysis with practice-led research, this approach provides a deeper understanding of how feminist themes are constructed and communicated in contemporary Brazilian Comics.

3.1 Identifying Myth in Comics and Cartoons

The goal of this visual analysis is not only to identify and describe icons, but also the signs, symbols and, finally, the myths that they evoke. Therefore, it is necessary to find out which meanings are connected to certain icons. This is where semiology comes into play, the study of signs. Based on the fundamental work by Ferdinand de Saussure, the sign is the most fundamental unit of language. It consists of a signified (an object or concept) and a signifier (a word, icon or other). Or, to put it simply, a sign is “a thing plus meaning”. Notably, there is no necessary or inherent relationship between a particular signifier and a signified. Instead, these connections are constructed by convention or ideology

and often a result of class relations or social modalities such as gender and race (Rose 2007, 74). In visual analysis, the first step is to separate elements in the scenario which can be signs. Gillian Dyer offers a useful checklist when it comes to possible signifiers in the signs of humans. In the depiction of bodies, it is advisable to look for age, gender, race, hair, body, size and appearance as these characteristics are usually meant to convey certain notions or messages. Also, it is necessary to observe their mannerisms such as expression, eye contact and pose. Then come activities, like touching, body movements and positional communication and, last but not least, props and settings, so basically any object or environment that the body is interacting with or that is purposely placed in the scenario (Dyer 1982, 96). In my visual analysis I will consider this list of characteristics as a guiding principle and starting point. Of course, a reading of signs is not complete without taking into account the context in which they were created. Therefore, I will always take into account the historical and political background, information about the artists, the publisher and the target audience.

Finally, after having identified icons and signs, it is time to look for the myth. Roland Barthes, who is lending his definition of myth to this thesis, postulated three different approaches to deciphering it. According to the author, the analysis can depart from the concept, from the form or from the process of signification itself. The first one is called the “empty signifier”. In this approach the researcher aims to find a form for a known concept. In the case of a “full signifier”, the researcher is looking to find the concept to a given form. And finally, the signification: The researcher analyzes the myth as a whole by consuming it and becoming a reader of myths. These tasks can be accomplished for example by reading, analyzing, producing or consuming myths (Barthes 1991, 127). The research in this thesis will make use of all three approaches. The visual analysis of Comics will both read myths in a given form and look for exemplary forms of given myths. In addition to this, the complementary method of research-led practice, which I will introduce below, will allow me to analyze my own process as a producer of myth.

3.2 Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice

In his book ‘Art practice as research’, the author Graeme Sullivan argues for the acceptance of art as a research method. He calls for its recognition as a complementary approach, since, as he puts it, “Artists are not social scientists” (Sullivan 2005, 75). In their book ‘Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts’, which lends its title to this chapter, authors Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean conceive a reciprocal approach in which research and artistic practice inform each other in a continuing process (Smith & Dean, 2009, 2). This method could be very beneficial to this project and provide a more profound understanding of the matter. Therefore, I intend to include examples and analysis of my own work at every stage of the project and document my artistic process and the production of myth. It also serves to become aware of my own habits and artistic modus operandi, which can keep me from possible bias when I might project them in my analysis of other artist’s artwork. Looking at the history of Comics and the feminist movement, I will identify several myths that are being employed both for and against the empowerment of women. Most of these myths involve the female body, in terms of beauty, sex, mental health and fertility. I will then analyze their portrayal and use in Comics, both by female and male artists and in my own work. I believe that this review will be illustrative of the extensive interaction that takes place between feminist literature, thought and research and personal art production.

On a closing note, it is important to circumference the scope of deduction that can possibly be made by this form of research. Semiology often takes the form of a collection of case studies, which is not necessarily applicable to a wider range of material. It is not quantitative, it is not statistical, it is rather meant to illustrate a certain analytical reasoning (Rose 2007, 73). However, design is intricately related with society, something that has been demonstrated by thinkers such as Adrian Forty, who has written his seminal work “Objects of Desire” precisely on this topic. Therefore, understanding where design comes from and what it perpetuates can provide valuable insights into the norms and conventions that shape our debates (Forty 1989). At this point, I would also like to invoke Bomfim’s definition of Design:

“It is not audacious to make the hypothesis, that the foundations of Design are essentially ideological (...) Design would be, first and foremost, an instrument for the materialization and perpetuation of ideology (...) or be it, the designer, consciously or not, would reproduce realities and mold individuals through their objects.” (Bomfim 2014, 32)

A Cartoonist is, first and foremost, an artist. But even though Comics incorporate art, they are also a social vessel of communication, especially when they are mass publications. From this perspective, the Cartoonist designs the message that is in the Comic or cartoon. For those that argue that the analysis of design in Comics is far removed from the harsh reality that is feminist political action, I would like to add Latour’s conception in “A cautious Prometheus”: Design, seen as a form of action without the hubris of “creating”, action that takes unintended consequences and risks into consideration beforehand, is what makes us fit to face complex issues (Latour 2008, 11). Its epistemological value, in this case, is a visionary one, which tries to gain knowledge of the future and imagines us in it.

3.3 Choice of artists for analysis

This thesis aims to analyze the myths, symbols and visual language used by contemporary feminist cartoonists in Brazil. Given the transformatory impact of webcomics and the recent diversification and democratization that came with it, they will be a main source of material. Brazilian feminist cartoonists have gained significant visibility and influence through webcomics and online platforms in recent years. Several artists have emerged as prominent voices in this space, each with their unique style and approach to addressing feminist issues. These platforms and online sources served as valuable input while navigating the Brazilian feminist online comic scene, which sometimes resembled the more decentralized internet from 15 years ago and turned out to be a vibrant network of blogs, tumblr pages, forums and download-links to self-published comics. After careful review, a cohort of artists was selected that roughly resemble each other in treated topics, recognition, type of publications and preferred platforms:

Helô d'Angelo, Carol Ito, Gabriela Masson (artistically known as Lovelove6), Lita Hayata, Marília Marz, Beatriz Shiro. They will form the base for this analysis.

The selection was made based on the following shared characteristics: They all publish mainly online. They all have published at least one larger work in the form of a graphic novel in recent years. They all deal with predominantly feminist issues. They all use recurring characters. While some, like Helô d'Angelo or Carol Ito, are more established artists with more printed publications, they all have at least some recognition from outside the community, based on articles, interviews and other online sources. They all publish both short standalone comic strips or single images and longer sequential comic narratives, sharing the fluid and genreless style that is so typical for webcomic culture. They are all still active now. These shared characteristics allow for meaningful comparision and the detection of shared patterns in their visual language. To give a counter example, artist Germana Viana shares many of those characteristics but was not included due to her lack of single-panel cartoons and only sporadic publication online. Similarly, Estela May is a quite renowned artists regularly publishing comic strips for Folha de São Paulo, however, she has not published a larger work (in form of a full-length comic) to date and is not predominantly dealing with feminist issues- therefore she is not included in this selection.

In her book “The Feminist Explosion: Art, Culture, Politics and University”, the author Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda describes the fourth wave of feminism as a feminism of differences, embracing intersectionality as part of the movement’s identity. She observes that this new generation is organized around personal experiences and values ethics rather than ideology, insurgence rather than revolution (Buarque de Holland, 2018, p.12). Also, the internet is a crucial space for communication and creation of collective identity (Buarque de Holland, 2018, p.24). The artists selected for this thesis fit right into this description. Their works deal with contemporary issues in feminism, but approach them from a personal perspective. While individually sharing their experiences, they describe a shared reality and the decentralized spaces of the internet are offering the perfect platform for this. Rather than calling for revolution or drastic change, their strategy seems to be that of a radical normalization- for example of the natural state and diversity of female bodies.

Helô D'Angelo is an illustrator, cartoonist, and journalist from São Paulo, Brazil. Her work focuses on political comic strips about human rights, daily life, and mental health. D'Angelo has published notable works such as "Tiny Self-Defense Manual" (2022) and "Isolated" (2020), which was a finalist for two major Brazilian comics prizes. She has also produced journalistic comics, including "Four Maries", a graphic report on abortion laws in Brazil (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2024). Helô D'Angelo is known for her bold and colorful illustrations that often tackle themes of body positivity and self-acceptance. Her work frequently challenges beauty standards and societal expectations placed on women.

Carol Ito is a prominent Brazilian journalist, cartoonist, and illustrator known for her work in graphic narratives and comics journalism. Born in Marília, she has been working with comics since 2014 and has published in various media outlets. In 2022, she won the Vladimir Herzog Trophy for Amnesty and Human Rights in the "Art" category for her comic reportage "Três mulheres da Craco,". She is the author of several graphic novels, including "Inteiro pesa mais do que metade", "Siriricas Tristes e outras (in)felicidades", and co-author of "Boy Dodói: histórias reais e ilustradas sobre masculinidade tóxica" (Carolito.com, 2025).

Gabriela Masson, better known as Lovelove6, has gained a large following for her distinctive style and frank discussions of sexuality and relationships. Her work often incorporates elements of surrealism to address complex emotional experiences. She is recognized for her feminist-themed work, with her first two zines specifically addressing feminist issues (Medium.com, 2014). She self-published her comic "Sheiloca", which was funded by an online campaign, as well as the comic Garota Siririca.

Lita Hayata's comics frequently address issues of race and intersectionality, bringing attention to the experiences of women of color in Brazil. Her work stands out for its nuanced exploration of identity and cultural heritage (Mina de HQ, 2019). She is the creator of the webcomic "Bete vive", which is an ongoing narrative of recurrent characters and is posted regularly on her website.

Marília Marz is recognized for her historical comics that often center on women's experiences and forgotten figures in Brazilian history. Her work combines meticulous research with compelling storytelling. Together with the author Regiane Barz she has published the graphic novel "Em ti me vejo", which deals with questions of identity and

beauty standards for Brazilian women of colour. She is a cartoonist for Folha de São Paulo and was nominated for the 2020 HQ MIX Trophy in the category New Talent (Mariliamarz.com, 2025).

Beatriz Shiro's comics often focus on everyday experiences of women, using humor to highlight and critique sexist attitudes and behaviors. Her relatable style has resonated with many readers online. In 2022, she was one of eight artists selected for the AniMAM residency at Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (Mam.rio, 2022).

While these artists share a commitment to feminist themes, their approaches vary significantly. D'Angelo and Lovelove6 tend towards more provocative and visually striking styles, while Ito and Marz often take more analytical or historical approaches. D'Angelo's work, for instance, spans both political commentary and personal narratives, while Masson's comics are noted for their explicit feminist content. Hayata's work stands out for its intersectional focus, while Shiro's humor-centric comics offer a more lighthearted but no less pointed critique of sexism.

The diversity of these artists' styles and focuses reflects the breadth of contemporary feminist discourse in Brazil. Their collective presence online has significantly contributed to the visibility of women's perspectives in Brazilian comics and has helped to create spaces for feminist dialogue and community-building (Crescêncio, 2021 (b), p. 2-3).

It is important to mention here that the analysis part of this research took place when I had already left Brazil. Therefore, I only had access to digital sources. Since one requirement in the choice of artists was that they publish mainly online and most of them published even their longer works as PDFs, this has likely not significantly limited the scope of research, however it may have had an impact in the selection of artworks.

4 Analysis of myths about women in Comics

This visual analysis of contemporary Brazilian cartoonists examines the myths and narratives embedded in their work, exploring how these elements shape

cultural perceptions. By drawing from Barthes definition of myth and also incorporating insights from my own artistic practice, I intend to reflect on the ways these comics engage with tradition, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to ongoing social dialogues.

4.1 Myths about Beauty and Body

The aesthetic is deeply connected to central questions of class, race and sex. The notion of aesthetics is constructed in relation to dominant societal ideology. It is able to assume an enforcing role, as well as that of a powerful alternative, making it a versatile and contradictory phenomenon (Eagleton 1990, 8). This dynamic fully applies to the position of women in society, which is strongly perpetuated through a form of esthetic ideology, the myth of female beauty. By striving to comply with an unattainable ideal, women are being drained of their energy and limited in their potential by both them and others. They develop eating disorders or expose their bodies to silicone. They are hindered in their political or business careers by a public focus on their appearance. They lose their sexual sense of self because they imitate pornography instead (Wolf 1991, 1-5). The continuation of this dynamic in media and art is evident. A good example for this is the so-called 'male gaze', a term first described by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1975, 10). In the following, these myths and debates will be traced in contemporary Brazilian feminist cartoons.

In art, as well as in society as a whole, one of the biggest battlefields in the struggle for women's rights has been, since the beginning, the female body itself. In mainstream Comics, they are often sexualized, objectified, weakened and subject to unhealthy beauty standards.

But female artists are pushing back and the accurate depiction of women's bodies has long become one of the major trademarks of feminist Comics. This starts with rejecting unrealistic beauty standards and showing women's beauty in all shapes and sizes. This includes an emphasis on the beauty of different skin colors and ethnicities, with regard to the intersectional element in modern feminism. The

woman that does not conform with beauty standards is a symbol - used both positively and negatively, depending on the author and the audience.

Figure 10: Source: @carolito.hq

Figure 11: Bette Vive

Source: https://betevive.tumblr.com/

In this sense, feminist Comics also make a point in depicting those parts of the female body that are usually hidden, such as her nipples, her vulva, her clitoris. Especially when it comes to the vulva, many artists go into great detail, assumably to make a counterpoint to the little triangle or slit that mainstream comics like to use as an artistic excuse.

Figure 12: Source: Lovelove6, "Sheiloca", 2019

The same thing goes for breasts and nipples. It is important to notice that feminist comics will depict these parts of the body, in order to send various messages for example to make clear that the character is at home, alone or at ease, while mainstream comics will usually only show them in a sexual context. Simply put, the difference between a mainstream comic and a feminist one is: You might see nipples, *even when the comic is not about the nipples*. Because the authors know that a woman's nipples and genitals are not a sexual toy but actually a natural part of her body and she won't hide them if no one is looking. In mainstream comics, nipples are a symbol for intimacy and the erotic, linking to the greater myth of the woman as an Object of Sexual Desire. These artists deliberately break this connection, by using the same symbol but then refusing to deliver the rest of the myth and instead filling it with new signified's of intimacy, security and solitude.
On the level of icons, it can furthermore be observed that the accurate and consistent depiction of sexual physical characteristics is starting to become the essential form of this symbol, the feminist original of something that used to be

appropriated from mainstream comics. It is a symbol for intimacy and the reclaiming of the female body in a feminist sense.

Figure 13: Source: @carolito.hq

The symbol that sticks out the most is body hair. Specifically, armpits and leg hair. For decades and far beyond Comics, being unshaven has been a symbol of defiance against beauty standards and linked to the myth of Feminism or the Feminist Woman. Nowadays, it has lost a lot of its political radicalism but is still regularly included in visual representations such as the ones being analyzed for this thesis. Similar symbols include openly showing or depicting cellulites and stretch marks. Again, the symbol is signifying defiance of beauty standards.

Figure 14: Helô d'Angelo, "Nos olhos de quem vê", 2022

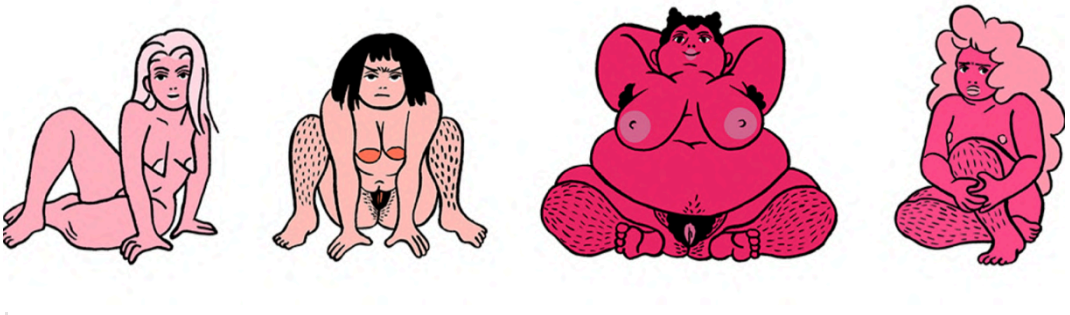

Figure 15: Source: Lovelove6, "Sheiloca", 2019

This is the moment where I would like to turn to my own artistic practice to gather some insight into why certain symbols are selected and persevere so distinctively. When drawing women, even when it is in a very simplistic way, I often make sure to include at least some little hairs on the legs. I have seen many other artists do this as well. Upon reflection I can say this: It is a coded message to female viewers. When I used to shave my legs, some hairs would always be missed by the razor. I would find those later on in public and be embarrassed, trying to hide

the imperfection. Including these hairs in the image effectively is building a community based on our common imperfections and internal knowledge, it is a message saying: " I know you have these little missing hairs on your legs. -I do too!". This mechanism holds true for many other little imperfections that are included in female character design. They allow us to enter a more intimate sphere, the sphere that knows about the hairs, and create a safe space where we do not need to hide.

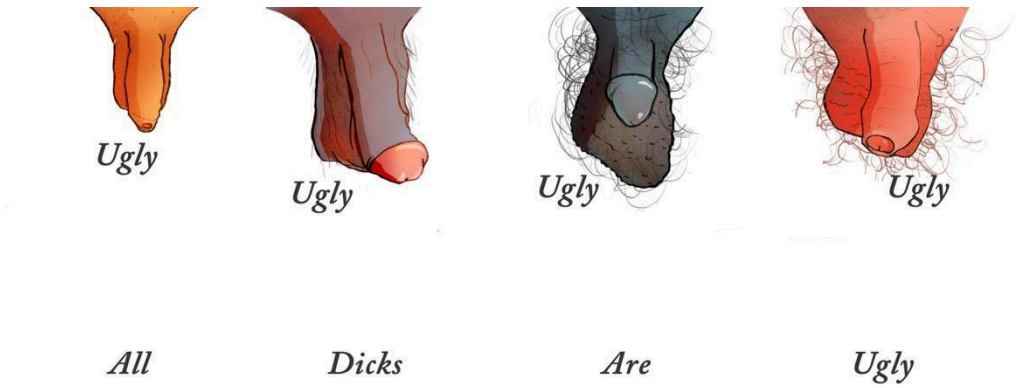

Figure 16: Source: Author's own work

Influenced by feminist artists rightfully celebrating the beauty of their genitals through their art, I came up with this work that I call "Ugly Dicks". I did it to call attention to the fact that by focusing on the "beauty" of our bodies, we might be missing the point, which is that bodies deserve respect no matter whether they are beautiful or not. To illustrate this fact, I would like to point out that if you applied the popular beauty standards usually in place for women (no wrinkles, no body hair, even shapes), male penises would definitely be considered ugly and still have all the rights they want. It is an inversion of the myth-shaping process that was analyzed before: Feminist artists took a symbol from mainstream comics and changed its signified in order to link to a different myth. This had implications for the icon of the myth, it became more accurate and detailed and eventually thus became a new original symbol, the accurate genital as a symbol for the Myth of the Woman without shame. I took this new symbol and applied to men, to

highlight the discrepancy that they do not need to adhere to the dogma of beauty at all.

Body positivity certainly is a most welcome development for physical and mental health and an important step in the liberation of oppressive body standards. However, its claim on female empowerment is debatable. I would like to question the concept of beauty within a political sphere. By pushing the concept of beauty, we are also perpetuating the idea that a woman has to be beautiful in order to be accepted. I do not see why beauty should be included in a discussion about rights and respect. The message could rather be “I am ugly, and I still deserve respect. I am ugly and it has absolutely no connection to my worth as a human”.

Now, some may argue that recognizing beauty is a natural human quality, which cannot and should not be controlled. However, the notion of beauty itself is, of course, questionable. Terry Eagleton argues that beauty functions as a consensual power that aligns with ideological hegemony, shaping individuals' sensibilities in a way that reinforces social order without overt coercion (Eagleton, 1988, p. 330). With this in mind, it becomes clear that beauty is in fact not in the eye of the beholder, but a tool of power. This tool has been routinely used against feminists, as the association of feminism and ugliness is one recurring form of anti-feminist discourse.

On a secondary note, I feel that the male body is strangely absent from feminist Comics. Male artists seem to have no problem using women as a canvas for their projections, desires, fears and fantasies. Female art seldom does the same but rather revolves around the consequences of the male impact, which are again inscribed on the female body and mind. As will be seen next, feminist cartoonist are finally flipping this perspective, especially when approaching the topic of sex. A welcome exception to this is the collaborative comic "Boy Dodói", which will be introduced in the next section.

When talking about the body, a topic that is central to most women’s bodies and lives is the monthly cycle and menstruation. For a long time, and in many cultures to this day, women have been shamed for their menstrual bleeding and told that it

makes them impure. It is largely ignored by popular discourse and women are supposed to be quiet and discreet about it. Mainstream comics, even the ones that supposedly empower women, do not cover the topic either. There is no episode in which Wonder Woman forgot her tampons.

Throughout history, characteristics or experiences that are exclusive to women, like menstruation or pregnancy, have been used as base for oppression or Othering ("Othering" refers to the process by which individuals or groups are defined and labeled as different or inferior based on perceived characteristics, leading to their marginalization or exclusion. The most famous academic author for describing "othering" in the context of feminism is Simone de Beauvoir. In The Second Sex (1949), she argues that women have historically been constructed as the "Other" in relation to men, who are seen as the default or normative subject. She states, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other." (Beauvoir 1949, p. 26).) These characteristics are what makes them different and, in the eyes of the oppressed, of lesser value. Therefore, these visible signs of being the "other" quickly turned into signifiers. And, just like many other symbols that we have discussed here and were originally used in a negative sense, female artists have appropriated it in many ways and made it their own. Most feminist comic artists will approach the topic in one way or another, be it with pride or with honesty, and give this important part of many women’s everyday life the presence it deserves.

Figure 17: Lovelove6, "Sheiloca", 2019

When depicting women's struggle with society's standards and expectations, other common signifiers are beauty supplies, especially the lipstick (both as an object and wearing it). The logic of signification is simple: These are the tools necessary to make women look "acceptable" and their shape carries with it the burden, the struggle, the illusion and the price of beauty.

For the cover page of the graphic novel "Em ti eu me vejo", illustrator Marília Marz only needs this symbol of beauty supplies and nothing else to perfectly convey the struggle for beauty and all its implications. The story in this book has yet another layer to it: the protagonist tries straightening her naturally curly hair, because she feels that common beauty standards do not include the hair of people of color. This symbol and symbols concerning beauty standards in general have a double meaning and even greater implications for black feminism, since they are not only fighting oppression because of their gender, but also oppression because of their ethnicity and natural appearance.

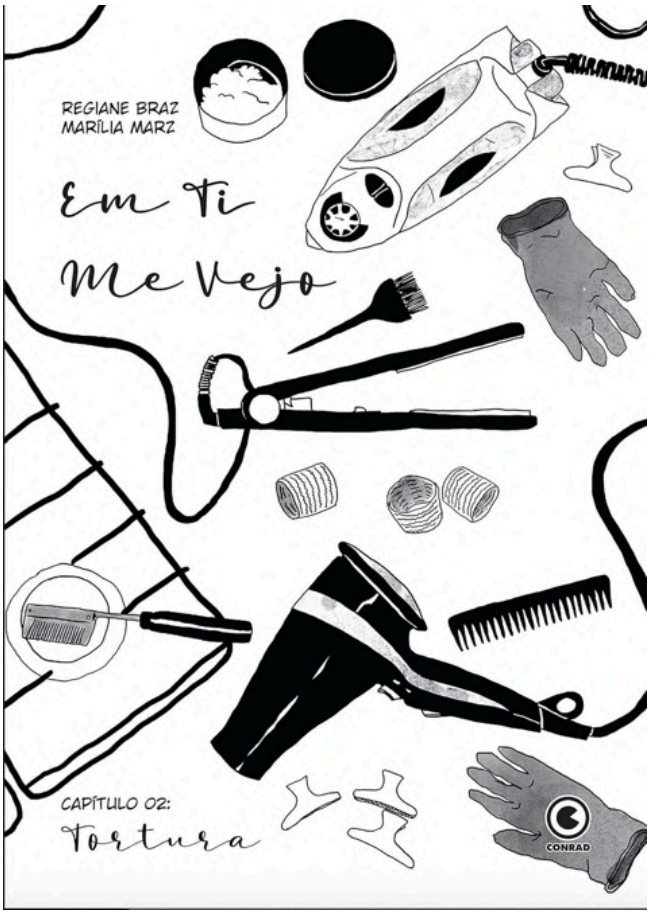

Figure 18: Marília Marz, "Em ti me vejo", 2023

Makeup is one of the most ambivalent symbols in this context. While women adhering to beauty standards are often depicted as defenders of the patriarchy and beauty supplies as tools to create your own misery, there are also feminist comic narratives where makeup is a means of empowerment and self-love- often in combination with sexual self-determination and the acceptance of female sex drive and desire.

Figure 19: Source: @carolito.hq

Makeup's use as a signifier is so broad and so omnipresent that sometimes it can be difficult to tell what exactly it signifies in a certain context. For example, here we see a comic by Cahú, one of Brazil's most popular female Cartoonists of all time. She was active during the military dictatorship and published for critical magazines. In her comics, we can see that the women that are not feminist are depicted using makeup and special hairstyles, while the feminist women are rather plain. But we need to be careful here: It is true that makeup is used as a symbol yet again. However, judging by Cahú's visual language and the depiction of workers, her focus is probably on a Marxist message rather than beauty standards. Therefore, the makeup and hairdo are likely first and foremost a symbol for wealth and being from a different social class, rather than a woman adhering to patriarchal expectations of beauty.

Figure 20: Cahú, Brasil Mulher, n°13, July 1978

Here, it makes sense to add some experience from my own process. During my studies at PUC- Rio de Janeiro, I worked as an artist and designer for the student's literature magazine Trama Nova. There I did a cover for an article by urbanist researcher Rita de Cássia Gonçalo Alves, where she writes about the Clube do Batom, a women's club for sexual positivity in Rio de Janeiro (Cássia Gonçalo Alves, 2023, p. 60). Just like the artists described here, the club is using the lipstick in its name as a signifier for dressing up, for wanting to please an onlooker and for getting up the courage to desire freely. Together they become a symbol for female sex-positivity. In my work, I used this symbol accordingly and

aimed to stress its phallic nature to give it an additional layer of meaning. The women around it are dancing the "Reigen", which is a dance that is often seen in depictions of a witches' coven (mostly due to its popularity in Europe during the Middle Ages). The topic of witches is something that we will also get to later on.

Figure 21: Author's own work

Apart from visualizing the frustrating daily struggle with appearance, feminist Cartoonists have come up with a powerful counterargument: practicing self-love. This topic can be found across all sorts of publication, in major or supporting roles, especially since a large portion of women's comics are autobiographical (Streeten 2020, 25). The symbol most commonly used is the character (who is often the author herself) being multiplied and meeting, comforting and hugging herself.

Figure 22: Helô d'Angelo, "Nos olhos de quem vê", 2022

To sum up this chapter, here is a table of myths, symbols and signifiers that were discussed. It is only to illustrate observations that were made in this chapter and in no way should be seen as a comprehensive list nor as a definitive statement about which signifiers belong to which symbols or myths.

Myths	the “Sex Object”, “Female Beauty”;
Symbols	intimacy, self-love, empowerment, naturality;
Signifiers	genitals, nipples, breasts, body hair, make-up, beauty products;

4.2 Myths about sex

According to thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir or Foucault, the ways we have sex, think about it and talk or not talk about it are socially constructed and hold a lot of power. This topic is also at the core of one of the biggest internal feminist debates. Its parties are commonly labelled as the sex-positive and the anti-pornography groups. Some see heterosexual sex as a mere eroticization of female subordination, while others argue that it can be an empowering experience (Jeffreys 1985, xiii). This chapter will present the two sides of the discussion as a dialogue between feminist authors Gayle Rubin and Sheila Jeffreys. It will also aim to identify myths about maternity, fertility, purity, sin and abortion. There is a large body of work in Comics that employs myths related to sex. This chapter will analyze a selected view, with a focus on feminist works and those which appear to be such, but also those that use sex as a tool of degradation.

In an opening lecture for the Cornell University Library's exhibition "Radical Desire: Making On Our Backs Magazine," Gayle Rubin herself gave a quick recapitulation of the sex wars (see Rubin 2022). Back in the 70's, some feminist branches questioned the involvement of lesbians in the movement and tried to exclude them from women´s institutions such as the National Organization for Women. In return, some parts of the lesbian community denounced heterosexuality as non-feminist, including what they saw as the reproduction of heterosexual gender roles in homosexual relationships e.g. butch-fem, penetration, sexual fantasies. In the late 70's there was an outpour of anti-sm sentiment. The late 90's were marked by a dispute over transsexuals, as some questioned their right of participation in women's movements. Rubin argues that these debates added to a stereotype of the feminists of that time being puritan and grim anti-sex crusaders, a vision that had little to do with reality, according to the author. She describes a sexual enthusiasm and energy that was even related to their political motivations and points to sex and masturbation workshops, campaigns against monogamy, as well as sex educators such as Betty Dodson, which were popular at the time.

Situated within this wider debate on sex, the anti-porn movement had its formative phase roughly from 1977 to 1983.The first feminist anti-pornography organization was Women Against Violence and Pornography in Media (WAVPM), followed later by Women Against Pornography (WAP). Rubins says that the debate on pornography had the tendency to pull in and claim other subjects, for example any sm- imagery was highlighted as a product of porn. In 1983 the second phase of the anti-porn movement (sometimes mistaken for the beginning) started with the introduction of the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance by radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. The Feminist Anti-Censorship task force (FAC) was largely formed as a response to these ordinances. While giving an account of her own participation in a WAVPM-meeting, Rubin criticizes the anti-porn movement mostly for its limitations on discussion and says that there was no space for questioning or differentiating the main premise "Porn is bad". She has also been the subject of personal attacks which she describes as a pattern of conduct of this movement. This climate and the impossibility of peaceful exchange of ideas, according to her, is why this

discussion is called a “war” (Rubin 2022). Personally, I suspect the title “Sex Wars” might also have been given more generously and irrespectively of the actual heat of the discussion, due to the debate´s coincidence with the first movies of the “Star Wars”- franchise being released.
In 1986 the ordinances were declared unconstitutional in the United States and the focus of the anti-porn movement shifted to the abolition of prostitution. It thus became a wing of the anti-trafficking movement, however, they condemned not only coerced and exploitative work but any form of commercialized sex. In Brazil, ther was (and is) also a popular debate on this topic. One of its most prominent figures was Gabriela Leite, a Brazilian former sex worker and activist who fought for the rights of prostitutes and for the recognition of sex work as legitimate labor, challenging both stigma and traditional feminism that viewed prostitution as oppression. Her activism was central to the creation of the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, the founding of the NGO Davida, as well as advocating for the legalization of the profession and the decriminalization of its surrounding activities. Gabriela reclaimed the term "puta" (whore) as a political identity and fought for public policies that ensured rights for sex workers, promoting a feminist perspective that recognized their autonomy and agency in choosing their profession (Barreto; Mayorga, 2016). Gabriela Leite faced opposition primarily from radical feminists and abolitionist groups who viewed prostitution as a form of male oppression and exploitation of women (Barreto; Mayorga, 2016, p. 291). The fight for sex workers’ rights continues to this day, and it continues to use and empower the term “puta”, as for example in the Coletivo Puta da Vida which is based in Rio de Janeiro (@coletivoputadavida).

Turning back to Rubin’s account, she observes that with time our view on the sex wars has become ossified and distorted and criticizes more recent publications on the topic. The porn wars have changed and evolved but never really stopped and their landscape continues to shape discussion and legislation today (Rubin 2022).

The topic of sex regarding women is very rich with myths: the seductive Femme Fatale, the pure Virgin, the sexless Spinster, the Nymphomaniac.. just to name a few.

Feminist Comics uses various ways to approach the topic of sex. A common and very effective one is simply to flip the perspective. A wonderful example for this is the collective work "Boy Dodói" with the participation of Carol Ito and Helô d'Angelo. It is a showroom for fragile masculinity and makes a strong case against the myth of the overly Complicated Woman.

Figure 23: "Boy Dodói", 2023

In my own work I like to comment on these matters too. In this one, my goal was to take the myth of the Woman as an Object of Desire and turn it onto men, similar to what was done in Boy Dodói. Because this myth has an important counterpart, that is often overlooked in commentary: The Sex-Crazed Man. The signifier here is the stretched-out leg and the bare foot. Here, I was influenced by rather old-fashioned notions of the erotic, where for example a woman would stretch out her naked leg from behind a door. Other connotations are the foot fetish and a visual depiction of the "Old White Man", which is a myth in itself but is here used as a symbol for the greater myth of the Patriarchy.

Figure 24: Source: Author's own work

The stance on sex has been controversial within the feminist movement, eventually resulting in the so-called "sex wars", which have long died down now but the core dilemma of which has never been truly solved. The anti-pornography movement appears to have given up and moved on to other things, while the sex positive movement has become a vehicle for sexual commercialization. You could say that both have been eaten up by the patriarchy and integrated into a place where they won't hurt anyone. However, feminists are continuing to construct an empowered sexual lifestyle. Since they couldn't find common ground, the search has shifted to the individual level - and Comics is finely illustrating and supporting this process.

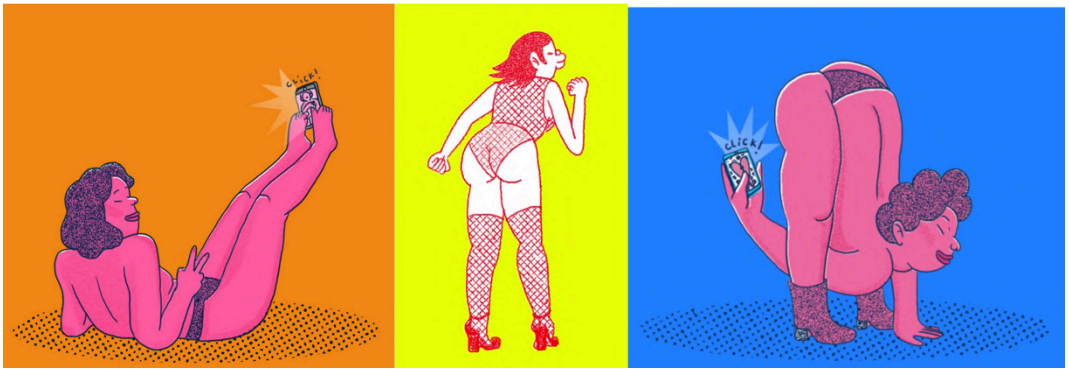

Figure 25: Source: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com

Once again, symbols that were established by patriarchal norms are used and re-signified. In this case the signifier are the high-heels and fishnet stockings, which signify the will to adhere to beauty standards and to please a male onlooker in order to find a sexual partner. These symbols link to the myth of the Woman as an Object of Desire or also the Nymphomaniac. Very similar to what could be observed in the Beauty and Body section on genitalia and nipples, when the artists take these same symbols but put them in combination with reasonable body proportions and a confident smile, they turn into messages of empowerment. They do not alter the myth itself, but by altering the context of the symbols they give the depicted women more autonomy and decision-making power. But reading them as such requires consideration of the context: the author, the audience and the intention. Not taking those into account, Shiro's drawings could easily be misinterpreted as women objectifying themselves.

Amidst this hot mess of empowerment, submission and commercialization, female Cartoonists have found a way out by taking matters into their own hands: extensively portraying female masturbation. Especially since female masturbation continues to be such a taboo and considering that for a long time it was a widely held belief that women were not able to have an orgasm, yet alone without a man, it is beautiful to see the playfulness and confidence with which these artists show masturbation in all its joy. In this case, they are creating the myth of female sexuality anew- it is neither the Virgin waiting for a man, nor the sex-crazed nymphomaniac (also looking for a man), but the woman that locks the door, puts on some music and proceeds to create a space of bliss of her own. It is the myth of Female Self-Pleasure, the promotion of which also has great repercussions for the myth of the Single Woman.

Figure 26: Lovelove6, "Garota Siririca", 2015

Figure 27: Source: @carolito.hq

Some artists prefer a very delicate visual language, focused on searching fingers, cozy zones of comfort and facial expressions. Others, like Carol Ito, openly whip out a diverse array of sex toys. Sex toys, like vibrators and dildos, are a popular signifier in this context. We can see them working as a symbol especially when they are not the focus of the image. There might be shown a woman's bedroom, cluttered with different objects, or a suitcase filled with her personal belongings. Interestingly, in this case the process of signification explicitly does not take place within the image itself but as sort of an in-joke that puts itself together inside the reader's mind. All that is needed is a hint to this symbol, the telling shape of a vibrator inside a bag or a dildo openly lying about- and immediately, the whole signified is there. The symbol says: I am also this woman that creates her own

pleasure, the myth, the one that locks the door. And if you recognize me, then you are too!

Figure 28: Author's own work

To sum up this chapter, here is a table of myths, symbols and signifiers that were discussed. It is only to illustrate observations that were made in this chapter and in no way should be seen as a comprehensive list nor as a definitive statement about which signifiers belong to which symbols or myths.

Myths	the Femme fatale, the Single Woman, the Virgin, the Complicated Woman, the Sex Object, the Nymphomaniac;
Symbols	masturbation, sexuality, desire, self-love;
Signifiers	vibrators, fingers, high-heels, fishnets;

4.4 Myths about Motherhood and Housekeeping

The myths of the Mother and the Housewife have played a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing gender roles, portraying childcare and the household as inherently female domains. There have been many visual representations used in propaganda in order to promote the "real" woman, especially during early suffragette struggle and then again during the 50s.

Lately, a new type of myth has taken shape: "The Working Mum". At first glance, it seems to be solely empowering women, encouraging them to pursue a professional career. Women are told that they can "have it all"- Having children

and pursuing a career no longer exclude each other. But since most neoliberal institutions do not at the same time provide the much-proclaimed work-life-balance, what this trend is actually doing is establishing a new cultural norm that is putting double responsibilities and even higher expectations on women. This myth presents itself as a feminist role model but is actually a neoliberal ideal that is trying to recruit more women for capitalist exploitation.

Figure 29: Source: See Red Women's Workshop (left), https://hbr.org/2021/05/ask-an-expert-how-can-i-plan-for-a-successful-career-and-a-family (right)

This poster by the See Red Women's workshop was done to emphasize the neoliberal exploitation of women. It looks eerily similar to the image that was published around fifty years of neoliberalism later than this, but is less of a critique and instead belongs to a cheery how-to guide on fitting into the system.

Female Cartoonists have started to take representation of these daily chores into their own hands. Interestingly, they display motherhood and housework both negatively and positively. On one hand the myth is enforced and appropriated in other to own these roles as a source of power and identity. On the other it is used as a familiar starting point, which is later disenchanted and put in contrast with reality.

Figure 30: Source: @carolito.hq

This comic strip by Carol Ito illustrates the difficulties for women in combining housework with personal or professional realization- Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" immediately comes to mind. It uses very clear signifiers to signify household chores: the broom and the pot. With only these little symbols, she signifies the myth of "Housewife" and with it, entirety of the aforementioned "mental load". Using these symbols, the piece is simple but powerful in calling to mind the potential that is lost by obstructing half of the human species from working effectively.

Beatriz Shiro has thoroughly documented the double responsibility that comes with working while raising children, especially during the pandemic. She plays with the contrast between her work and home life, also including the difference her appearance online during home office and offline, when the children are trying to get her attention.

These visual representations by female artists often depict women as overwhelmed, frazzled, and solely responsible for domestic tasks, while men are shown as incompetent or uninvolved in household matters, leaving the mental load to them.

Her visual language uses a general sense of disorder and overstimulation, with many things happening at the same time and no clear focus of activity in the panel, giving the viewer a taste of what it is like trying to keep up with responsibilities. One clear signifier stands out, it is the laptop screen. Those of us that have desk jobs can easily relate and the little rectangle immediately pulls up stressful connotations of emails, deadlines and zoom meetings. Together with this signified, the screen becomes a symbol for "work". It generally vanishes in the image amidst the flood of little household activities, visualizing how hard it is to focus on professional life.

As opposed to work, childcare is not represented in a single icon, but mirroring its nature: as a never-ending, simultaneous array of small but necessary chores. There is however, one clear signifier, which happens almost imperceptibly in every other panel: breastfeeding. It signifies all these kid-related chores together and by way of composition, also includes the fact no matter how important these chores really are, they are usually done on the side. Together it become the symbol for childcare, which summons the myth of the Mother.

Figure 31: Source: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com/

In her ongoing webcomic "Bete vive", Lita Hayata shows the everyday life of a single housewife and mother. She visibly uses similar symbols as the other artists- for example the simultaneous pursuit of family chores like cooking, reading and being on the phone, or the broom, which is one of the most common symbols for housework for all artists in this analysis. However, her facial expression shows that she is on top of things and that this is her realm of power. When she offers the local water supplier to be carried, it is not to criticize how women have to take care of the rest of the world as if everyone were their children, but to show her strength and that she can do it all with a smile on her face. When she crushes a cockroach beneath her foot during cleaning (broom in hand), it is not to illustrate the unfair hardships of everyday life but to honor her work in a heroic depiction. Thus, this artist evokes the same myth of the Mother, using the same symbols, but decides to tell the story differently and in this way manages to alter the myth.

Figure 32: Lita Hayata, "Bette Vive", https://betevive.tumblr.com/

Figure 33: Lita Hayata, "Bette Vive", https://betevive.tumblr.com/

Figure 34: Lita Hayata, "Bette Vive", https://betevive.tumblr.com/

The protagonist Lita Hayata's "Bette Vive" is accompanied by a character that seems to be a personification of death. This might be interpreted as a comment on the passing of time, the fear of aging or dying alone - however, it is not directly commented in the narrative.

To sum up this chapter, here is a table of myths, symbols and signifiers that were discussed. It is only to illustrate observations that were made in this chapter and in no way should be seen as a comprehensive list nor as a definitive statement about which signifiers belong to which symbols or myths.

Myths	the Mother, the Housewife, Warrior-Mum, Working Mum;
Symbols	mental load, stress, chaos, strength, solitude, independence;
Signifiers	disorder, noise, breastfeeding, cleaning products;

4.4 Myths about insanity

Throughout history, insanity has been used as a label to exclude and confine people that did not fit social norms or morals. At the same time, it has also been an object of fascination and even worship (Foucault 1972, 6). Hélène Cixous describes how these notions of insanity have been systematically attributed to women, in the form of the sorceress and the hysteric, the witch and the bitch. She also shows how women can empower these roles and eventually escape from them (Cixous & Clément 1986, xiv). This chapter will trace the appropriation of the role of the social Other in Comics and examine the semiology used to that end.

Analysis

Another important myth, one that has a very tragic history and, in many ways, continues to hold women back today, is that over the overly emotional or mentally unstable woman, also known as: the hysteric.

Feminist Comics often deals with mental health and in doing so, indirectly addresses this myth too. Depression or a feeling of loneliness and worthlessness are frequent topics. Visual elements include the fetal position, or as seen here, being inside a dark hole or cave. They signify vulnerability and loneliness, creating a symbol for mental distress or depression. The artists emphasize the importance of caring friendships in that matter. This way, they dissect the myth of the Hysteric and look at its many building blocks, which include mental health, emotions and stress. For example, high emotionality, which is usually portrayed as a weakness in regard to this myth, is presented from a different perspective, revealing a strength that comes with it: empathy.

Figure 35: Source: @carolito.hq

Figure 36: Lita Hayata, "Bette Vive", https://betevive.tumblr.com/

Apart from this, cartoonists have found another symbol for emotionality that is usually looked down upon, which they can put to their service: enjoying soap operas.

Figure 37: Lita Hayata, "Bette Vive", https://betevive.tumblr.com/

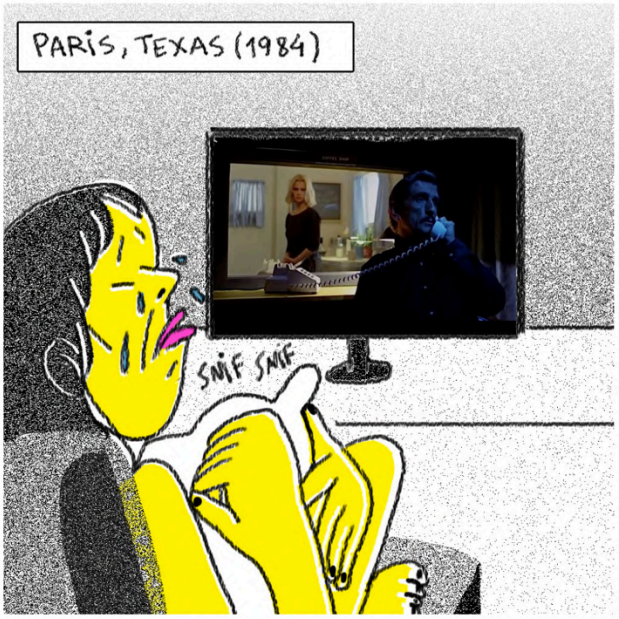

Figure 38: Source: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com/

Since overly emotional women cannot possibly be considered strong in popular culture, it has come up with the solution of turning them into men. Hence the cold-eyed warrior queens and murderous secret agents of recent years, which are female versions of existing, traditionally male myths. In the last decade, these "strong female characters" have entered the mainstream film industry (Cooper 2016, 3).

Figure 39: Source: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com/

In Portuguese, there is the term "mãe-guerreira" ("mother-warrior) which appears here in Shiro's comic strip and is used to denominate a very strong and determined mother. This construction is particularly ironic, since the strength of a mother is to give love and care, which could not be any further away from what a warrior does. However, there appears to be no popular word in neither English nor the Portuguese language to accurately describe the power she has. In general, amidst the cheers for "strong women" it still seems that women have to endure much more in order to be considered strong. Much like the myth of "the Working Mum", the vague myth of the "Strong Woman" can be quite treacherous when it is used to make women negate their emotions and follow a male ideal of strength. Luckily, female Cartoonists have found ways to criticize this.

Figure 40: Source: @helodangeloarte

Ito's cartoon (as seen below) follows a different logic. Yoga and little flowers are signifiers for the calm and child-like. She puts them in contrast with an unexpected call for violence- making the viewer aware of their initial assumptions. This is well situated in the tradition of the Riot Grrrl, which used symbols like flowers, stars and hearts in order to shock by contrast (Marcus, 2010, 250).

Figure 41: Source: @carolito.hq

Thinking about this detail, it is surprising how much our art choices are (subconsciously) influenced by feminist history. Here I would like to draw another parallel to my own artistic practice: Years ago, I came up with these two characters seen below. I wanted to encapsulate the chaotic good energy that I remembered from me and my friend in our teenage years. It was a lot of drama, shrillness, naiveté, curiosity and tears mixed with a kind of ignorant confidence that is long lost to me now. Instead of being embarrassed by this phase of my life, by creating these characters I wanted to celebrate this strength we had. And thus, without knowing the first bit about Riot Grrrls and their feminist history, I naturally re-created two of them, which I believe proves that there is a Riot grrrl in all of us. I continued working with these characters in animation projects, which I did while I was also researching more on feminist history for this thesis. This led me to introduce more Riot Grrrl elements. For example, in one of the more recent frames we can see that the background is made from photo snippets, which imitates the Fanzine style.

Figure 42: Author's own work

Moving on to the myth of the Single Woman or the "Spinster". By this myth's standards, for a woman to grow old and stay single implies that she is crazy or that there is "something wrong with her". Therefore, and to cope with her apparent loneliness, she talks to her only companions, the cats. And thus, the myth of the “Crazy Cat Lady” is born. Thinking about it in depth, it truly is a fascinating construction of intertwined assumptions, prejudices and expectations that makes up this myth, which is used so freely as a comical device. However, the Crazy Cat Lady implies not only a single but also an independent woman, which is an angle that feminist cartoonist like to use to their advantage when working with this myth. A classic symbol is the cat. The cat stands for companionship and builds a link to the myth of the Single Woman, but it is still ambivalent and commonplace enough to not evoke the full myth of the Crazy Cat Lady every time a cat shows up in a panel. Therefore, this symbol can be used as a playful nod towards this myth, like in Helô d'Angelo's Dora e a Gata.

Figure 43: Helô d'Angelo, "Dora e a Gata", 2019

All of these characteristics, including the cat symbol, the Crazy Cat Lady has in common with another, very powerful myth concerning women: the Witch. Witches are a strong myth that has grown very much in popularity in recent years. For one, they remind us of the tragic history of the women who were killed directly by the patriarchy simply for not conforming or being in its way. They also evoke a sense of sisterhood and secret knowledge shared only between women. This myth has found its way into popular discourse, for example the social media platform Reddit's biggest feminist forum is called "witchesagainstthepatriarchy". And it is no coincidence that cartoonist Gabriela Masson, when asked about her current occupation, replies: "I am a non-practicing witch." (Tenório, 2016, p. 2) Silvia Federici argues that the witch hunts in early modern Europe were not merely acts of religious fanaticism but were central to the transition to capitalism, as they helped suppress women's knowledge, autonomy, and role in communal economies.. She highlights that witches were often midwives, healers, and women resisting the increasing control over reproduction and labor, making their persecution a tool for reinforcing patriarchal structures and capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2004, p. 313). This systematic attack on women's bodies and knowledge served to confine them to unpaid reproductive labor, shaping the gendered division of labor that capitalism required (Federici, 2004, p. 317).

Figure 44: Source: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com/

Figure 45: Source: @carolito.hq

The acclaimed anthropologist and feminist Sherry B. Ortner has thoroughly analyzed this rhetoric that is setting women apart as the over-emotional and uncontrolled as opposed to the "rational" men and condensed it to a principle in society's thinking: "female is to male as nature is to culture" (Ortner, 1972).

The belief in itself is of course, blatantly sexist. However, there are still some elements in feminist Comics that use it and put women's asserted connection to nature to their service. The term "Mother Nature "is no coincidence, since there is a certain likeness between the slow but relentless forces of nature and the sort of calm and enduring strength of a mother. At least, there is certainly more likeness between those two than between a mother and a warrior.

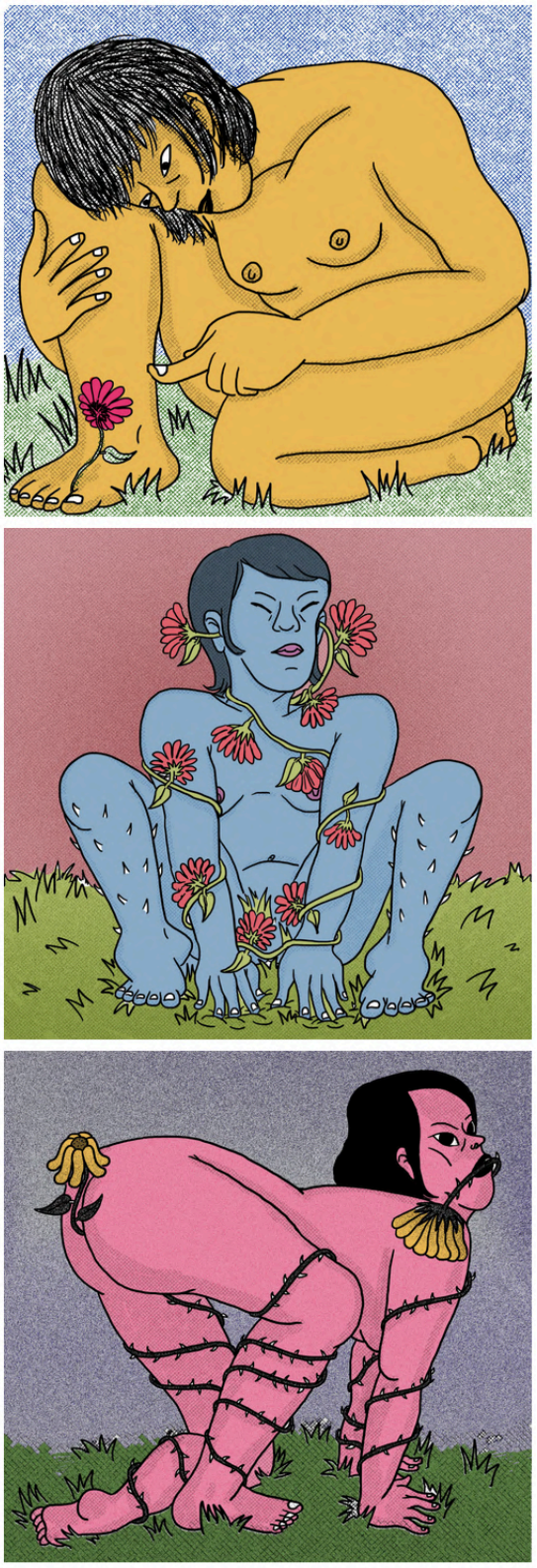

Figure 46: https://beatrizshiro.tumblr.com/

The signifiers used here are plants, with form the symbol for "nature". In combination with the woman, it becomes the myth of the Woman as part of

Nature, or even Mother Nature. We can also see a nice combination with a different symbol that we discussed earlier: the thorns of a plant drawn as leg hair.

To sum up this chapter, here is a table of myths, symbols and signifiers that were discussed. It is only to illustrate observations that were made in this chapter and in no way should be seen as a comprehensive list nor as a definitive statement about which signifiers belong to which symbols or myths.

Myths	the Hysteric, the Cat Lady, the Witch, the emotionally unstable Woman, Mother Nature;
Symbols	empathy, friendship, mental health, nature;
Signifiers	fetal position, abyss, hugs, soap operas, plants, cats;

5 Conclusion

Something that always stood out to me when I first came to Brazil, was the immense pride that people took in their culture and artistic production. This included Brazilian Comics and, being aware of my interest in Comics and animation, people would happily introduce me to their favourite childhood Comics like Turma da Mônica, show me clips of Irmão do Jorel, or send me witty Laerte strips via chat. It was a way to connect with people in a new environment, but also, this excitement encouraged me to take up my own art again which I had been neglecting for a while. During my time at PUC-Rio, I joined the students' literature magazine Trama Nova as an illustrator as well as the university's nucleus for animation, N.A.D.A. I think my experience in Brazil has made me live my art as part of a wider community, as opposed to just drawing for myself and never showing my work to anyone. Concluding this thesis, I am very grateful for all the new experiences and knowledge and for all the people that accompanied me on this path, through their art, their insights and advice.

According to Waldomiro Vergueiro, Brazilian comics uniquely reflect Brazilian culture and society by incorporating local themes and perspectives. Popular artists like Ziraldo actively integrate Brazilian culture into their work, for example the Pererê (Vergueiro, 1999, p. 4). Additionally, underground comics take a radical stance, offering alternative representations of Brazilian society against mainstream comics from other countries, exemplified by groups such as the COLIQUAMA –

the "Comando de Libertação do Quadrinho Nacional" (Vergueiro, 1999, p. 5). My personal impression as a reader is that Brazilian feminist Comics more naturally interlace various other topics, such as social inequality, racism or environmental protection. This could be because the artists are more familiar with the interplay of these issues in their everyday lives. However, making a conclusive statement about this is beyond the scope of this thesis. In the end, maybe this quote in Revista Pirralha about Crau da Ilha is the most telling:

> "Crau, the cartoonist, Crau from Bicho, from the Periquitas and from Pirralha carries inside her Crau, the Mandolin player. She only draws sporadically now, because she rather involves herself with music and poetry." (Revista Pirralha, 2023)

I believe that every artist carries within themselves various versions and identities. Brazilian cartoonists will also carry many versions of their "Brasilidade" inside themselves, just like Crau da Ilha's love for Samba, and I am sure that they can be seen in their work.

This thesis has explored the intricate relationship between myth, feminism, and comics, with a specific focus on the role of Brazilian feminist cartoonists in challenging and reshaping traditional narratives about women. By applying a semiotic analysis inspired by Roland Barthes, we have uncovered how myths about beauty, sex, motherhood, and mental health are both perpetuated and subverted through visual storytelling.

The historical overview demonstrated that feminist Comics have long been an essential vehicle for political and social critique, from the suffragette movement to contemporary webcomics. The Brazilian context, in particular, highlighted the struggles and triumphs of women artists who have used their craft to resist societal norms, often under challenging political conditions. The emergence of digital platforms has further democratized access to feminist comics, enabling new voices to emerge and reach broader audiences.

The analysis of selected Brazilian feminist cartoonists illustrated how visual language can be a powerful tool in the feminist movement. Symbols that have often been used as a tool for oppression, such as body hair, beauty products, and nudity, are re-signified in these works to challenge the oppressive standards imposed on women. By juxtaposing mainstream and feminist portrayals of female characters, we observed how feminist artists reclaim autonomy over their representation, rejecting the male gaze and traditional beauty standards. We have also seen how this language of myth can be used to send hidden messages of belonging to an insider's group.

In her review of female representation in Comics, Boff (2014) comes to the conclusion: "Thus, there is a large evidence that the most part of these narratives swings between scoffing and supporting the idea of female, based on the feminine mystic, by Betty Friedan"(Boff, 2014, p.7). This thesis supports this idea, but it adds that the narratives are based on not one but several and sometimes contradicting myths of the "female".

Furthermore, the methodological approach of practice-led research allowed for a deeper engagement with the subject matter, providing insights into the creative process behind feminist Cartoons. By reflecting on my own artistic practice, I was able to draw connections between theory and practice, reinforcing the significance of visual language in shaping feminist discourse.

This study confirms that feminist comics are not merely a form of entertainment but a critical component of the feminist struggle. They serve as both a mirror and a battleground for societal debates, continuously evolving to reflect and challenge contemporary gender issues. While significant progress has been made in diversifying and expanding the representation of women in comics, there remains work to be done in ensuring greater visibility and recognition for feminist artists, particularly in mainstream media.

Ultimately, this thesis underscores the transformative power of comics as a medium for feminist activism. By deconstructing and re-signifying myths about women, feminist cartoonists contribute to a broader cultural shift that challenges oppressive narratives and fosters a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender. As the field continues to grow and adapt, future research could further explore the intersectionality of feminist comics, considering how issues of race, class, and sexuality intersect in these visual narratives.

When it comes to Virginia Woolf's vision of re-writing her language, this thesis makes clear that feminist cartoonists are in the process of it. In the words of Hélène Cixous, "Woman must write herself." The artists analyzed in this thesis are doing precisely that—rewriting the myths that have long defined them, and in doing so, shaping the future of feminist storytelling.

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