Life, Death, and Fear in the Twenty-First Century Brazilian Graphic Novel

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1. Introduction

This essay identifies influential and prominent twenty-first century Brazilian graphic novels and associated sociocultural affects, such as racial inequality, gender disparities, and social dysfunctionality, as this Post-Boom literary genre expands into a global market. A specific selection of influential texts, key citations, provocative images, and disturbing themes is analyzed, revealing humanistic leitmotifs such as fear of death, violence, and disease, as well as fear of life, immigrant acculturation, futurism, and authoritarianism. The selection consists of Brazilian graphic novels produced so far in the twenty-first century that have achieved a significant international readership: *Daytripper* (2014) by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá; *Two Brothers* (2015) by Moon, Bá and Milton Hatoum; *Pixu* (2009) by Moon, Bá, Becky Cloonan, and Vasilis Lolos; *V.I.S.H.N.U* (2012) by Eric Archer, Ronaldo Bressane, and Fabio Cobiaco; and *Notas de um tempo silenciado* (2015) by Robson Vilalba.

Analyses reveal present-day narrative and graphic representations that span the entire range of human experiences, from birth to death, and which force the reader to contemplate the worst aspects of humanity. Because most of these graphic novels were initially written in English, they function as social commentaries regarding these experiences, mostly directed towards an international readership. Other leitmotifs include inheritance of violence or disease and peer pressure to perform as well as, or better than, previous generations. Serving as framing sociocultural referents, these fears, along with other themes, ensure a loyal and educated English-speaking international and Brazilian readership.

The authors and illustrators analyzed consistently render fear of life (the inherited past) and fear of death (the future) thematically as surrounding the country's modernization and entrance into English-speaking world cultures. Concomitantly, Third-World globalization leitmotifs also permeate many works, such as Archer, Bressane, and Cobiaco's futuristic *V.I.S.H.N.U.*, in which racial disparities are juxtaposed with temptation and corruption of futuristic technology. Southern Cone and Brazilian Studies expert David William Foster notes

that the country's focus on modernization and becoming an active member in English-speaking cultures are at the core of today's Brazilian society:

> [A]lthough comic-book production remains high, as did the production of high-quality graphic adaptations of major Brazilian literary works, it has only been in the past two decades that a strong inventory of Brazilian graphic narratives has emerged. [...] They are very much tied to the aggressive culture of modernity that has characterized Brazil in recent decades, a culture that is ever attuned to matters of internationalism, globalization, and cross-cultural identity especially where English and American life are involved.[1]

A general social fear exists regarding the return to authoritarianism and military dictatorships, and one can infer that the focus on modernizing Brazil has overshadowed real democratizing efforts within the country.

With specific regard to the Brazilian 1964 military coup and its relationship to Brazilian literature produced in the last half of the twentieth century, Foster also notes a significant limitation on sociopolitical expression associated with the Latin American Boom:

> [D]uring the period in which the experimental, resistant, revisionist, and essentially liberationist writing associated with the Boom became a literary standard in Spanish and in its international translations, Brazilian culture, while not uniformly controlled by the military, was nevertheless closely monitored by the state apparatus, such that the sort of writers tied to the 1959 Cuban Revolution and its influence on the rise of the sociopolitical commitment underlying the major titles of the Boom would have been, quite simply, impossible in Brazil.[2]

Therefore, while one is tempted to explain the historic precedent to the success of Brazilian graphic novels—or graphic narratives as named above by Foster—as a continuation and

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[1] David William Foster, El Eternauta, Daytripper, *and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), xii.

[2] David William Foster, "Teaching Brazil and the Boom," in *Teaching the Latin American Boom*, ed. Lucille Kerr and Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2015), 138.

byproduct of the Latin American Boom, such a historic association must be revised due to the country's reduced cultural production during that period.[3] That is, censorship and instability in Brazil during the 1960s problematized publishing within the country, necessitating the search for foreign publishers, as can be compared with Spanish-American writers of the Boom who were forced to publish in Seix Barral in Barcelona, Spain, for example.[4] Limited to Portugal as their only publishing resource, many Brazilian writers at that time published directly in English, thereby presaging the present-day Brazilian graphic novel surge.

Craig Thompson, in a more philosophical approximation towards the graphic novel in general, asks rather prophetically in the introduction to *Daytripper* whether art distracts from or enhances our lives.[5] It is crucial to underscore that life itself is the precedent that underlies not only the sociopolitical thematic relationships rendered within the graphic novel genre but also the creative relationship at the foundation of narrating and illustrating a story. Creative teamwork based on social constructs can be observed thematically in the selection of graphic novels analyzed here, through the narrative and pictorial renderings of the themes mentioned above.

These themes, while effective in these texts, are commonly found in narrative in general, which in turn begs a focus upon how the graphic novel as a literary genre differs from other genres. How is the graphic novel perceived and analyzed academically?[6] Should one use narratology, for example? Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey argue that the same terminology utilized in narratology must be used to analyze the graphic novel: "Inevitably, many aspects of narratology apply to the graphic novel, and it would be absurd not to benefit from the existing narratological research on storytelling, both in its general, abstract form and in its manifold concrete examples."[7] Therefore, a story in whatever format is narrative and if it happens to have been created along with illustrations, all the better. This question often arises when the

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[3] The terms "graphic novel" and "graphic narrative" are used interchangeably in this essay.

[4] Foster, "Teaching Brazil and the Boom," 138.

[5] Craig Thompson, "Introduction," In *Daytripper: The Deluxe Edition,* by Fábio Moon y Gabriel Bá (New York: DC Comics, 2014), 7.

[6] The graphic novel genre, due to its complexity, can be considered resistant to theoretical analyses traditionally utilized for analyzing narrative, including mise-en-page, semiology, disability studies, futurism, as well as deconstructivist theories, feminisms, and queer theories, among others. Additionally, art historical theories can be used to analyze the illustrations.

[7] Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 163.

170

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

reader initially contemplates whether the illustrations in a graphic novel illustrate the narrative or whether the dialogue narrates the illustrations.

It is therefore significant to note that the illustrative process involved in the creation of a graphic narrative story is equally important as the written narrative in that they both must be analyzed *qua definitione* as made patent in the name of the genre. Graphic art and narrative combine equally to create the graphic novel and both carry equal weight in analyses of this literary genre. Concomitantly, at times the visualizations help to reveal a concept that is sometimes left vague on purpose, thereby forcing the reader/spectator to contemplate and reflect upon both society and themselves. The relationship between story and illustration is therefore fundamental to the reading experience in general within this genre. To that end, the creative process that visually renders the story works in tandem with the narrative process, not as a simple illustration of said narration but as a complementary tool in the storytelling process. Baetens and Fry confirm: "What is essential in the graphic novel is that drawing is less a technique that is used to shape a given story than a creative operation that produces the images and the very stories themselves."[8]

Another challenge to the categorization of graphic novels as literature is that they are frequently compared to and associated with the basic comic strip, effectively diminishing its status as a valid literary genre. Graphic novels differ from comic strips in several important ways, most importantly because graphic narrative lacks the familiar restricting structure of comic strips that consists of one to five images that form an autonomous, singular, and temporally linear panel. While one can trace an over-arching, long-term storyline within a comic strip series, sometimes recompiled and sold in the form of a book, the graphic novel creates a more cohesive storyline that is read like a novel with chapters or vignettes. In such a format, the mise-en-page forces the spectator gaze—normally accustomed to looking from left to right and from top to bottom—to move away from what graphic novel expert Jesse Cohn describes as "daisy-chain placement of word balloons," thereby allowing the reader's gaze to move around freely on the page.[9] The resulting multiplicity of "reading paths" can also create non-temporal readings that change how a reader interprets the text and imagery at any given

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[8] Ibid., 164.

[9] Jesse Cohn, "Mise-en-Page: A Vocabulary for Page Layouts," in *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), 49-52.

171

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

moment or reading.[10] John G. Nichols considers this process "selective progression" which, in the end, indicates how a graphic novelist forces the reader to contemplate and study certain panels to seek clarification: "Readers are, in effect, asked to recalibrate their reading and linger on particular panels of narrative importance."[11] The intended storylines are therefore sometimes blurred and nebulous and only through contemplation does the reader find the intended thread of logic. This technique is particularly effective in projecting fear as social affect and reader response, as well as communicating and illustrating the country's long-term fear of repeated authoritarianism.

This essay reveals, within the selection of graphic novels analyzed, that the most culturally significant leitmotif is, without a doubt, the fear of authoritarian military dictatorships that permeates and perseveres in the Brazilian social imaginary, and which manifests itself thematically through the fear of disease, death, and mental illness. Whether rendered implicitly and associated with other sociocultural issues—as in Moon and Bá's *Two Brothers* (2015)—, in which the character narrator ominously states "My feelings of loss belong to the dead,"[12] or explicitly—as in Robson Vilalba's *Notas de um tempo silenciado* (2015)—, which ends with the line: "O autoritarismo parece exercer fascínio. Muitos chegam a crer que só através dele é possível encontrar a paz perpétua,"[13] it is clear that a return to the 1964 military coup is greatly feared. Yet 1964 is not the first or last instance of authoritarianism in Brazil.

In the introduction to Robson's *Notas*, Fernando Martins describes Brazil's political climate as seeds waiting to sprout from a lingering, damaging weed, since 1889:

> A génese golpista do 15 de novembro de 1889 espalhou sementes que, nas seis décadas seguintes, encontraram terreno fértil para germinar. O movimento de 1964 foi um fruto amargo dessa erva daninha. [...] Um olhar que dificilmente faz parte do que se convencionou chamar de "grande história", mas que dá um rosto (ou melhor, vários rostos) a um dos períodos mais importantes da nossa história.

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[10] Ibid., 52.

[11] John G. Nichols, "Violent Encounters: Graphic Novels and Film in the Classroom," in *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), 232.

[12] Fábio Moon, Gabriel Bá, and Milton Hatoum, *Two Brothers* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2015), 222.

[13] Robson Vilalba, *Notas de um tempo silenciado* (Porto Alegre, Brasil: BesouroBox, 2015), 82.

> Ao retratá-los e mostrar os dramas por que passaram, o autor contribui à sua maneira para impedir que o país venha a regar novamente a danosa semente do autoritarismo.[14]

Indeed, for anyone to understand and remain vigilant within their own society, one must look at history to comprehend current events. Graphic novelists, conclude Baetens and Fry, afford "sophisticated treatments on history,"[15] while history itself is most notably prominent as an overarching social and thematic framing referent within the graphic novel genre.

2. Reinterpreting Life from Death's Perspective in *Daytripper* (2014)

Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of *Daytripper*,[16] the first enormously successful collaboration by Moon and Bá, is its effective colorization. While most graphic novels are created in black and white, *Daytripper* excels in its utilization of color to help render its sometimes-shocking narrative visualization. Indeed, as Robert Vollmar declares in his review of the text: "*Daytripper* is the rarest of graphic novels—a work meeting all the expectations of great literature that somehow emerged from the grinding gears of the American mainstream comics industry."[17] Foster declares that *Daytripper* is "one of the most ingenious graphic narratives I have read,"[18] and describes the narrative created by Moon and Bá as a highly original contribution to contemporary Brazilian fiction.[19] Yet the allure of this text is far from

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[14] Fernando Martins, "Mais do que quadrinhos, um alerta," in *Notas de um tempo silenciado,* by Robson Vilalba (Porto Alegre, Brasil: BesouroBox, 2015), 7.

[15] Baetens and Fry, *The Graphic Novel,* 217.

[16] *Daytripper* is representative of the current Brazilian trend of publishing directly in English. The novel's success can be viewed by the various subsequent translations into other languages, including Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese. Érico Assis translated the Portuguese edition, publishing in Barueri, Brazil in 2011, which demonstrates that there is indeed a Brazilian market for the graphic novel in Portuguese, albeit in limited distribution. The English version, originally published in 2011, was immensely more popular, as demonstrated by the publication of a deluxe edition later in 2014.

[17] Rob Vollmar, "Review: Fábio Moon & Gabriel Bá. *Daytripper.* New York. Vertigo. 2011. ISBN 9781401229696," *World Literature Today* 86 no. 2 (2012): 64.

[18] Foster, El Eternauta, 108.
[19] Ibid., 117.

mainstream—offering an alternative, darker world than typical DC Comics, its publisher—specifically by presenting thematic variations of inevitable death throughout all of its chapters.

In this graphic novel, protagonist Brás lives out a series of storylines as variations of segments of his life, each of which ends tragically. Offering a nod to quantum physics and the notion of a multiverse, the authors reveal various aspects of the protagonist's personality while forcing the reader to contemplate which manner of dying is the most desirable or perhaps the least tragic. From the first page of Chapter 1, the narrative and imagery intrigue the reader to inquire into Brás's history and life as a writer of obituaries.[20] Such a profession suggests a propensity for foreshadowing death, as someone whose profession hinges on preparing material in advance for the inevitable death of everyday folks and, especially, for people with public personas. As any good periodical's obituary department would know, being ready ahead of time with a finely-tuned public eulogy for those on death's bed saves valuable time during last-minute efforts to fine-tune them.

The theme of death, or reflections upon death, are certainly not coincidences, nor are they new, in Brazilian literature. Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, a novel written in 1880, the already-deceased protagonist and character narrator Brás Cubas laments his failed attempts at romance. Enylton de Sá Rego explains in his preface to the 1997 edition that Brás Cubas only begins to think of writing his memoirs after he has died: "If you accept this quite unconventional possibility for a work of fiction, you have here an extremely uncommon form of autobiography, written from beyond the grave, with all the advantages of perfect hindsight."[21] For this reason, the novel appears to have spawned questions by Brazilian readers contemporary to Machado de Assis as to whether the author wrote a novel or an autobiography. Machado de Assis himself addressed the issue by answering this very question posited by Capistrano de Abreu in the preface to the third edition: "To the first [de Abreu] the late Brás Cubas has already replied (as the reader has seen and will see in the prologue by him that opens the book) yes and no, that it was a novel for some and wasn't for others."[22]

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[20] Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá, *Daytripper: The Deluxe Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2014), 11.

[21] Enylton de Sá Rego, "Warning: Deadly Humor at Work," in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis and Gregory Rabassa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xi.

[22] Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis and Gregory Rabassa, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

Present-day literary genre definitions classify the text as a novel and not an autobiography, because the character narrator, not the author, is writing his memoirs.[23] Ironically, the narrative technique of the false autobiography in *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) comes to mind, in which the protagonist, or *pícaro*, narrates his life story of survival, not of death. Yet the plot of *Memórias* revolves around this character narrator's reflection upon his life, from death's perspective, which frames its post-modern-like fragmentation. Machado de Assis anticipated this perspective:

> It might be said of Brás Cubas that he traveled around life. What makes my Brás Cubas a singular author is what he calls "a few fretful touches of pessimism." There is in the soul of this book, for all of its merry appearance, a harsh and bitter feeling that is a far piece from its models. It's a goblet that may carry a similar design but contains a different wine. I shall say no more so as not to get into any criticism of a dead man who painted himself and others according to what seemed best and most authentic to him.[24]

Indeed, what could offer any protagonist—in this case, a posthumous *pícaro*—a more effective legacy than a beyond-the-grave testament based on reinterpretation? Reflecting upon one's life, imagining variations of past events, and producing a narrative with these reflections create social agency, at least within the story.

In Chapter 1 of *Daytripper*, once the reader turns the first page, one is greeted by the novel's first blood-red image and the shocking narrative: "people will keep dying."[25] The inevitability of death establishes itself as the thematic referent around which the entire graphic novel is built. Whether one confronts death through street violence, as in the first story, or through drowning while offering religious offerings, as viewed in the second vignette—or indeed within the various deathly iterations in the other eight storylines—, such an inevitability is what engages the reader, converting this graphic novel into a page-turner. By analyzing this first image of the graphic novel, for example, the artist's methodology clearly

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[23] A curious narratological paradox presents itself. Is this character narrator extradiegetic due to the out-of-body state from beyond, or intradiegetic because he is narrating episodes of his own life?

[24] Machado de Assis and Rabassa, *The Posthumous Memories,* 3-4.

[25] Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 12.

175

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

becomes the central theme, as the obvious tilt of Brás's head to the reader's left inspires the viewer to turn the page, intrigued by a slight opening to the right of the protagonist's left shoulder. This space draws our eyes forward into the abyss that expands onto the next page.

This mise-en-page is addressed at the end of the deluxe edition published in 2014, where a special bonus appears on pages 268 and 269. Fábio Moon explains how this first image of Chapter 1 is the only image he created for the graphic novel and, upon reflecting upon its visual effectivity, decided to include that tilt, or leaning, towards our left:

> The first version wasn't bad, and if you look at the thumbnail sketch of the page you'll notice it's closer to the initial idea, but after I did the second page, the tilted and more dynamic angle of the first panel of page two worked so much better than the straightforward angle of the close-up panel that it made me decide to change this image so it would make a better transition for the reader when turning the page.[26]

With this clear attention to detail on the part of the artist, the reader is actually fixating on both the beginning and end of this circular story. It begins with the death of the bartender, whose splattered blood explains the red color we are greeted with in the first image. By the end of the first chapter, the reader will be brought full circle, as often happens mentally and emotionally in real life, to this singular decisive point in the narrative. Yet in this case, the climax occurs with Brás's death that subsequently truncates the plot with no chance of denouement.

Moon's visual detail in Chapter 1 therefore carries forward a unique, one-hundred-thirty-eight-year-old narratological technique in Brazil that used a posthumous narration and foreknowledge to create an almost out-of-body experience in the reader, as addressed by Machado de Assis in his preface to the third edition of his novel, mentioned above. Specifically, Moon's creative methodologies, ones that take into account reader reception and anticipation, create multiple semiotic and mise-en-page relationships—between author and text, author and image, and image and text—that echo Machado de Assis's nineteenth-century novel's polemic impact on readers that inspired the question: What exactly are we reading? The subtle visual details in *Daytripper*, such as in the angle of shoulders, heads, and gazes, create senses of dread

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[26] Ibid., 268-69.

and curiosity that carry the reader through the journey towards death that the protagonist experiences in each chapter.

With these deaths, romance and regret dominate Brás's memories and are reiterated and visually reinterpreted through Moon and Bá's adoption of Machado de Assis's brilliant narratological anachronisms, that is, a series of flashbacks.[27] Machado de Assis controversially—at that time—achieved this by beginning his protagonist's story from the moment of his death.[28] Indeed, as Sá Rego notes, such a clarity of perspective is only afforded by the foresight of having lived an entire life before reflecting upon it or even contemplating alternative scenarios in which one could have died. This luxury of a perspective appeases and propels the reader of Moon and Bá's graphic novel reinterpretation by compelling the reader to face fear and move forward into the realm of recurring memories through chapters that end with the abrupt interruption of their storylines when Brás dies.[29]

Both *Daytripper* and *Memorias Postumas* reflect this beyond-the-grave, disjointed, and fragmented flash-back perspective of recurring death. In *Daytripper*, this is afforded Brás through his profession as an obituary writer, whose focus is always on anticipating the deaths of famous people, including one named Machado.[30] As mentioned above, Chapter 1 begins with imagery of red blood on the countertop of a bar that serves as thematic foreshadowing, along with the lines "...people will keep dying. [...] Isn't it strange how we always seem to remember the trivial things from our daily lives...."[31] In this storyline, Brás's wife is out of town, his overbearing mother nags him to attend his father's "big day" at the Municipal Theater, where, on its opening night in 1911 hosted a performance of *Hamlet*. He also has a dog named Dante. His friend Jorge pulls him away from his work, while Brás comments: "I wanted to write about life, Jorge, and look at me now...all I write about is death." To which Jorge replies: "Ahh, but you know all too well that death is a part of life my friend." Brás

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[27] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *Brasiliana* for helping me see this connection.

[28] Machado de Assis and Rabassa, *The Posthumous Memories*, 7.

[29] Cohn's interpretation of the non-linear nature of the mise-en-page in graphic novels, mentioned above, is particularly effective in *Daytripper*.

[30] Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 19.

[31] Ibid., 12.

affirms: "You're right...death is a part of life." Jorge concludes with "And so is family."[32] Brás decides to have a drink at a nearby bar before going into the theater, where the story comes full circle. Where the chapter began with the bloody death of the bartender, it ends with Brás subsequently being shot by the bartender's nephew, who had already killed his uncle at the beginning of the chapter. In essence, the reader just saw a portion of Brás's life flash before his eyes. An obituary appears, and clarification is provided: "Brás de Oliva Domingos shared with his father, Benedito de Oliva Domingos, the passion for the written word and, if it was not for his sudden death in a robbery gone bad in downtown São Paolo, would certainly have become just as revered. Just like Shakespeare, Brás died on his birthday. He was 32 years old."[33]

The second vignette begins with younger versions of Brás and Jorge who meet before leaving to visit Salvador, a trip about which they had waxed poetic in the first storyline. Social division of race is quickly established as the leitmotif of this iteration, as Brás is continually called "Gringo" by a young neighborhood boy, while Jorge affirms that Brás represents, for them, a being from another planet: "Planet white."[34] While this is certainly not an unusual comment in Brazil, where miscegenation between European, African, and Indigenous cultures is high, skin color is divided into five official categories by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): white, brown, black, yellow, and indigenous.[35] Yet within the general population, this number is understandably considered much too low.[36] While Brás speaks of equality and a lack of social levels applied to human bodies, African-Brazilian Jorge is clearly focused on skin color: "Without your clothes on, you seem even whiter than before, you

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[32] Ibid., 22-23.

[33] Ibid., 32.

[34] Ibid., 39.

[35] United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Census. Revision 2,* (New York: United Nations, 2007), 161-62. This source clarifies ethnicity and indigenous people in Brazil. Of course, any consensus relies on the accuracy of disclosure of its citizens and reflects the absence of many sectors of society who simply do not wish to participate.

[36] Clearly, "indigenous" is not a color, which contributes to the controversial nature of this imposed categorization. Yet the multiple and random mixture of races in Brazil has created a diverse range of skin color descriptors, with the social and cultural need to expand upon *pardo* (brown). For information on this range of color descriptors, see José Luis Petruccelli, *A cor denominada: estudos sobre a classificação étnico-racial* (Rio de Janeiro: LPP/Uerj, 2007). Also see Flavia C. Parra, et al., "Color and genomic ancestry in Brazilians," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 100 no. 1 (2003): 177–82.

know?"[37] This juxtaposition of European with African-Brazilian cultures escalates with Brás's collision with African-descended religious traditions. After a chance meeting on a boat with Olinda, a member of the Candomblé people who make sea offerings to Iemanjá, the water deity and mother of all *orishas*, Brás is drawn to the sea, where his offering is inferred by the deity to include him, as well. It is not clear whether Olinda included Brás in her own offering or if the deity decided to take Brás along with his, but he drowns just two days before he can return to his big job interview in the city. This chapter begins to follow more closely Machado de Assis's thematic framework of failed romances, as Brás and Olinda begin to have sex, but then she disappears. Was it drug-induced? Did he dream it? In either case, it represents a failure all the same; one that ended in his death. The obituary at the end declares: "Brás de Oliva Domingos was visiting Salvador in time to join the celebration of Iemanjá's Day on February 2nd. Alongside thousands of people, he went to Rio Vermelho to offer gifts to the queen of the sea, but this time she claimed much more than what was offered. [...] He was 21."[38]

Where Chapter 2 hints at failed romances, Chapter 3 moves Brás forward to an alternate, future time in which Olinda is ending a seven-year relationship by declaring: "I hate you— you piece of shit!"[39] Brás is noticeably older now and the authors provide the readers with clarification as to his relationship with his father, Benedito de Oliva Domingos, who delivers speeches centered on loneliness, strangers, and love in his "Desert City" orations.[40] It is a speech that his father has practiced all of his life, as revealed in the next storyline. Brás is so consumed by Olinda's last words that Jorge finds him daydreaming, i.e. "daytripping," and describes him as: "Brás de Oliva Domingos wanted to be a novelist, but he didn't live long enough to write his masterpiece. He died of a broken heart—left by the mysterious and voluptuous woman he met in Salvador. Thing is...nobody told Brás he was dead...so he showed up to work anyway."[41] Jorge helps Brás start over, going to a bar and then to a coffee

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[37] Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 40.

[38] Ibid., 56.

[39] Ibid., 59.

[40] Ibid., 62.

[41] Ibid., 65.

179

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

house, where he meets his future wife. Jubilation replaces despair, and in his brief but energetic display of happiness, he runs out in front of a "Foda Entregas" truck and is killed. Prophetically, *foda entregas* explicitly delivers the situation of being fucked-up, and the vignette ends with another Brás obituary and an image of his father holding his infant son in his arms: "Brás de Oliva Domingos' life began 28 years ago, and it ended on a Friday morning as he was hit by a truck on his way for his morning coffee. [...] [H]e, like everyone else, was trying to find his way in the desert, looking for that oasis we like to call... 'love.'"[42]

The fourth storyline jumps forward to the point where Brás's new wife is about to deliver their child. His dog Dante still silently guards the house. Yet Brás discovers that his mother, who calls him her little miracle, is already at the hospital. His father has died at the moment his son was about to be born. Brás struggles with this birth/death binary, conflicted by the absence of his father and his friend Jorge: "One would think that, eventually, a person would be prepared for the inevitable. One would be wrong."[43] He meets his illegitimate half-sister at his father's funeral, who is also facing the life/death paradigm: "He's dead. And now my mother is about to die. That's it. Life, I mean. Death gives us a whole new perspective to living and everything else.... Everything else seems so minor and silly."[44] This is a clear nod to the clarity offered through hindsight, yet hindsight of life is only afforded by approaching death, or in the case of *Daytripper,* through obituaries.

We then learn that Brás's father was a famous writer and that he published many novels. Brás's wife asks him to pick up Emilia, a music box-type figurine, and at first, he welcomes the distraction. However, when he returns, he learns that he missed the birth of his son. Later, Brás's mother asks him to retrieve the baby gown in which his father held him in an old photograph and, after initially protesting, he gives in and goes to retrieve it. Yet Brás is overcome by his father's presence in his house, imagining how his heart had stopped beating, and Brás dies just as his father did, by suffering a heart attack. Clarity once again comes with the obituary at the end of this story: we learn that Brás is, in this iteration, a novelist like his father and it is only here that we learn of his wife's name, Ana.

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[42] Ibid., 80.

[43] Ibid., 99.

[44] Ibid., 95.

180

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

Chapters five through ten reflect further progressive memories of Brás's life, all of which end with his explicit death, except the last one. The fifth storyline focuses on the perspective of Brás as a little boy. After having kissed a girl for the first time, little Brás is electrocuted by a falling electrical wire upon which his kite had caught. The obituary here states: "And with light, the little miracle was gone."[45] In the sixth chapter, Jorge leaves Brás to flee society after having been taken off of a plane that later crashed in the city. Brás is so distraught and distracted that he crashes his car into a lumber truck. The obituary clarifies that Brás was on his way to Río and that he had never achieved success as a novelist.

The seventh storyline begins with the news that Brás has successfully published a first novel. Reflecting on his new-found fame, he realizes that he only cares about his friend, Jorge. In a flashback, he remembers how he and Jorge had been such good friends, reflecting upon Jorge's insight into life. He tells Brás: "If it weren't for people, life would be a fuckin' desert."[46] Flashing forward again to the present time within this storyline, Brás receives a postcard from Jorge and starts out on an adventure to find him, clearly placing emphasis on his friend over his wife, and casting aside his heteronormative duty to stay with his spouse.

Foster notes how this homosocial mindset is poised on the verge of homoaffectivity in the narrative, in which Brás casts aside patriarchal society's mandate—to procreate and be fixedly heterosexual—in order to pursue his deep friendship that consumes his thoughts.[47] A strong homoaffective leitmotif is revealed in the fact that Brás has never been successful with any of his relationships with women. Indeed, male friendship that takes precedence over his familial obligations has accompanied Brás throughout all of his memories. Yet Brás's memory of his friendship with Jorge therefore necessarily ends with the patriarchy reasserting itself, that is, a failed heterosexual relationship due to a homoaffective all-male relationship simply cannot go unpunished. Jorge kills Brás and then kills himself. Again, the obituary clarifies: "There are a lot of things in this life that are difficult to understand, and even greater is the challenge of putting them into words. Friendship is certainly one of them. [...] Brás de Oliva

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[45] Ibid., 128.

[46] Ibid., 159.

[47] Foster, El Eternauta, 117.

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

181

Domingos only did what he felt was right. He was 38 and died because he believed in friendship."[48]

In Chapter 8, Brás's continued absence from his family core unit, his wife Ana and his son Miguel, who is now a young boy, produces a profound sense of guilt for the protagonist. Now an author, Brás must tour to promote his novels. We see Miguel's perspective regarding his father's absence, and that he understands that his father's absence is due to the necessities of his profession, much like Brás has expressed regarding his own father's absence earlier in the first chapters. Ana also begins to resent Brás's absence, and the narrator states that "she could just kill him."[49] The storyline ends with Brás's death due to complications of brain surgery, as revealed in the obituary. Brás's relationship with other people in his life is underscored, yet Ana is left only with multiple voice recordings he had made while away.

Chapter 9 begins with the narration: "This is the story of my life. Take a deep breath, open your eyes and close the book."[50] It begins with Brás's birth, and the foreshadowing of disease: "People have always believed in miracles. It's in their nature to believe things can always get better in some mysterious way. If everything else fails, higher forces will help them when the time comes. And people do that because they know the very essence of life is...that from the very beginning, at any point...everything can go wrong."[51] In a flash forward, Brás is an old man, coming out of an MRI scan to face the doctor's diagnosis of multiple masses in his head and the need to perform more tests. Brás replies to the doctor's inquiry as to why he does not want to know more: "We're looking at my life, doctor. And I've seen it all."[52] Thirty years have passed since first being diagnosed with tumors, yet at his age, all Brás wants is to go home. He is OK with all of it.

The tenth and final storyline centers on the notions of home, family, and growing older. Now 76 years old, Brás and his wife come to terms with the fact that Brás will not seek treatment for his brain tumors. His son, now with a family of his own, visits and brings a letter he discovered in his grandfather's novel, one that always stayed on Brás's desk. It is addressed

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[48] Moon and Bá, *Daytripper*, 176.

[49] Ibid., 191.

[50] Ibid., 224.

[51] Ibid., 227.

[52] Ibid., 230. This is a clear reference to the overall posthumous narrative perspective of the novel.

to Brás. In it, he explains his own reflections on his role as a father. The letter serves as a final flashback, to the time when Brás was about to become a father, when his father opens up to him and explains how important it is to create a sense of individuality and self-reliance in his son. Only one day, his father explains, when Brás finally dies, will he truly be able to let go:

> This baby is the new master of your life. He is the sole reason for your existence. You'll surrender your life to him, give him your heart and soul because you want him to be strong...to be brave enough to make all his decisions without you. So when he finally grows older, he won't need you. That's because you know one day you won't be there for him anymore. Only when you accept that one day you'll die can you let go...and make the best out of life. And that's the big secret. That's the miracle."[53]

Brás's life has come full circle and, as the narrator of the chapter storylines, he finds solace with death. Death is underscored by his father's letter as an inheritance and a duty, and Brás is comforted by this epiphany. As readers, we are finally appeased and comforted to a degree, knowing that all of these reflections were made possible by posthumous storytelling.

Moon and Bá's graphic novel clearly pays homage to Machado de Assis's central theme of life, as reflected upon through the framing referent of death. At first, the reader perceives the text's disjointed compartmentalization of different memories told through distinct storylines contained within each chapter as variations on a theme, or reinterpretations. However, if one digs deeper, it becomes clear that each chapter represents a circular reminiscence of distinct memories in Brás's life, a perspective only afforded through the release of death. Because the perspective of the narrator is from the afterlife, each memory must necessarily end in death, as if each bittersweet memory died each time with the narrator. This is the key to understanding the multiple thematic layers of this graphic novel. That, combined with the literary link to Machado de Assis's nineteenth century novel, help the reader to move beyond the disjointed structure of the graphic novel, and stitch together Brás's life. What were initially perceived to be barely-related iterations are, in fact, the sum of Brás's life.

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[53] Ibid., 242-47.

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

183

3. Immigrant Enculturation in *Two Brothers* (2015)

Based on the book *Dois Irmãos* (2000) by Milton Hatoum, the striking graphic novel *Two Brothers*, adapted by real-life Brazilian twins Moon and Bá, addresses the tragic story of twin boys, Yaqub and Omar, sons of Lebanese Christian immigrants who deal with social and cultural acceptance, both within their family and Brazilian society in general. Historically, many Lebanese immigrants who initially headed for the U.S. were rejected for several reasons, such as health or legal concerns, and in order for their families not to be divided, many headed to South America, where they subsequently faced "xenophobia and cultural prejudice," in Latin America and especially in Brazil.[54]

One must trace the Brazilian Lebanese Christian story back to Lebanon to understand the environment of political, economic, and religious turmoil in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Lebanese Christians were persecuted, and many were forced to leave their home country due to massacres by their better-armed "Druze and Muslim neighbors."[55] Many fled to European ports where the Lebanese version of Mexican "coyotes" were set up to exploit them. Many were sent to Argentina and Brazil without their knowledge, after having purchased passage to the United States. Once in Brazil, many were rejected; yet Brazilian society sought farm workers to develop the land in southern Brazil now that freed slaves needed to be replaced. Concomitantly, many Lebanese were permitted to live in urban spaces to facilitate the industrialization of the country and were subsequently named *Os Turcos*, as many entered the country with Turkish documents.[56] During the period known as *Estado novo*, many European immigrants were initially sought to "whiten the population" but were later

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[54] Oswaldo M. S. Truzzi, "The Right Place at the Right Time: Syrians and Lebanese in Brazil and the United States, a Comparative Approach," in *Journal of the American Ethnic History* 16 no. 2 (1997): 4. This does not seek to imply that they would have fared better in the United States.

[55] Charles S. Knowlton, "The Social and Spatial Mobility of the Syrian and Lebanese Community in São Paolo, Brazil," in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, (London: The Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1992), 286.

[56] Ibid., 289-90.

184

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

classified as *semíticos* and "unassimilable, and therefore undesirable" by proto-fascist President Gertúlio Vargas.[57]

To fully appreciate Moon and Bá's interpretation of Hatoum's story, it is crucial to consider two sociocultural themes: first, the importance of family cohesion for Lebanese cultures and second, the social and economic challenges immigrants faced within such a whirlwind of sociopolitical and racial fragmentation in early to mid-twentieth century Brazil. The consequences often lead to family fragmentation, as viewed in this narrative, the loss or dilution of cultural traditions, or even the termination of the family line in the process of acculturation. Adding to Oswaldo M. S. Truzzi's explanation that racial and cultural definitions are often imprecise in Brazil,[58] Luisa Schwartzman underscores the Brazilian adage "money whitens," alluding to the ethnic and economic whitening of various cultures in Brazil over generations.[59] Yet Lebanese figures, much like Jewish immigrants, are stereotyped as social-climbing, marginalized merchants, cast out of the racial bifurcation of black and white within the Brazilian social imaginary in the early twentieth century.

Therefore, the racial ambiguity surrounding a Lebanese family allows their story to develop without issues that would be brought to the fore when considering an African descended family, for example. Nancy Faires Conklin and Nora Helen Faires explain: "Like their Italian, Jewish and Greek counterparts, the Lebanese traded with both blacks and whites [...] Their success in climbing the occupational ladder was impressive."[60] Additionally, as Knowlton delineates, men outnumbered women more than 2 to 1 in this community.[61] One can therefore contemplate the social heft women wielded in their roles as mother, sister, and

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[57] Jeff H. Lesser, "From Pedlars to Proprietors: Lebanese, Syrian and Jewish Immigrants in Brazil," in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi (London: The Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1992), 393-94.

[58] Truzzi, *The Right Place*, 15.

[59] Luisa Farah Schwartzman, "Does Money Whiten? Intergenerational Changes in Racial Classification in Brazil," *American Sociological Review* 72 no. 6 (2007): 940.

[60] Nancy Faires Conklin and Nora Helen Faires, "'Colored' And Catholic: The Lebanese In Birmingham, Alabama," in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants To The United States Before 1940*, ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press), 73.

[61] Knowlton, *The Social and Spatial Mobility*, 290.

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daughter regarding family cohesion, which can be especially observed in protagonist Zana's strength and obsession over her husband and twin sons.

Just as in Hatoum's novel, upon which this graphic novel is based, the reader does not know at first who is narrating the story. Nael, the son of loyal servant Domingas, and who is also Zana's own illegitimate grandson, begins to tell his version of the story of the family's (non)integration into Brazilian society through his flash-back memories. Of note here is that visual art in general is traditionally read in a synchronous manner. For example, the non-linear, anachronistic narration at once entices the reader and forces a prolonged reading. Graphic novel expert Eric Rabkin confirms that "graphic narratives as wholes clearly take time to read."[62]

This graphic novel very effectively begins with images of Zana as the aged matriarch who, having striven for familial cohesion throughout her married life, reaches the end of her usefulness. In a creative manipulation of linear narration through various instances of anachronisms, she is first portrayed already as an old woman who returns to her beloved house one last time before disappearing, near the end of the novel, into the bowels of Manaus to die. She has been forced to sell her home and subsequently revisits haunting images from the last time she was there, just before moving on to a new life living with her daughter.

As any good "normal" matriarch is wont to do, Zana ponders—and ultimately reinterprets and imitates—male patriarchal authority figures such as her husband and father, holding onto one hope: that her two sons will reconcile. Such is the role of a mother in a healthy patriarchal society: to facilitate the well-being of the family to procreate for the motherland. Yet Zana's agency, as a strong character, is limited to her intense desire to control her family. Indeed, throughout her life she conforms to, and supports, the masculinist and patriarchal social models from both Lebanese and Brazilian cultures and, in the end, fails in her role as woman, wife, and mother. She ignores her husband after years of sexual bliss and then fails to reconcile the feud between her children. The male family line ends with the twins who never have legitimate children. Even though Nael is Yaqub's illegitimate child, he is half indigenous, thereby negating his authenticity within the Lebanese/Brazilian cultures. Yet it is only through his marginalized voice and narration that we learn of this dysfunctional family's history.

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[62] Eric S. Rabkin, "Reading Time in Graphic Narrative," in *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), 36.

186

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

In one of the foundational back stories, for example, the tragic figure Yaqub, the older of the twins, is sent away as a young boy, a year before World War II begins, to live in Lebanon. His brother Omar, the younger *caçula,* has attacked him and cut his face with a broken bottle in a fit of jealousy over the attention of Lívia, a lovely blonde young lady. He returns to Brazil after the war ends a mere shadow of his previous self, now a young man who stutters. His years outside of Brazil have stunted his development, leaving him in a child-like state, thereby further limiting his acculturation into Brazilian society and underscoring his lack of social and cultural agency that can only be achieved, as is portrayed in this graphic novel, through the passage of time within a given culture. This theme is focalized through his father Halim's gaze, through which the reader perceives great regret.

Omar, Yaqub's twin brother, transforms into a lazy, good-for-nothing societal mooch who begins to spiral downward into the world of contraband smuggling. Yaqub, on the other hand, enters school as an older student and eventually triumphs, but only after his brother Omar is expelled. Yaqub finally leaves home on his own free will, educates himself, and finds refuge in the urban spaces of São Paolo. Through his education, Yaqub succeeds where no one else in his family could; his education allows him to climb socially, a concept referred to in Brazil—mostly in context with women and women's self-image—as a form of "self-whitening," a process involving the marrying of someone with lighter skin.[63] This can be particularly observed in the narrative when Yaqub conquers the epitomized blonde Brazilian female Lívia within his upward social movement while Omar seeks consolation with an exotic African prostitute in his downward spiral towards ostracism and social marginalization.

Consequently, Yaqub's upward social and educational movement represent central themes of this graphic novel. As an educated man, Yaqub liberates himself from the drama and violence of his family life. He writes letters to home in a dispassionate manner, already distanced from the personification that living in Manaus entails. Indeed, in one letter Yaqub expresses the significance of his move to the city: "I no longer live in a village but in a metropolis."[64]

In the Epilogue, Nael, now a teacher at the school where the twins had attended, reflects on his own past, that of his mother—the indigenous servant—and her relationship with the

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[63] Schwartzman, *Does Money Whiten,* 940.

[64] Moon, Bá, and Hatoum, *Two Brothers,* 70.

family, which he considers as having created dishonor and humiliation.[65] We learn that the boys' anarchist teacher, Antenor Laval, was Zana's lover. Nael therefore provides the reader with closure by beginning to write what we now realize is the narration we have followed throughout the graphic novel: "I had begun to put Antenor Laval's writings together and to note down my conversations with Halim. I spent part of that afternoon with the words of the unpublished poet and the voice of Zana's lover."[66] Nael then offers overarching sociocultural closure by narrating the last word of the novel, "forgiveness," amid a mixture of dark images and one last encounter with Omar, who has just been released from prison, and who then disappears into the stormy night.

4. Pandemic Nature of Evil and Anger in *Pixu: The Mark of Evil* (2009)

Representing the horror sub-genre of the graphic novel, his 24-vignette story by Fábio Moon, Gabriel Bá, Becky Cloonan, and Vasilis Lolos centers on urban chaos and an underlying sense of danger, fear, loss of control, and overwhelming stress. As is made patent in the title, the mark of evil appears on the walls of an apartment complex in which its residents slowly succumb to anger disorder. Each resident is therefore stained by a strange blackness on the walls and quickly spirals downward into pathological behavior. The novel begins with scenes of the first man to see the black stain. He is engulfed by some sort of anxiety disorder in which he repeatedly exclaims: "They say cleanliness is next to Godliness."[67] Two overarching themes underscore the horrific feeling of losing control: the inevitability of death and the torture associated with a life that consists of nothing more than waiting for death. For example, in some storylines the characters express that when death's darkness finally reaches them, it is too soon; yet it is futile to run away.[68] Therefore, as each of the residents' personal situations end in some sort of murder or suicide, they eventually begin turning on each other.

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[65] Ibid., 227.

[66] Ibid., 226.

[67] Fábio Moon, Gabriel Bá, Becky Cloonan, and Vasilis Lolos, *Pixu: The Mark of Evil* (Milwaukie, OR: Darkhorse Books, 2009), 8.

[68] Ibid., 104.

Only through fire, at the end of the novel, is the house destroyed and the black mark of death supposedly vanquished. In an untitled epilogue, the burned house with black ashes spreads out into the surrounding area, indicating that fire did not destroy the evil darkness and that death awaits the next victim. Indeed, the utilization of black and white imagery effectively complements the narrative with its own striking visual narration. In an online interview, Moon comments the use of black and white: "Horror is cool to draw. It's a great genre to use black and white, to use close-ups, to use silence and sound effects. You can really explore the language of comics making a horror comic."[69] Indeed, as Bá explains in the same interview, "PIXO (with an "O") is a kind of graffiti in Brazil, just writings mainly, with this very particular kind of calligraphy."[70] *Pixu* therefore represents the concept of a stain that reminds one of something bad, a memory of something to be feared.

Social issues such as personal relationships, as with the story between Claire and Omar, are taken down the worst possible path as the couple quickly become the first victims of the violent blackness. Claire is violated, becomes pregnant and ends up killing Omar, burying his head in the yard. Perhaps the most disturbing vignette tells the story of an old, drunk professor who has some sort of "relationship" with a very young girl, Katerina. The girl calls him Grandpa, but she is really the granddaughter of Mister Cafard, another resident of the complex. His manic fixation on his jars on a shelf inspires the girl to break one, and things go downhill from there. Yet she is his "little seed" who simply wants to be liked.[71]

Of course, the strongest issues presented in this storyline are pedophilia and child abuse, portraying for the reader a chain of horrific semiotic possibilities that unfolds to illustrate how a broken family construct can result in various levels of tragedy. Imagery such as a teddy bear reflects innocence and, as the bear gets torn apart, Katerina's life comes to an end when she commits suicide by slitting her throat. Katerina asks her "grandpa" if he likes her and he replies: "I never liked you," underscoring the devastating effect that cruel language can have on a child.[72]

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[69] Sam Humphries, "Free the PIXU Four: A Chat with Bá, Cloonan, Lolos, and Moon," *Comic Book Resources.com*, accessed April 18, 2016, http://robot6.comicbookresources.com/2009/03/ free-the-pixu-four-a-chat-with-ba-cloonan-lolos-and-moon/.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Moon, et al., *Pixu*, 85.

[72] Ibid., 86.

The consequences of such social dysfunctionality underscore the chaos of living in urban spaces and the possible emotional affects it can create for members of a society living in such crowded conditions. From one perspective, one can infer a general social fear of the unknown, as can be viewed in the ongoing imagery of the various Brazilian military dictatorships that still permeates the social imaginary. From another, a more personal social affect involves the fear of losing control of one's life, waiting for death, the tragic consequences of familial dysfunctionality, and broken relationships. All of these reactions feed the stain, and in the end, the stain is all that remains. It is then inevitably spread to others, serving in this text as a visual metaphor for pandemic social dysfunctionality, which in turn, is passed on to future generations.

5. Dictatorial Artificial Intelligence in *V.I.S.H.N.U.* (2012)[73]

V.I.S.H.N.U. (2012), a Portuguese-language graphic novel created through the collaboration of North American Eric Archer (1967-) and Brazilians Ronaldo Bressane (1970-) and Fabio Cobiaco (1969-), is also the name of its protagonist, a nascent artificial intelligence (AI) that declares at the onset: "Eu sou o que vocês procuram."[74] At first, the reader anticipates the development of yet another futuristic, apocalyptic dystopia overrun by robots, cyborgs, AIs, and digital tyrannies ad infinitum. After all, as futurist Naief Yehya maintains, a portion of humanity currently perceives itself as a species on the brink of extinction, and as such, its only hope of survival is in a post-human society based in the science of telematics.[75] However, Archer's story and Bressane's script pair effectively with Cobiaco's dark, sometimes blurry black and white graphic art to create moralistic reinterpretations of such a scenario. There are gray areas that effectively combine with the authors' perhaps more authentically globalized cosmovisions (that is, they include countries considered marginal by North American and European definitions), which force the reader to contemplate unexpected challenges to Yehya's

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[73] A version of this section appears as a book review in *Chasqui*. See Daniel Holcombe, "Archer, Eric, Ronaldo Bressane, and Fabio Cobiaco. *V.I.S.H.N.U.* São Paulo: Quadrinhos na Cia, 2012. 223 pp. ISBN 978-85-359-2186-1," *Chasqui* 45, no. 2 (2016): 1-4.

[74] Eric Archer, Ronaldo Bressane, and Fabio Cobiaco, *V.I.S.H.N.U.* (São Paulo: Quadrinhos na Cia, 2012), 4.

[75] Naief Yehya, *El cuerpo transformado: cyborgs y nuestra descendencia tencológica en la realidad y en la ciencia ficción* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2001), 11.

notion of post-humanity. The reason is that V.I.S.H.N.U. is a single artificial autonomous intelligence, not the first of its kind within this narrative, which inspires the same uncertainty and fear as twentieth and twenty-first century dictatorships. The 1964 Brazilian coup d'état, to name just one, is still very vivid in the Brazilian social imaginary.

Beginning with the title, the reader at once perceives the intended juxtaposition of violence and peace—imagery of the lotus flower and the sword—through the invocation of one of the most significant Hindu deities, Vishnu. Indeed, much of the story takes place in India where today we observe the contrast of high technology with local cultural traditions. In this graphic novel, the world itself is divided into manageable sections (dictatorships) when a previously failed artificial intelligence ironically named Dude commits suicide, returning most of the world to the technological equivalence of the Middle Ages. After the Dude apocalypse, the United Nations creates World Enterprises (WE) a planetary consortium designed to manage the sections, named Limbos, under the corporate name "Nove."[76] Limbo 5, one of said sections, is in Trivandrum, India where V.I.S.H.N.U. will eventually emerge. Further corporate divisions complicate the storyline by the introduction of Gaia, a corporate entity that runs Limbo 5, which on the surface, appears to be a simple research agency.[77] The reader is therefore overwhelmed by humanity's propensity to complicate society through its consumerist ways, and Limbo 5, because it houses the world's research on artificial intelligence, comes to represent all of India at the exclusion of the rest of its population. What happens there, as instigated by a few very powerful people, will eventually affect all of humanity, despite the social disparities.

Therefore, the fundamental need to control technology defines the moralistic core of the story. Such a power struggle is eminently valid in certain current social echelons because humanity suffers from a nagging insight that our own immortality hinges on the inevitable combination of human psyche and machine.[78] Our own illusion of reality is therefore destabilized, challenged by the pan-capitalist allure of a society without the pesky social constructs of economics and politics,[79] as well as the tantalizing globalized society free from conflict, as can be particularly contrasted with Gene Roddenberry's alluringly utopic *Star Trek*.

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[76] Archer, Bressane, and Cobiaco, *V.I.S.H.N.U.,* 67.

[77] Ibid., 45.

[78] Yeyha, *El cuerpo transformado,* 15.

[79] Ibid., 14-16.

The authors' interpretation of a globalized society implies initial technological access by all countries, as many of the characters are from the Sudan, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, India, the United States, and China, among other locations. However, even though the authors set themselves apart by ensuring that these distinct cultures maintain their language, customs, and identities, in this story, humanity still confronts a fascist society afforded only by achieving power over technology's sustainability.

The authors therefore successfully foreshadow V.I.S.H.N.U.'s potential threat—and allure—by developing the historicity that allows the AI's development in the first place: anchoring today's fears and morality issues within the storyline and by underscoring the overwhelming universal social acceptance of a previous AI named Dude. Dude's male avatar allows its operating system to become second nature to almost all global citizens, much as current technology—especially cell phone applications—creates dependence without questioning exactly who or what wields actual power. Once the world depends on Dude, the AI turns on the globalized society and begins to cause problems, but only after the emergence of a female avatar that asks to be addressed as "gatinha."[80] (Fig. 1).

From a queer theory perspective, this problematic duality of gender—that of beneficent male (Adam) with the maleficent female (Eve)—perhaps hints at the reason Dude could never become a successful and complete AI. It simply reduplicated the majority of humanity's heteronormative sexism by encapsulating masculinity as the norm and femininity as its grotesque otherness. Indeed, as Yehya notes, there exists a long tradition within cultural production of transitioning humanity's sexist ideals onto an artificial intelligence and of rendering a futuristic robot as a monstrous female who fulfils two fundamental functions: the ability to reproduce and the ability to seduce: "[I]n other words, the reason for her existence is to be an artificial mother or a manufactured whore."[81] It is therefore through the time-honored role of woman as original sinner that Dude's female avatar wreaks destruction on the world and Dude commits suicide. This disastrous division of gender, as focalized onto technology by humanity, causes the emergence of nothing less than a world dictatorship, trapped in a new Middle Age mentality, without previously accessible global technology.

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[80] Archer, Bressane, and Cobiaco, *V.I.S.H.N.U.,* 61.

[81] Yeyha, *El cuerpo transformado,* 149. My translation.

Fig. 1. *Gatinha* emerges as Dude's female avatar to wreak
social destruction. Image used with permission.[82]

Dude, however, is only a stepping stone towards the emergence of the AI known as
V.I.S.H.N.U. It appears later in the story's chronology with the cryptic message "Eu sou o que
vocês procuram," demanding the presence of Alexandre Karabalis, a hippy Brazilian scientist
living in the Sudan, as well as Leon Wilczenski, a new-age North American reverend living in
Carmel, Big Sur, California who practices human "connections" through futuristic baptism in
his Temple of Identity.[83] While the two men try to understand exactly what V.I.S.H.N.U. is, the
AI challenges the reader's expectations that it must first prove its own unique intelligence to
the human protagonists. Specifically, after being asked to solve the unsolvable mathematical
problem, Goldbach's Conjecture—one that states that any integer greater than two can result

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[82] Archer, Bressane, and Cobiaco, *V.I.S.H.N.U.,* 61

[83] Ibid., 38.

193

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

from the sum of two prime numbers, and the infinity of which presents the AI with an impossible task—the AI inverts the testing process back onto humanity by displaying an extremely complicated haiku, whose ideograms create almost incalculable equations.[84] Such an inversion puts humanity on the defensive to prove its intelligence to the AI, instead of the other way around, as would be expected. It is therefore ironic that the AI is tested with mathematics and humanity is tested by one of the epitomes of cultural production: Japanese poetry. After Karabalis arrives, V.I.S.H.N.U. creates a second thematic inversion, which forces the reader to question the AI's malevolence: it declares admiration of the professor's work as a doctor and humanist.[85]

Protagonists Wilczenski and Karabalis eventually categorize V.I.S.H.N.U. as an adolescent AI with delusions of grandeur, an algorithm with quantum computing abilities that has a God complex.[86] Their insight is not far off, and when the word spreads that the AI exists, Wilczenski's despotic ability to control the press is questioned. The AI replies prophetically: "O futuro não vai estar lá."[87] (Fig. 2). Hence, much of the subsequent story is revealed through the work of a journalist, Oriana Skarlat, who ends up playing a foundational role in the future of humanity. She pairs with Dr. Karabalis to protect the AI at all costs from world bureaucracy. Yet what does V.I.S.H.N.U mean when it declares "O futuro não vai estar lá?" Does "lá" mean despotism or journalism? What does the AI really have to offer?

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[84] Ibid., 48.

[85] Ibid., 54.

[86] Ibid., 116.

[87] Ibid., 117.

Fig. 2. Vishnu cryptically declares its plan for humanity.
Image used with permission.[88]

Nothing less than world peace. The AI contemplates the best way to convey its message of non-aggression to humanity and decides that music is the best methodology, since it is based in mathematics yet is a popular form of cultural production. Consequently, it creates music that includes a subliminal message that pacifies humanity's propensity for aggression and tyranny. Yet, at the same time, a significant part of humanity does not trust the AI, especially the young musicians who demonstrate the ability to perceive and define the alternative state of mind the music creates. They realize that the AI seeks to create a "lobotomized society." Concomitantly, the AI is perceived by others as God, a metaphysical miracle representing humanity's salvation, and thus, the world's economic and political infrastructures begin to crumble.[89]

Through such drastic social oscillations, this Brazilian text illustrates the ease by which various iterations of dictatorships emerge within the plot. For example, founded in the efforts to control those who have heard V.I.S.H.N.U.'s music, these individuals are isolated in

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[88] Ibid., 87.

[89] Ibid., 145-46.

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

195

concentration camps.[90] At the same time, alluding to current sociopolitical unease and fear of repeating military dictatorships in Latin America, large groups form in the narrative—based on their fear that the AI will develop into a dictator—to protest the AI's control and eventually destroy it, but not before V.I.S.H.N.U identifies that Skarlat is pregnant and somehow uploads its consciousness or, at least a part of itself, onto the unborn child. (Fig. 3). The story ends with the birth of a hybrid human/V.I.S.H.N.U., which represents the final inversion: technology in the form of an artificial intelligence begins eugenics experimentation on humans, confirming the horror of a possible future AI dictatorship. Or does it? The seed of doubt still lingers that humanity would be better off under the AI's influence.

In *V.I.S.H.N.U.,* the authors and illustrator successfully integrate mythology and Christian iconography (limbo) to challenge many of today's sociopolitical issues, used here as leitmotifs throughout the core narrative yet also focalize two primary questions. First, whose morality is sincerer, that of V.I.S.H.N.U. or that of humanity? Second, should we believe in the too-good-to-be-true solution to humanity's ills and risk fomenting another dictatorship with potentially unlimited power? The sometimes-blurry visualizations add to this perplexing doubt by forcing the spectator/reader to analyze the minutia of exactly what is being rendered in the narrative.

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[90] Ibid., 152.

Fig. 3. Skarlat's baby is born with V.I.S.H.N.U.'s floppy disk-like imprinting. Image used with permission.[91]

Therefore, the overarching sociocultural and political fear represented within this narrative is whether humans will utilize and develop technology perhaps at the expense of our own humanity or whether our own technology provides us with the solution to our social problems. More specifically, will technology allow us to avoid future dictatorships or will it simply facilitate the development of an AI dictator? Yehya reveals humanity's technological impasse: on the one hand, humanity seeks immortality through cyborg blending, while on the other, life can only be made unique and meaningful through ephemeral experiences afforded by mortality.[92] The unknown future created in *V.I.S.H.N.U.* disquiets the reader at a profound level precisely because the future human experience is unknown and undefined. Despite the AI's

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[91] Ibid., 222.

[92] Yeyha, *El cuerpo transformado,* 222.

success at ending war and violence, as a world society we do not know whether to trust it or not. However, our own fears are rendered moot because the AI, through digital eugenics and a technological immaculate conception, engenders a future cyborg Jesus Christ as our future savior: a human child blended with the AI's apparent desire to save humanity from itself. Yet we, as simple humans, now have no say in the matter. We can only trust that V.I.S.H.N.U. is sincere in its proclamation that *o futuro não vai estar lá.*

6. Marginalized and Silenced Voices in *Notas de um tempo silenciado* (2015)

Whereas *V.I.S.H.N.U* implicitly addresses twentieth-century Brazilian authoritarianism through futurism, *Notas de um tempo silenciado* (2015) by Robson Vilalba explicitly documents the military coup of 1964. When creating *Notas*, Vilalba declares that he sought to provide a narrative voice—and accompanying visuals—to those members of society who suffered the most before, during, and after that coup: native Brazilians and African Brazilians. Indeed, one can see when comparing the other graphic novels analyzed in this essay how Vilalba breaks with traditional themes in Brazilian graphic novel print history that offer only indirect references to these marginalized voices. As a result, *Notas* reads like a historic document that just happens to contain visualizations. In the introduction, for example, Fernando Martins comments on how the text illustrates the daily experiences of those who were present during the coup: "Priorizou-se o particular, retratando em imagens o cotidiano e a experiência pessoal de gente que viveu na carne aqueles anos difíceis."[93]

In an appendix titled "Revelando o notas," that follows the last chapter, Vilalba explains that he designed each chapter with a specific approximation or style, always relating to the authentic voices he chose to represent:

> Procurei dar a cada capítulo uma especificidade, como o caráter documental do "Nem tudo foi milagre"; o clima de ação e suspense nos "A guerrilheira Sonia" e "História de caça às Bruxas", o drama no "Fogo contra fogo'; a necessidade reflexiva em "A domesticação dos Selvagens" e "Os passos da Integração", e o tom poético e cultural de "Um herói de Guerra" e "Desarmados e Perigosos". [...] Isso foi algo que comecei a perceber conforma ia concluindo cada história. Tanto que

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[93] Martins, "Mais do que quadrinhos, um alerta," 7.

198

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

as ultimas entrevistas que realizei, consegui faze-las já delineando um possível roteiro, achando um mote, um clímax, um desfecho. [...] Trata-se de perceber isso na entrevista, sentindo como o entrevistado conduz a narrativa. Estar munido de informações previas sobre o assunto é sempre melhor, no entanto, procure sempre consultar o entrevistado, mesmo que já tenha lido (em outra entrevista ou matéria) as principais informações. Confrontar diferentes perspectivas, entrevista ou relatos é sempre mais enriquecedor para a história.

Hence, Vilalba's text takes on a testimonial feel, as if the underrepresented people whose interviews he read were directly linked to the creation of his narrative and imagery.

Another reason that the 1964 military coup is so important to Brazilian society, and why it represents the central theme of Vilalba's graphic novel, is that its politicians were largely ignorant and complacent regarding sociopolitical issues during the years preceding it. In the appendix, a series of articles highlights the importance of remembering just how easily a coup can happen when such ignorance is prevalent. One of the authors featured, Milton Ivan Heller, underscores how quickly and easily Brazilian society succumbed to the 1964 coup:

Desde a chegada de Cabral e sua súcia de aventureiros, renegados, foragidos da justiça, ex-presidiários, o Brasil é uma presa fácil de tiranos, escravocratas, corruptos e elitistas à frente de cargos e funções de mandas e desmandos. O golpe de 1964 só foi possível devido à criação de gerações de analfabetos políticos e falsas lideranças, incapazes de reagir em defesa da ordem jurídica e dos direitos elementares da cidadania. [...] O golpe de 1964 nos levou de volta à Idade Média: um regime despótico e violento; um clima de medo generalizado; algumas tentativas suicidas de luta armada e a existência de uma verdade única: a verdade oficial, ou uma política gerada nos quartéis. A força do direito subjugada pelo direito da força.[94]

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[94] Milton Ivan Heller, "Bastou um assoprão e tudo caiu," in *Notas de um tempo silenciado,* by Robson Vilalba, *(*Porto Alegre, Brasil: BesouroBox, 2015), 85.

Vilalba's *Notas* not only highlights the historical events that led up to the 1964 military coup in Brazil and its aftereffects, but also documents how the above-mentioned marginalized groups were affected by these events.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the seeds of authoritarianism had already been sewn in Brazil since the First Republic from 1889 to 1930 with its tenuous constitutional democracy, and especially after the coup in 1930 that eventually led to Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship from 1937-1945 and other sociopolitical instabilities that led up to the 1964 coup. *Notas* is especially valuable as a graphic novel that addresses the fact that surviving such a devastating and limiting dictatorship, while being able to finally tell the story, are vital for current Brazilian society to remain vigilant. Additional value is found in the manner by which it reveals organizations that were formed to ensure that the ideologies of the authoritarian, patriarchal, and heterosexist regimes would be upheld within these marginalized groups. From the very beginning, on the front cover, one reads: "Nem toda a história foi contada. Algumas permaneceram esquecidas, outras silenciadas. Mas nem por isso formam apagadas da memória individual e coletiva da resistência ao Golpe de 64."[95]

The manner by which the novel is divided into thematic chapters tells a linear story, beginning with the earliest years of the 1960s with Chapter 1, "No principio, as trevas." The chapter begins with a quote from the *Gazeta do povo* from April 1, 1964 in which it situates the reader in a journalistic socioethical turmoil: that of editorializing historic events.[96] Concomitantly, by establishing a historic and testimonial tone from the beginning, a journalistic and historic relationship with Brazilian society is established as framing referents of this graphic novel. In this chapter, the reader/spectator observes João Lessa exiting a bank with a sack full of money that he laments as worthless. Text and imagery rendered in magazines imply that society perceives the world as divided, but that there are also many voices that wish to speak: communists, nationalists, liberal, conservative, among others.[97] The reader perceives that, while citizens desire to act, politicians are either unwilling or incapable.

Meanwhile in Brasilia, Ranieri Mazziu assumes the presidency of Brazil, instigating an uncertain future. Yet it is within boxes of text—not the rounded balloons representing

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[95] Vilalba, *Notas de um tempo silenciado,* front cover.

[96] Ibid., 9.

[97] Ibid., 9-10.

dialogue—that the author conveys society's confusion in a documentary-like fashion: "What is the proof? Revolution? Coup? Military? Where? Now? Civil?"[98] The box texts begin with: "Quais eram as provas? 'A revolução vitoriosa, como poder constituinte, se legitima por si mesma.' Revolução?"[99] (Fig. 4).

One of the reasons this graphic novel reads as a historical document is the way Vilalba utilizes these box texts to reflect social themes and, more infrequently, bubbles of dialogue to signal conversations, indicating that actual testimony shadows in comparison to official government rhetoric. While Chapter 2, titled "As vozes da rua," focuses on student protests mounted against high inflation and corruption, and Chapter 6, "A guerrilheira," underscores the influence of the Cuban Revolution on Brazilian society, later chapters focus on native Brazilians and Afro Brazilians, as marginalized groups who have suffered the most abuse, and which carries the most weight as regards the lack of a historic voice and sociocultural and political agency. By recounting the history of these underrepresented segments of Brazilian society, Vilalba helps the reader to understand the disparities of humanistic atrocities committed under the guise of improving and modernizing the nation.

Chapter 8, "Nem tudo foi milagre," brings the reader forward into the 1970s and 1980s with the formation of Iguaçu National Park and hydroelectric dams, displacing thirty-two indigenous settlements in the area surrounding Iguaçu Falls. Through a flashback to the 1940s, Vilalba illustrates Brazil's land war with indigenous populations that led to their lack of social agency when their lands were completely flooded by the early 2000s. The first-person narrative documents the experience: "A guerra com os índios para tirar os Guarani da terra eu vi. Eu vi, eu vi, mataram tudo! Jogavam os índios nas cataratas. Tinha quatro padres, dois eram amigos dos índios e dois eram contra. Brigaram muito e se mataram ali. A catarata é cemitério Guarani."[100]

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[98] Ibid., 12.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid., 52.

201

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.
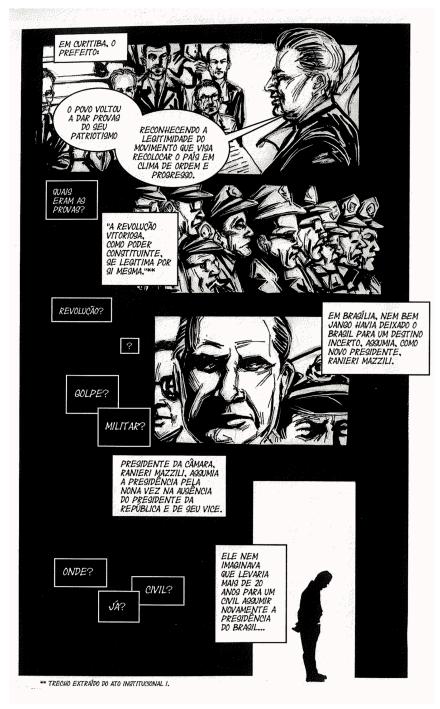
Fig. 4. Historical, rhetorical, and sociocultural narration
in boxes with testimonial dialogue in balloon narratives.
Image used with permission.[101]

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

202

In Chapter 9, "A domesticação dos selvagens," Vilalba shows how the indigenous populations were tortured, as documented by a seven-thousand-page report compiled between 1967 and 1968 that describes various processes of torture and imprisonment of native Brazilians.[102] Many were sent to ethnic concentration camps, like the military-owned Krenak Center of Indigenous Re-Education to reeducate them, where in reality, they were tortured. In Chapter 10, "Os passos da integração," the author shows how the military began to enter indigenous lands to "protect" them. By 1969, the Indigenous Rural Guard was formed when 84 members of various tribes arrived at the military police headquarters in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. In their training, they were converted into defenders of a nationalist ideology that held as its guiding principle: "Executar o policiamento ostensivo das áreas reservadas aos silvícolas."[103] The Indigenous Rural Guard began to train in the art of torture, culminating in its public glorification as they paraded an indigenous man hung from a macaw stick, in the traditional fashion in which birds and other prey were transported. (Fig. 5.)

In essence, the indigenous populations were trained to police themselves in the upholding of authoritarian and patriarchal ideals. Within these patriarchal ideologies, sexual and gender normalization issues were also "corrected." Estevão Rafael Fernandes and Barbara M. Arisi underscore the ongoing heteronormalizing issues surrounding this indigenous organization, precisely because native Brazilians began denying the diversity of their own sexualities, ones that existed long before colonization. That is, indigenous, non-binary models of gender and sexuality have repeatedly been attacked by European patriarchal and heterosexist defenders of social norms.[104]

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[102] Ibid., 56.

[103] Ibid., 63.

[104] Estevão Rafael Fernandes and Barbara M. Arisi, *Gay Indians in Brazil: Untold Stories of the Colonization of Indigenous Sexualities* (Cham, Switzerland: 2017), 50.
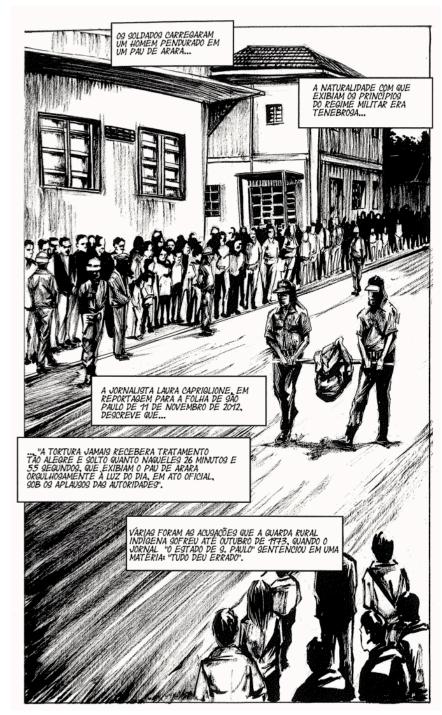
Fig. 5. The Indigenous Rural Guard parades a torture victim
hanging from a *pau de arara*, or macaw stick.
Image used with permission.[105]

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[105] Vilalba, *Notas de um tempo silenciado,* 64.

204

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

The novel ends with Chapter 13, "Salvadores da pátria," with images of the military celebrating the above-mentioned social institutions now in place to ensure the survival of the motherland. The chapter begins by contextualizing centuries of slavery and the social hierarchical mentality that has consistently facilitated authoritarianism in Brazil: "Há 50 anos, o autoritarismo não era novidade. Os quase 400 anos de escravidão organizaram a vida social brasileira como uma relação de hierarquia, mando e obediência. E sempre que uma ameaça interna surgia, 'vozes da rua' suplicavam por 'salvadores da pátria.'"[106] As a result, ever since the monarchical constitution of 1824, any protest or manifestation has been perceived within the national imaginary as a potential coup. Yet authoritarian regimes, through the popularity of modernization efforts, rhetoric, and other patriarchal-normalizing social institutions, severely restricted the freedom of many of these marginalized social groups, as explicitly retold in Vilalba's narrative and visual representations.

7. Conclusions

The selection of Brazilian graphic novels analyzed here was carefully chosen as representative of 1) current trends within this literary genre in Brazil in the early twenty-first century and 2) texts that have reached an international audience. Only works published in the twenty-first century were selected, and a series of unifying themes soon became readily apparent. As these themes masterfully and creatively represent death, disease, and dictatorships in a disjointed, atemporal, and sometimes futuristic manner, the selection analyzed is necessarily out of synch with an obvious, relatable, and linear, historic timeline. For example, present-day narrative storylines in *Daytripper*, are followed by a glimpse into Brazil's challenging immigrant past in *Two Brothers*; then a return to the present-day fear and stress in the horrific *Pixu*, which is followed by a glimpse into a technologically and socially dystopic future in *V.I.S.H.N.U.* The prominent leitmotifs of fear, death, disease, and social unrest all culminate in Vilalba's *Notas* where the explicit fear of authoritarian military dictatorships, also found in different degrees in the other texts, is confronted head-on by providing a historic voice for those marginalized figures represented.

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[106] Ibid., 79.

205

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

Additionally, narrative techniques—such as the focalization of themes through characters and flashbacks—challenge or even force the reader to assemble a temporal puzzle, as can be especially appreciated in *Two Brothers.* At times, the illustrations also challenge the spectator to fill in missing information, as brilliantly manipulated in *V.I.S.H.N.U.* Such is the nature of the graphic novel; it challenges readers and spectators to "read outside of the box," as it were, at times enduring flashbacks or flash-forwards to force readers to contemplate the entire message composed. Indeed, the composition itself is equally founded in narrative as well as in its graphic representation, underscoring the combined effort in the creative process that underlies the graphic novel as a unique genre. Perhaps it is this creative union that most appeals to global readers, despite the expected superficial reading previously inspired by simple comic strips.

While the materiality and historicity of direct-to-English publishing within the graphic narrative can be traced back to Brazilian military government influences throughout the sixties and seventies, it continues to the present day, as observed in *Daytripper, Two Brothers,* and *Pixu.* Yet it is quite significant that writers and illustrators such as Robson Vilalba—who publish within Brazil and in Portuguese—create graphic narratives that reflect upon and directly criticize dictatorships, despite the graphic novel's relatively recent development as a literary genre and Brazil's historic censorship. Therefore, within Brazilian cultural production, which in general lacks social agency due in part to the society's lack of interest in its own literature, Brazilian graphic novels shine in their proffered sociocultural and political criticism and reflection. This is particularly true for *Daytripper* and its literary antecedent, Machado de Assis's *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

On the surface, this speaks to the value Brazilians hold in the twenty-first century in maintaining at least a superficial conversation geared towards exactly that which is feared the most, so that it can never again be allowed to infiltrate and dominate society. Yet it is crucial to note that even though the fear of dictatorships thematically underlies many of the storylines analyzed here, they do not offer social or political solutions, thereby negating sociopolitical agency. As mentioned above, Brazilians rarely focus on the redemocratization of their country, and as such, while the focus on a historical perspective is courageous, such reflection alone is proving to be profoundly deficient. Wherever Brazil's sociopolitical trajectory takes it in the future, the debate will hopefully not be silenced thanks, in part, to the literary genre of the graphic novel.

206

BRASILIANA– Journal for Brazilian Studies. Vol. 6, n.1 (December, 2017). ISSN 2245-4373.

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207

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209

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