Closing the Gap: Graphic Narratives and the Archive of Afro-Diasporic Resistance—A Conversation between Breena Nuñez, Marcelo D'Salete, and André Diniz

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Introduction

In recent years, graphic narratives have become a crucial space for Black artistic resistance and social contestation across the Americas; a development that is noteworthy in at least two ways. Historically, comics and caricatures have played a decisive and likewise deplorable role in the reproduction and circulation of ethnic misattributions and systemic racism, a fact that becomes even more apparent when one considers the specific visual registers of the medium that have traditionally been based on caricaturesque exaggerations. This specific feature, however, is now being used to de- and reframe hegemonic and White supremacist visual culture in the great variety of stylistic devices that the multimodal language of comics and graphic narratives has to offer. At the same time, the lack of Black and Brown characters in such narratives—apart from one-dimensional sidekicks—is being refuted by a new generation of artists who dedicate their work to the recovery and visualization of Black (hi)stories and experiences.

Indeed, the growing transnational awareness and recognition of comic books that feature Black and Brown protagonists in the African diaspora is striking. Brazilian comic book artist Marcelo D'Salete's *Cumbe* (2014) and *Angola Janga* (2017)—graphic narratives that deal with the resistance of enslaved men and women in colonial Brazil—have by now been published in Portugal, France, Italy, Austria, Spain, Poland, Turkey, and the United States, where *Cumbe* (translated as *Run for It:*

Stories of Slaves Who Fought for Their Freedom by Andrea Rosenberg and published by Fantagraphics in 2017) won the prestigious Eisner Award in the category "Best U.S. Edition of International Material" in 2018. D'Salete's earlier works, the graphic narratives *Noite Luz* (2008) and *Encruzilhada* (2011) about the urban peripheries of São Paulo, are not only in direct dialogue with his later narratives (in the sense of an inverted continuity), but also with André Diniz's award-winning *Morro da Favela* (2011; translated as *Picture a Favela* by Jethro Soutar and published by SelfMadeHero, 2012), a graphic biography that tells the story of self-trained photographer Maurício Hora and has been translated into English, French, Polish, and Spanish. Hora grew up in harsh conditions in Rio de Janeiro's first favela community, Morro da Providência (formerly, Morro da Favela). In *Morro da Favela*, André Diniz not only addresses these struggles, but also shows how Hora's creative engagement with the favela and its inhabitants leads to quite a different and more nuanced image than is most commonly presented in international media.[1] In contrast to D'Salete and Diniz, Guatemalan-Salvadoran cartoonist Breena Nuñez (who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area) engages in a decidedly more trans-American perspective in her work. In her zine-influenced, autobiographical comics strips, she explores the nuances of Black and Brown experiences in the Latinx community in the United States while contributing to a queer-feminist negotiation of identity. What connects the works by Breena Nuñez, André Diniz, and Marcelo D'Salete is that their graphic narratives revolve around a gap, a blank space, in comics and visual culture. Their stories highlight and explore the unknown, the ignored, the unseen and invisible, thus offering a counter-hegemonic visual archive that challenges and disrupts traditional (i. e., Western) historiography.

The following interview with Breena Nuñez, Marcelo D'Salete, and André Diniz was conducted between April and June of 2021 on several occasions, and the editors would like to thank the artists for their openness, for their generous explanations, and for allowing them to reproduce selected images in this issue.[2]

Localizing the Gap: Absence as Inspiration

Breena Nuñez:

My source of inspiration to create comics comes from two places: first, remembering what it felt like to be a child who was hungry for knowledge and truth. When I make comics about these topics, I notice how I'm using the medium as a form of therapy to help that younger self to feel seen and listened to by my words and pictures. Comics are another way for us to archive our experiences and stories, especially when it comes to anything that we want to leave behind: I intend to create as a response to feeding a need for my younger self who has not seen any

1 Regarding André Diniz's *Morro da Favela*, see Javiera Irribarren Ortiz's contribution to this issue.

2 Marcelo D'Salete's and André Diniz's answers were translated from Portuguese into English by Jasmin Wrobel. The guest editors have decided to leave out their questions and instead curate a conversation between the artists. All footnotes have been added by the guest editors.

representation or stories that have some sort of nuances about what it means to exist as an Afrodescendiente from the United States, something that's really specific and a type of identity that is an anomaly to what it means to be a Latinx or a person of Latin American descent. I have been hungry for something that is not only just Central American but that talks more specifically about embracing Blackness. Archiving, for me, is rooted in my practice, because I do want to leave something behind for the generations that come after me, so that they also don't forget, so that they don't have to feel ashamed for their curls, their skin, their culture, just to let them know that it's taking a lot of us time to fully accept our Blackness. Anti-Blackness has become really large within Latin America and for Latin Americans who live all over the world who identify as Afrodescendiente. Comics as an art, it's not just another way for me to express love, but it's another way to remind people that we're here. We're fighting against erasure and colonization and we do it with so much love and tenderness.

Figure 1. Breena Nuñez, "Self-Portrait"

Secondly, I see how many cartoonists of color from the Bay Area have used comics and zines to share their stories, and oftentimes these stories are told through memoir or diary comics. I tend to feel really held by their stories and that feeling is something I want to give to readers who look like me or who share a similar story like mine. I want them to feel that they are not alone in the ways White supremacy has isolated you, or alone in how you have grown to love your Blackness.

Marcelo D'Salete:

My own incentive to draw comics connects with Breena's points in several ways. You could say that my comic art was initiated by the perception of a certain absence of a Black experience in the arts, an absence

I noticed in films, books, and conversations with friends—but especially in comics.

Figure 2. Marcelo D'Salete, "Portrait by Rafael Roncato"

Later, when I was a student, I experienced a kind of key moment in downtown São Paulo. I went out to see a dance and theater performance and came across a book stall with a huge range of titles about Black literature in Brazil. There were some copies of the *Cadernos Negros* series, by Quilombhoje, works by Márcio Barbosa, and others.[3] When I came across this literature, I understood that this Black and Afro-diasporic universe also existed in Brazilian literature, beyond North American literature and cinema.

Little by little, I realized how absent these Afro-diasporic narratives were from formal education, television, and other spaces of visual media where they only appeared as stereotypes: they were the "exotic" elements within a certain context and rarely presented Black people as round, complex characters.

In my comics, taking up these Black and peripheral narratives in all their complexity became the crucial point. And, of course, at that moment, in the early 2000s, I started to meet a lot of other students who had similar interests. I realized that this was not just the interest of a kid from the outskirts of São Paulo, but it was actually a concern of many other people to reconstruct complex Black and diasporic narratives. It is fundamental for us to resituate the image of Black people in Brazil today, to understand their history, beyond racism and discrimination.

3 The Brazilian literary group Quilombhoje was founded in 1980 by Cuti, Oswaldo de Camargo, Paulo Colina, Abelardo Rodrigues, and others, with the objective of discussing the Afro-Brazilian experience in literature. The group's name is a portmanteau of the words "quilombo," referring to settlements of runaway slaves in colonial Brazil, and "hoje," meaning "today." In 1982, with the entrance of Esmeralda Ribeiro, Márcio Barbosa, Miriam Alves, and Oubi Inaê Kibuko, the group took over the organization of *Cadernos Negros* ("Black Notebooks"), an Afro-diasporic literature series that had been launched in 1978. The writer, researcher, and Black movement militant Márcio Barbosa currently shares the direction of Quilombhoje and the organization of the *Cadernos Negros* series with the writer Esmeralda Ribeiro.

The lack of the archive that Breena insinuated, the gap, the unspoken, the "crack" in the document, these are precisely the spaces where the artist's creation and exploration begins. It is in this space that we can generally create instigating narratives, beyond the original record, beyond the fact. Furthermore, fiction makes it possible to connect documents or facts that are not necessarily related historically.

André Diniz:

The absence of certain narratives in Brazilian cultural life, highlighted by Marcelo, was also a motivation for my work on *Morro da Favela*, even if I'm telling this story from a different position. Comics are generally seen as a visual medium in the first place, but my premise for creating graphic narratives is to have a good story to tell. So, what attracted and inspired me most in this case was the life story of Brazilian photographer Maurício Hora and his lucid vision of the favela Morro da Providência—its whole social context.

Figure 3. André Diniz, "Self-Portrait"

Another aspect that motivated me is that favelas, in fiction, are often chosen as a topic or scenery to show scenes of gunfire and violence, like a "Brazilian Wild West." Besides, it is a theme that arouses the interest of readers outside Brazil. In Maurício's story, I saw an opportunity to show another vision. When I learned about him and his work, I was just one more "outsider," without any right to talk about favela life and even less so to transpose the favela and its people into scenes, dialogues, and drawings. It was also the first time that I "adapted" a life story of someone still alive, and whose deceased relatives had controversial lives, so the initial barrier I felt was high.

Talking about the favelas in Brazil, especially in Rio de Janeiro, is a much more complex subject than it might first appear. For obvious rea-

Figure 4. André Diniz, "Maurício Hora," *Morro da Favela*

sons, the first issue that comes to mind is the glaring social inequality. Some of the largest favelas in the country, ironically, are located next to upscale neighborhoods.

As someone who creates stories and characters and who seeks and enjoys the particularities of each and every one of them, whether they are fictional or real, I believe that one of the main obstacles to an understanding, and even an approximation of these different worlds, is the generalization of an entire part of the population using one or two derogatory words: "poor" and "favelado." Behind these labels, there are millions of different people with millions of different universes, with different experiences, including the issues that, at a first glance, might stand out the most, such as economic, cultural, and professional factors. Let me illustrate the existing prejudices with a little anecdote: I remember when Maurício and I, after finishing the book, were invited to launch the French edition in Paris. The publisher, a contact of Maurício's who would be hosting him, his then-girlfriend, everyone wanted to know if we would be going and coming back on the same flight, if we would be together the whole time, asking me to guide and look after Maurício during the whole trip. The idea of a "favelado" in Paris was worrisome to everyone involved. I, the author, White, middle-class, would have the mission of "guiding" Maurício, the "Black slum-dweller," through the "first-world" city. I then had to explain that Maurício already had been to Paris years before for an exhibition of his work, while I, on the contrary, had never traveled to Europe.

Subversive Potential, Counterculture, and Freedom of Creation in Comic Art

Marcelo D'Salete:

Comics have an enormous potential to create visual critical approaches and "noise" within hegemonic power structures. I imagine this noise as something not expected within a certain work. A scene or even a universe of creation that escapes the expectations and contours of the public-context-work relation. It would also be something that escapes certain genres. These kinds of narratives that bring, in an instigating way, new ways of dealing with and thinking about a problem, works that present new questions, new disruptions.

In the nineteenth century, in Brazil, there was Angelo Agostini for example, expressing a direct critique of the empire and slavery in his sequential image stories, even if, on the other hand, he could not completely overcome his own classist and ethnic prejudices towards the Black population.[4] But what matters most here is that he created sort of counter-hegemonic comics already in the nineteenth century.

Today, in much of the production of industrial comics, for which the medium is most famous, this critical potential, the questioning of hegemonic structures, is not so evident. And yet, there are comic authors today from very different backgrounds. In my opinion, this diversity of authors and creative forms is the most interesting aspect of the recent comic production.

André Diniz:

Let me take up Marcelo's last point. When I started to publish my first works in the form of fanzines, in the mid-90s, the label "comics" seemed to close all doors. Not that they had anything against the medium itself, but there was a lot of disregard for a *Brazilian* making his own comics. We were limited to a few specialized stores, a very restricted number of readers, there were rarely any events and festivals, and there was a lack of interest and also respect on the part of most people, bookstores, institutions, media, etc. The simple act of making comics in Brazil, even nowadays, still has an air of counterculture. A large part of the editions, for example, are still independent editions (even if financed by government programs or crowdfunding campaigns), sold by the author her/himself at events and on the internet. A big difference between the 90s and today is that, besides the current number of releases and authors being incomparably larger, Brazilian comics artists in general have woken up to what I believe is the greatest asset of comics: freedom of creation. If, back then, authors were still stuck to commercial conventions that made no sense for independent editions (cross-over between different characters, 22-page stories with "To be continued…"

4 In the nineteenth century, which marks the birth of what we understand as "comics", Italian Brazilian Angelo Agostini created two of the first illustrated stories considered as comics worldwide—*As Aventuras de Nhô Quim ou Impressões de uma Viagem à Corte* (1869) and *As Aventuras de Zé Caipora* (1883). His name and importance for national comics culture in Brazil gave the inspiration for the "Prêmio Angelo Agostini," awarded annually by the *Associação de Quadrinhistas e Caricaturistas do Estado de São Paulo* ("São Paulo Comics Artists and Caricaturists Association"), and for the creation of the "Dia do Quadrinho Nacional" ("National Comics Day"), celebrated on January 30, the date of the publication of *As Aventuras de Nhô Quim ou Impressões de uma Viagem à Corte*.

at the end), today what reigns is a creative freedom that is not concerned with certain approaches, themes, and commercial formats aimed at the general public.

Let's take the film as a contrasting example here! Making a film is a great responsibility for its producers and directors. It involves several professionals, large sums of money, not to mention that a bad film can end the careers of those involved (even so, it is possible to see breakthroughs of daring and courage in works that escape the triviality of blockbusters). Comics do not have these limitations. In a single day, it is possible to make a short story without spending any money, and to publish it on the internet before sunset. You also don't need locations, costumes, makeup, you don't even need to consider the laws of physics! The difference between making a realistic comic and a highly imaginative one is solely the author's creative mind. All these factors bring a huge potential to comics as a contesting, anarchistic, and subversive medium.

Breena Nuñez:

I also still see subversive potential in sequential art. Especially if we consider that we were in lockdown for a good portion of last year and still this year [2020-2021, ed. note] where I feel like what's subversive to me is the way comics folks were able to publish their work without having to go through the needs of a publishing house or some kind of syndicate. As somebody who has been part of the zine community since ca. 2013, for me it's the most abundant source of original comics, because they tend to have a lot of autobiographical and political material. In regard to the representational potential that predestine comics: I think a lot about my friend Daniel Parada, an Indigenous Salvadoran artist who makes these comics called *Zotz*. It's amazing what he does, because his comics are actually pretty subversive—they reflect his imagination on what Mesoamerica would have been like if the Spanish hadn't colonized those lands, and he is creating this whole universe based on the mythologies that are a part of Mesoamerica. He has visited a couple of classes of mine at San Francisco State University and has been so inspiring to my students because he has introduced the idea of how Mesoamerican "comics" are the first forms of comics that this continent has probably seen. There is definitely evidence of characters presented in Mayan codices, pottery art, and this kind of touches on the question of archiving again and on what our ancestors did for so many years and across world cultures, creating an archiving history. Moments in human history have always been archived through the means of illustration, and Mayan people have a very visual, heavy language that was really sophisticated, the way our ancestors communicated with each other. Daniel Parada also points out that there are a kind of speech balloons to show that there is a dialogue, a conversation that was happening between the characters.

To me, this is another form of resistance, against these ideas and narratives that Indigenous people have had no idea how to live in a "civilized" society, that they "needed" to be colonized and have their selves stripped and removed from their language, their belief system, in the name of "modernization," in order to be adopted into a more "civilized" society. And I think if we continue to look at other world cultures pre-contact—and even today—there were and there are always narratives that are represented visually, not in the means of comic books or print, but definiteley through other things like clothing, pottery art, jewelry, hair cuts, everything. There is some sort of narrative that is being shared with us, and we might not belong to a culture that automatically understands a certain piece of visual narrative, but the fact that it exists and that is being delivered through some visual means just shows that it is kind of disrupting the way our Westernized perspective has assumed that the only way for us to really fully understand a story is only through a book, through literature, a conventional comic book.

André Diniz:

When talking about this potential, described as "noise" by Marcelo, the different media and formats in comics play an important role. We have a variety of media and formats ranging from the classic newspaper strip format, which today has evolved into webcomics that are mainly disseminated through social networks, to the 100-, 200-page albums that take at least a few months to be written and drawn, and they may take a year in the publisher's queue to be published (not to mention that a reader may buy the book two, three years later). So, when we talk about the urgency of comics in the face of social issues, these different paces mean that each format has a very different timeframe. Since a webcomic can reach the reader on the same day as a news event, it has the potential to follow the unfolding of facts practically live. It works well with a nimble drawing, and if authors don't get their message across the way they intended, they can achieve this in the following days with another strip. The album, on the other hand, requires a more refined and slower work (and this does not make it more "noble" than the strip, nor does it require more talent—to say a lot with only a few drawn lines is often more difficult) and a longer "life cycle" (ideally it should be "current" both if read today and if read ten years later, at least). Thus, the focus is different. It becomes more interesting to address current issues, but not necessarily those of today. The two paths (there are other formats, of course, but I have highlighted two extremes here) complement each other when they oppose a society that both demands urgent changes and needs its vision, already crystallized and solidified over decades or even centuries, to be dissolved little by little.

Breena Nuñez:

This also just reminds me of a student who had a really inventive approach to making a comic for her final project. She created a sort of comic scroll made out of cardboard and paper, crafting the paper to look like flowers, and it was a visual history, among other things, of her experiences and relationship with Black hair and of how Black hair has been criminalized and demonized within the United States. There are also moments when she expresses how she fell in love with her hair, and you have to literally interact with this comic to learn the history. There are some points that were being accompanied by visuals which were these illustrations of flowers, some of them were in bloom, representing the growth of how she learned to embrace her hair. It was really interesting, because this also makes me realize that I consider myself to be very "Western" in the sense that I collect comic books, because that's how I consume them, in book form. But what if we challenge that and create comics that are structural, sculptural, three-dimensional, and made out of other materials?

The subversiveness that comes with that is related to the question [of] how we can make comics even more accessible—you still have to buy them, and when you buy a graphic novel it's quite an investment for some people. And not everyone is able to afford the printed version of the copy. How can a comic be even more public than being accessible in the public library?

André Diniz:

This is an interesting point that I would like to reconnect to the question of production. Unfortunately, in most cases, comics with a social approach are still works made by those who, to some degree, are more inserted in society. As versatile as comics are as a language, of course factors such as education and culture, money to invest in drawing material, books, courses, and computer, time available to study and create, are factors that help a lot, and when you don't have any of these, the obstacle is greater, even though it is possible to create a comic with a pen and a sheet of paper. This is a pity, because Brazilian comics would be greatly enriched by this new group of authors, the ones who actually live in the scenarios that are the themes of many works created by artists who do not know this reality up close. If we had a movement to bring workshops on comics and the creation of fanzines and webcomics to communities in need, we would probably solve this problem. From a sheet of paper, when cut in half, when its two halves are joined together, folded and stapled in the center, we have a small eight-page notebook. With pages measuring one-fourth of the space of the sheet, with this single sheet being printed front and back, a small eight-page copy emerges, where one would be the cover and the other seven pages

would bring the comic to the reader. Printing 100, 200 copies in this way is perfectly viable, because the cost would be minimal and the editions would be quickly created and easily distributed. Something like *literatura de cordel*,[5] so typical of Northeastern Brazil, where small editions with poetry and woodcut images (printed in a rudimentary way to maintain tradition) talk about daily life in an agile, efficient, and creative way, mixing poetry, engravings, and humor.

Contesting Anti-Black Stereotypes and White Supremacy in Comics Art

Breena Nuñez:

Thinking a bit more about comics and diversity: I feel like now we're seeing more nuances of Blackness in cultural productions and that this existence is not monolithic or contained in certain stereotypes. Black people, especially Black women, have often been and still are written as characters to be strong, so that they can be the emotional support system for the protagonist. But I grew up as a quiet and shy kid who was obsessed with watching cartoons, anime, playing in the school band, and playing in the soccer team so I wouldn't have to do P. E. [Phycial Education]. What I hope I'm adding to the discourse with my comics is that there is no "one way" to exist as a Black person, and that some people had (and are probably still having) a very difficult relationship with embracing their Blackness. As an Afro-Salvadoran from the United States, I understood that I would be racialized as someone who was mixed with Black heritage or who was from Ethiopia, Colombia, or Puerto Rico, yet I was quick to deny it because children already learn at an early age in the Latinx culture that anything associated with Blackness was not just "good" despite how much we consume Black culture.

Marcelo D'Salete:

Thinking about racism, stereotypes, and visual archives, there is quite an abundant production in Western art about Indigenous Peoples of America, Asia, and Africa at the beginning of maritime expansion and modernity, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A little later, in the nineteenth century, we witness the "birth" of modern comic strips. In this same period, there is a huge dispute between different political groups about the abolition of slavery. This counts for many parts of the Americas. Now, in this period, along with the birth of comics, we have the development of caricatures as a whole new graphic form that often transformed the Black population— people about to become free—into something close to animalistic (according to the White supremacist imagery of the time).

5 *Literatura de cordel* ("string literature") refers to inexpensively produced booklets or pamphlets that contain mostly poetry, tales, or folk songs, while the booklets are usually illustrated with woodcuts and hung from strings to display them at street markets to potential readers, especially in the Brazilian Northeast.

We are still in the much-needed process of overcoming these ways of representing Black people and other ethnic groups. This process shows up in comics, but also in other types of artistic expression. In the last decades, we have made a lot of progress. But we also have to be very careful that we do not end up with a conservative update of these supposedly overcome stereotypes.

André Diniz:

All cultural languages (and spoken language itself, of course) are laden with prejudices, stereotypes, and pejorative and segregating views of social, racial, and gender identities, in ways that perhaps only future generations will know how to identify properly. Unfortunately, these factors are very strong in comics, and I have some theories about what may have made comics and cartoons particularly fertile ground for these distortions.

Firstly, an essential ingredient in the language of comics is synthesis. Text and drawings need to occupy the same space, so neither should outdo the other. There are time gaps between one panel and another, so a single panel often needs to represent more "time" and events than, for example, a photograph, which captures a single instant. Drawing itself makes use, to a greater or lesser degree, of synthesis. The more stylized it is, the more the forms and what they represent are being simplified. A dot with a circle around it replaces the real image of an eye and its precise curves, eyelashes, etc. A window is represented by a simple square. And this is beautiful: it is a creative reconstruction of the real world through the eyes of the respective author. The trap is when this simplification uses prejudices to have an immediate impression on the reader. Thus, someone poor gets disheveled hair, torn clothes, dirty and smelly looks, as if there could not be poverty and dignity at the same time (and quite often this figure is Black). Women are often being reduced to two types: either the beautiful young woman with long hair and a statuesque body, or the woman over fifty, overweight and bad-tempered. In the same way, a bandit will have a badly-done beard, a prominent chin, and a big nose; a priest will necessarily be a fat, bald middle-aged man. Fortunately, I am talking about something that has changed a lot recently, I think in comics all over the world and certainly in Brazilian comics: limited and unjust patterns that lack not only common sense, but also creativity. It is not about picturing what has been witnessed in other comics for decades, but what we see around us now.

Still, the world you see in a comic book is a world a hundred percent created or recreated by a cartoonist and her or his vision of everything and everyone, and the distortions and exaggerations of her or his way of seeing the world will be reflected, even if in an unconscious way: a female character and her gestures drawn by a man; a poor person's house drawn by a well-to-do artist; a remote town portrayed by someone who lives in a metropolis.

Aesthetic References and Modes of (Self-)Archiving

Marcelo D'Salete:

My latest graphic novel *Angola Janga* was the result of many years of research. In fact, it is based on a long process of building my own internal self-knowledge. I realized during this research that there was a universe of facts about Palmares, and about the Black population in the seventeenth century, that most people didn't know.[6] These facts are very relevant to understand Brazil today and especially its Black population. This process of discovery involved learning about and reading the sources, but also reimagining them for today's readers. There was a need to recontextualize those archives in the form of fiction, trying to bring all the complexity and potentiality of fiction to those stories.

The graphic novels *Noite Luz*, *Encruzilhada* (Figure 5), *Cumbe* (Figure 6) and *Angola Janga* are, in my view, connected. They end up being part of a spiral process of knowledge about Brazil in the past and present. There is a line of nuances to understand the Afro-diasporic experience in Brazil of three centuries ago and connect it with the Brazil of the last decades. There is a perverse continuity between these two ends. We urgently need to untie the knots of this history of violence and subjugation.

It is amazing to see the reach of *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* outside Brazil. I think it is related to the interest of people from different countries in learning more about Brazil, but from a different perspective, a perspective that highlights the Black protagonists in the country's narrative. The books show another topic little known abroad—the formation of mocambos[7] and quilombos by resistant Black men and women. These stories are probably being told in some translated academic texts, but not in such a dynamic and accessible language that comics (and other visual media) can offer.

I am very happy to note that the female figures of my narratives, Jô (*Encruzilhada*; Figure 7), Calu (*Cumbe*; Figure 8), or Andala and Dara (*Angola Janga*), have gained importance in the eyes of readers. Part of the texts that I have used address the role of Black women in the colonial period. I just tried to follow in the same direction. I imagine that in *Cumbe* this was developed in a very organic way with each narrative. In the case of *Angola Janga*, in the middle of the book's development, I realized that the documents and my narrative still included few women. That was the moment to revise much of the book project and alter some important passages.

When I started creating comics, my visual references were mainly urban. I had the habit of creating scenes involving streets, alleys, buildings, etc. This is clearly visible in *Noite Luz* and *Encruzilhada* (Figure 7). The elaboration of *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* forced me to rethink my references. Revisiting historical paintings by Frans Post or Albert Eckhout, as well as more recent comic strip artists, was very relevant for the elaboration of this universe.[8]

6 Both *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* unfold against the historical background of the Quilombo dos Palmares, a settlement of men and women who escaped slavery in colonial Brazil (ca. 1605-1694). Located in Pernambuco, it became the most important center of resistance against the Portuguese, led by Zumbi (1655-1695), who was a quilombola leader and the last king of Palmares. Among Afro-Brazilians, Zumbi dos Palmares's heroic resistance has long made him a symbol for freedom and an important reference for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black political movements in Brazil. November 20, the day Zumbi died, is celebrated as *Dia da Consciência Negra* ("Black Awareness Day") throughout Brazil.

7 The term "mocambo" ("hut") is often used as a synonym for "quilombo," but refers normally to a smaller settlement.

8 The Dutch painters Frans Post (1612-1680) and Albert Eckhout (1610-1665) were among the first European artists who painted landscapes and scenes from Brazil's northeastern regions during and after the period of Dutch Brazil (1630-1654).

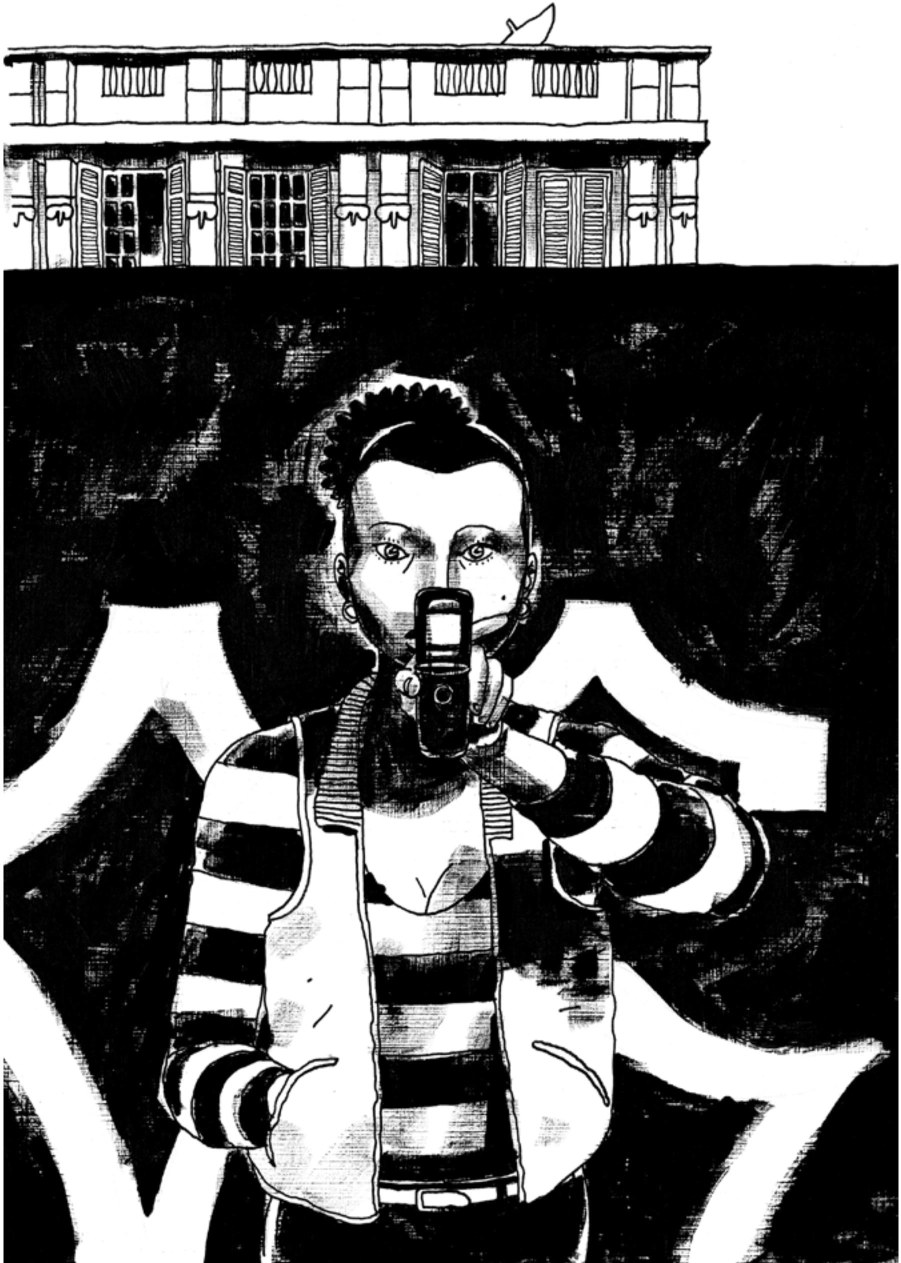

Figure 5. Marcelo D'Salete, Dora from "93079482,"[9] *Encruzilhada*

9 The image shows Dora, the protagonist of the short story "93079482," but this specific full-page panel serves as a closure image for the whole book.

Figure 6. Marcelo D'Salete, Valu in "calunga," *Cumbe*

Figure 7. Marcelo D'Salete, Jô in "Brother," *Encruzilhada*

Figure 8. Marcelo D'Salete, Calu in "Sumidouro," *Cumbe*

Breena Nuñez:

I think because I didn't see enough of myself and other types of Central Americans depicted in the mainstream, I ended up drawing myself in my comics just to show up as a character who deals with many experiences that don't often get to be discussed in comics, and it's also been a powerful way for me to connect with other Black folk from different parts of the diaspora. The idea of writing and drawing myself circles back to the need to challenge the stereotypes we face as well as wanting to show folks that Black Central Americans or Afrodescendientes exist, and that I'm not any less proud of being Black, Salvadoran, or Guatemalan. My comics touch on how mestizaje can be harmful to those who are Black or Afrodescendientes because it forces us to negate our identities in order to be able to feel like we are a part of Latinidad.

I feel like, when I look back at my earliest comic, "They Call Me Morena… For a Reason," my style was really different. I think I was still trying to figure out who I was as a cartoonist, and what my aesthetic was going to be. I took a break from reading comics from childhood—I would say like around ten or twelve years old—and I stopped reading and just dedicated my life to music for a long time, because this was another dream I had, I wanted to be a concert musician. But I fell in love with comics again in college, and the titles that really pulled me back were *Love and Rockets* (since 1981) by Jaime Hernandez, who is a Mexican American artist based in Southern California,[10] and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003), as well as *Blankets* (2003) by Craig Thompson, and all these narratives I realize now kind of represent intersectional experiences that I have been able to access, when it comes to finding books that represent feminism, protest, questioning and critiquing religious institutions, and finding some sort of subculture with People of Color being depicted and drawn in really honest and authentic ways. So, in my earliest comics I definitely wanted to look "Jaime Hernándezesque." I just love the way he draws bodies, especially female or women-identifying bodies, because they just look like all of my friends and family. There are also all those different ethnicities that he beautifully represents, and these are really people that are from *his* community. For me, I just wanted to have this kind of honesty.

When I was in this graduate program at CCA (California College of the Arts) for the MFA Comics Program, exploring my cartooning style, I was making these shorter comics, one of them with the title "Things to not Ass-Ume about Black Latinx from the US" (2018; Figure 9) and that style was more like round, bubbly, just chibby, mini characters that look a bit more friendly and approachable. I realized that I pretty much have a lot of fun when I do this style of cartooning that feels a lot lighter for me to bring up heavier themes such as racism, the awkwardness of also not belonging in the Latinx community, or feeling like nobody really sees me as Latinx because of my Blackness in my aesthetic, my physi-

10 The comic book series *Love and Rockets* is a collaborative project by Mario (b. 1953), Gilbert (b. 1957), and Jaime Hernandez (b. 1959), although each brother produces his respective stories independently.

Figure 9. Breena Nuñez, "Things to not Ass-Ume about Black Latinx from the US"

cal form. It's a way for me to feel like I can have fun with this subject matter if I just draw myself in a sort of goofy way of cartooning style. I think for me it just makes it easier for people to feel like they can witness the conversation that I have with myself, and sort of see the humor of how absurd anti-Blackness and tokenism is in the United States. In that comic where somebody assumed that I'm from Africa, I don't ever see myself drawing my personal self and other characters in a hyperrealistic form, because it just does not feel very welcoming to me and I think for me personally I tend to be drawn more to reading comics that depict really heavy subject matter, but that have a very stylized cartooning style at the same time that really pulls me in. I think this cartooning style just

allows me to be able to create also dialogue and a style of writing that feels really honest, not needing to compromise other people's feelings because there's a truth that needs to be told, and it's not often where we get to see comics that talk about race and representation and also the lack of belonging that happens to be very much a part of an experience that's specific to being Afrodescendiente.

I think my comics have personally helped me realize that racial and gender categories, which were generated in colonial discourse, never really did any justice to how I wanted to exist (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Breena Nuñez, "How Do You Translate Non-Binary?"[11]

11 The complete comic was published in *Be Gay, Do Comics! Queer History, Memoir, and Satire from* The Nib (2020), ed. Matt Bors and Matt Lubchansky. San Diego, CA: IDW. Print.

Assimilation, unfortunately, has been such a useful tool to make us feel like we shouldn't own our Blackness, Indigeneity, or queerness for fear of being persecuted by the government. Often, I lean into memories and think about how much we're taught not to express excitement for exploring queerness or for loving our skin or our hair during childhood. What comics have been doing is imagining worlds that could be created for us, for people that have been already marginalized and seen as a disruption to White supremacy and heteronormativity as well. And there are endless possibilities of imagining that world, that reality, in your story.

André Diniz:

In my case, Maurício's photographs helped me a lot as a visual reference, although I didn't recreate any specific point portrayed by him, except for Morro da Providência's central square with its chapel and the soccer field (where, years later, the cable car was built for the 2016 Olympics which was abandoned soon after by the government). After contacting Maurício with the proposal for the comic book, I made several visits to Morro da Providência, where I had the possibility to meet Maurício's friends and neighbors, and all that experience yielded not only *Morro da Favela* but also inspired my other album *Olimpo Tropical* (2017). If I had created the graphic novel without this experience, the nuances of this whole context would have been distorted. There were people connected to the drug trade walking around heavily armed, but you understood that this was part of everyday life for the residents who were not shaken by this sight. There were old ladies sitting in the open doorway of their houses, with children playing in the street (Figure 11),

Figure 11. André Diniz, streets of Morro da Providência, *Morro da Favela*

free, something you don't see in the rest of Rio de Janeiro, much less in the richer neighborhoods, where everyone is locked up in their condos, clubs, or shopping centers, looking for some sense of security.

This doesn't mean that the favela is safe, far from it. But it is possible to understand the relationship between drug trafficking and the community. Trafficking imposes a fierce dictatorship on the residents, and anyone who disobeys its rules can be killed. On the other hand, someone who follows those rules has little to fear. The trafficants even help the community in some situations, filling a power vacuum. The real danger are the police, no matter how honest and righteous the resident, because the police treat everyone in the favelas as if they were bandits. It is an absurd distortion, but one that can be seen in the nuances that I witnessed. Today, I understand when someone from the favelas says that he or she wouldn't leave to live somewhere else. I understood this by seeing how everyone there knows each other and unites to face daily obstacles, like, for example, taking a new refrigerator to a house on the top of the hill, when the only available path is a staircase and steep and unstable earth slopes. It was this little experience in the favela that put me at ease and really inspired me to make this comic. Even when it came to putting—or not putting—a smile on a character's mouth, the local experience influenced this decision.

From the beginning of the creation of *Morro da Favela*, there were many doubts: would I divide the narrative into small stories or would I make (as I did, in the end) a single story, with a beginning, middle, and

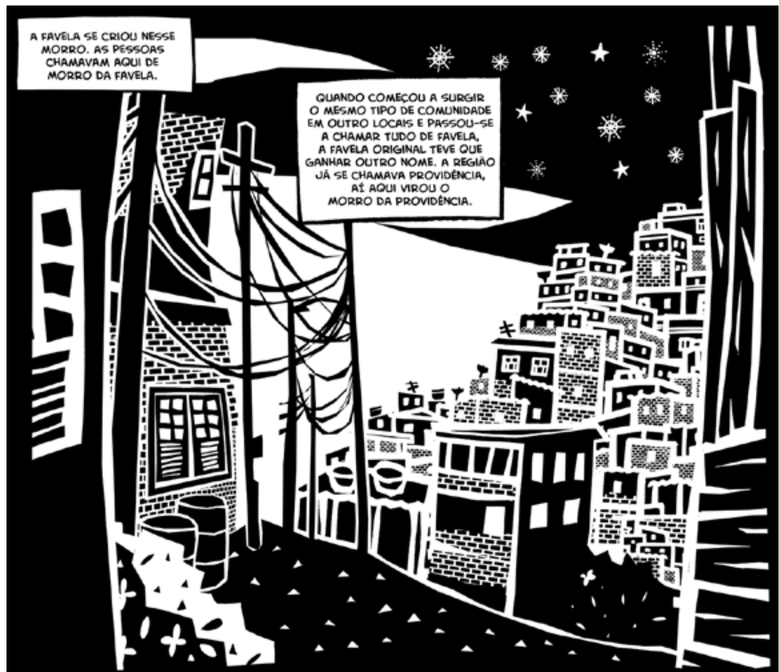

Figure 12. André Diniz, view of Morro da Providência, *Morro da Favela*

Figure 13. André Diniz, Maurício taking a picture, *Morro da Favela*

end? What would be the tone of the drawing? In short, I had a series of testimonials collected by someone who had never interviewed anyone before, and now I needed to translate all this into a comic book. And when I say "translate" it's not for nothing: the only point I had already decided from the beginning was that this would be a book *by* Maurício.

Whoever reads it would read Maurício's vision, his visual archive, without my interference. His vision of the favela, the police action, the prejudices and discrimination the residents suffer, etc. Even the decisions concerning my artwork obeyed this premise. I was going to show the favela in an iconic way, with drawings in light and dark that reminded me of woodcuttings, something very stylized. In the last section of the graphic novel, it is Maurício who actually shows the images of Morro da Providência in his own photographs.

Platforms, Formats, Collaborations, and the Challenges of the Digital

Breena Nuñez:

I've mostly been able to share my work via zines and mini-comics and saw those zine fests as radically inclusive spaces that were also the perfect place to share my work. Zine culture within itself aided me in giving myself permission to have my identity be manifested through words and images, plus zines have been able to take me to so many communities, and really felt like I have this extended family in different parts of the United States.

Last year, I started getting more comics published online and was overwhelmed by the immediate reactions to pieces like "I Exist!" (2020)

or my personal diary comics. It was a sobering moment to sit with the fact that "Oh yeah, I make webcomics too," because I tricked myself into needing to focus simply on using one platform to share my comics (but it's also because I still have this deep love for the printed book and zines). I got to be introduced to organizations like AFROOS through Afro-Salvadoran artist Carlos Lara, and he came up with this brilliant hashtag (#arteafrogosto) for the month of August to encourage other Afro-Salvadorans to create art as a way to build up to *Día de la Afrodescendencia* (which has been the one community-run festival to openly celebrate African heritage in El Salvador).[12] Despite all of the trauma that came with 2020, I felt like I've grown to know more Afro-Salvadorans here in the United States and in El Salvador because we've been able to use these platforms to use our personal narratives to resist Black erasure in the country.

The role of anthologies, which is my other point, is crucial for showing up in social movements to fill this void of not feeling seen or being heard. What better way to bring people together and to a movement than by collecting all sorts of stories and sharing them in a collection, a common archive? *Drawing Power* (2019) was an interesting book because I didn't know how to summarize everything that I had experienced when it comes to having my body tokenized and fetishized.[13] Also, having that support of editors who want you to be heard, who want to give you advise on how to do the writing or strengthening the point you want to get across to your readers is very valuable.

Drawing Power was necessary at the time, and I'm sure it still is. I can just recall drawing this during the time when president Trump was very much against everything that's not "masculine." For people to know that you're not alone in your frustration, that you're not alone in how you feel in the midst of White supremacy where you might feel you're in a tiny boat in treacherous waters. Even without a pandemic, it's easy to feel alone, it's easy to feel disempowered if you have experienced sexism and violence in the patriarchy. You feel like there is no one else out there, nobody who would be able to hold space for me and to help me heal and that's what comics do for me; they make me feel less alone when it comes to wanting to critique institutions I belong to or to feel seen in terms of shaping an identity. So, this was a really special book because I remember seeing the list, the roster of the artists who were going to contribute to *Drawing Power*, and so many happen to be just wonderful people I have met through the zine community in the Bay area, folks who felt compelled to be a part of this book and never would I have imagined that we all would be in this huge collection of comics. I tend to hold myself short. I have a hard time celebrating things that happen in my life, but it really draws attention not only to a number of women and women-identifying people who have been hurt by White supremacy and patriarchy, but to the fact that this is not an issue that is specific to the American identity, but it spreads across cultures, across spaces that

12 See, in this regard, the grassroots organization AFROOS's Facebook profile and Carlos Lara's article, "El Salvador Project Illustrates the 'Invisible' African Roots of Common Latin American Words" (4 Feb. 2021, trans. Anthony Sutterman).

13 *Drawing Power: Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival. A Comics Anthology*. Ed. Diane Noomin. Introd. Roxane Gay. New York: Abrams Comicarts, 2019. Breena Nuñez contributed the graphic short story "Fuera" (114-16).

are even designed to make us feel safe; even in our own ethnic anchor we still experience machismo, sexism, violence in all directions, within White supremacy. We have to remember that femicide and sexism are also rooted in colonization and books like this show people: this is the result of what colonization does. It continues to harm people; this is something that has not stopped manifesting since the late 1800s. I'm speaking within the context of the United States and I guess in other parts of Latin America as well. Colonization has not stopped working; it's like a functioning thing that happens in the ways we talk to each other, in the ways we build relationships with each other, break each other; it still manifests within our legal systems, our governances, etc. And this is how it continues to harm us, and a book like this is just important to exist as well as other books that center women and transwomen when we produce justice. It talks about how, yes, there is still harm that comes from colonization, but we are still here; we are alive to tell these stories; we're here to grow as a resistant community.

Marcelo D'Salete:

I started producing comics and publishing in the early 2000s. That environment was very different from the context of creating and publishing comics today. In the early 2000s, with the advent of the internet, I was part of a collective of people who produced the comic magazine *Front*, using email groups.

This was a very interesting time of debate among the authors, arguing about which stories should be published in the magazine. It was the first contact with previous generations of comic artists. Well, I still publish mainly in print. But you can't deny the enormous reach of the internet today, and the importance of the publication of comics in social networks.

I still hope to produce something more specific for this universe. On the other hand, I find it incredible to see my works being distributed in public schools in a good part of Brazil, and even in quilombos. In addition, images of my graphic novels *Angola Janga* and *Cumbe* were also part of institutional videos dealing precisely with the historical struggle of the quilombolas, in defense of their right to land and to remain in their territories, with dignity.

I think that collaboration in the artistic world is something very interesting, very opportune, for you to make contacts, to meet other people, to strengthen this idea of group, of collective, which is something so difficult nowadays. So, I have already made some collaborations with Kiko Dinucci, with Alan da Rosa, with Ed Gomes, with Bruno Azevedo and, more recently, Oswaldo de Camargo—some illustrations we did together. Lately, I have been a little more busy with works that are a bit more extensive and demand a lot of time, so there were fewer opportunities for collaborations. But collective and collaborative work is

very important for the engagement of artists, for debate, for artistic and aesthetic discussion, for the formation of new artists. My initial training was based on artists' collectives, involving illustrators and comics artists as well.

It was interesting to observe that during the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, a lot of new authors emerged or became more visible, with very relevant works that help us to reflect about the current Brazil, our society. One work that started as a project specifically for the internet and that has many followers and a very good quality, is certainly comics artist Leandro Assis's and cyberactivist Triscila Oliveira's Instagram series "Confinada" ("Confined").[14] It started during the time of the pandemic, a very interesting work in terms of a social and historical record of this period, as well as in terms of questioning the social structures we are living in. Several others have emerged as well. The internet has become a great stage for manifestation, from all possible sides, and of course it is very interesting to have works like this one by Leandro and Triscila, because we also know that, more and more, the digital media are not only liberation, but we see the actions of big companies and conservative groups occupying this space, in fact, for the coercion of fake news, of non-information, of lies, in order to disturb, to create a kind of confusion between concepts and to favor this politically heated discussion that ends up appearing on the internet. So, producing material that also shows you in a different position from the conservative one is essential. Sometimes I participate in some specific actions when I am invited—campaigns, things like that. One happened last year—a campaign about quilombolas, the defense of land. They used my work for the illustration of their campaign. Recently, there is an initiative involving graphic artists doing serigraphs and other things, to help families in vulnerable situations. I contributed an image for sale, funds that are destined for specific families in difficult situations.

14 The series "Confinada" ran from 11 April 2020 – 1 April 2021; the 70 episodes were published on Leandro Assis's and Triscila Oliveira's Instragram and Twitter accounts. The series is related to its (ongoing) predecessor "Os Santos: Uma tira de ~~humor~~ ódio" ("The Saints: A ~~Humorous~~ Hateful Comic Strip"; strikethrough in original, since 5 December 2019). Both series feature related protagonists and problematize the specific situation of the (mostly female) domestic workers in Brazil, addressing and denouncing phenomena of social segregation as well as sexualized and racialized violence.

André Diniz:

I had experiences with digitally published comics in two instances: between 2000 and 2006, when I had a website—*Nona Arte*—where I made my comics available in PDF format for free download and which became well known at the time; and between 2013 and 2014, when I published short stories on a website that I have also deactivated now—*Muzinga*—, aiming more at tablet and smartphone readers. What caught my attention in these two periods was that the number of readers I reached was much higher than with print publications, but the titles did not gain reviews, critiques, or award nominations, and were more quickly forgotten. Print and digital publications are two very interesting and, in some way, complementary paths. I believe that, besides the more ephemeral side of digital content, paper has this particular "glamour," not least in the practice of archiving. I find it curious that, when an article about my

work is published in a newspaper or magazine, people come to congratulate me, they think it is fantastic, but the same does not happen with an article published on the web, even if the number of readers is ten times higher. In this case, paper is even more ephemeral than digital, because the newspaper is thrown away the next day and the digital story will probably be available for years.

But I believe that this is not the only difference. I notice that at major comic book conventions (note that CCXP in São Paulo in 2019 was the most attended comic book convention in the world), the public values the experience of buying the publication directly from the author's hand, as well as being able to get an autograph, chat a little, and exchange ideas. I had the experience of sharing a table with a colleague, each of us with our titles for sale. The two of us sold more or less equal quantities of our works. But when one of us went out for a meal or a walk, our titles stopped being sold, and only the works of the table partner who remained at the table were still being bought. So, it also gives the impression that the ease and "coldness" with which a book reaches the reader via Amazon or in digital version via social networks contrasts with the experience of adding a work to the bookshelf bought directly from the author, or even, in the case of fanzines, produced and sold by him or her directly. I therefore believe that, in the same way that an anti-system manifestation does not go well with large TV networks, an independent work, printed with few resources and passed from hand to hand, has more spirit of resistance than a link on Facebook.