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"It is about the graffiti they wrote in your grave": Manifestations of Nonconformity as an
Instrument for Transgression in *The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*

Florianópolis
2024

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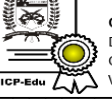
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ABSTRACT

Power is a complex concept, and its relations with resistance and transgression were explored further by Michel Foucault, the theoretical basis for argumentation in this study. It can impose limits, which are never fixed or stable, and that are flexible enough to let some non-conformative acts cross and recross the line. Drawing on this idea, this study aims to analyze manifestations of nonconformity as an instrument for transgression in two plotlines of the comics *The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys: California* (2013) by Gerard Way, Shaun Simon and Becky Cloonan. From this, Korse's plotline can be observed particularly from the perspective of him allowing himself to feel emotions, suffering a major violence from the corporation to which he works in order to conform again, and finally rebelling and letting go of his loyalty and beliefs to construct a new life. The other plotline, this concerning the porndroids, is based on the duality between humane and non-human, able-bodied and disabled, and the construction of the main transgression is also on these aspects. As such, all the characters in relation to power and resistance present the cross of limit's lines through transgression.

Keywords: Power; nonconformity; Transgression; Resistance.

RESUMO

Poder é um conceito complexo, e suas relações com resistência e transgressão são profundamente exploradas por Michel Foucault, usado como base teórica na argumentação deste estudo. Como tal, o poder impõe limites, que nunca são fixos ou estáveis, e que atuam com flexibilidade suficiente para que alguns atos de não-conformidade cruzem e retornem a estar sobre a linha. Observando esse aspecto, o presente estudo tem como objetivo analisar manifestações de não-conformidade como instrumento para transgressão em duas tramas do quadrinho *The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys: California* (2013), escrito por Gerard Way e Shaun Simon, e ilustrado por Becky Cloonan. Neste, temos a trama de Korse, que pode ser observada da perspectiva dele se permitindo sentir emoções, da violência que ele sofre por parte da corporação para a qual trabalha em consequência disso, e finalmente da rebelião que o leva a abandonar sua lealdade e crenças para construir uma nova vida. A trama relacionada, identificada pelas *porndroids* Red e Blue, é baseada na dualidade entre humano e não-humano, corpo fisicamente apto e corpo deficiente, e na construção da ideia de transgressão baseada nesses aspectos. Dessa forma, todos os personagens em suas relações com poder e resistência apresentam o ato de cruzar as linhas do limite através da transgressão.

Palavras-chave: Poder; Não-conformidade; Transgressão; Resistência.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze manifestations of nonconformity as an instrument for transgression in the comics *The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys: California* (2013) by Gerard Way, Shaun Simon and Becky Cloonan. To illustrate this process, the corpus was selected based on the relevance of nonconformity to their narratives. The setting of these stories is a cyberpunk-like United States, ravaged by a series of conflicts known as Helium Wars, which took place in the first half of the 2010's decade. In this post-apocalyptic dystopia, humanity can find a supposed safe space from radiation in Battery City, a place ruled by the megacorporation Better Living Industries (BL/Ind). This population lives under a constant state of lethargy, a consequence of the chemical and social control imposed by the corporation, besides other manifestations of violence. In opposition to this emulated tranquility of the urban scenario, there are the Zones on the outskirts of the City, a space where a semi-anarchist organization of society endures frequent incursions of power and police by the corporation. Some members of this social group are named The Killjoys, an assembly of misfits that defy the order and norm enforced by BL/Ind. The universe in which *The Fabulous Killjoys* is set is an opportune view on oppression and power, dissecting the ways in which conformity and nonconformity function.

Michel Foucault (1977) discusses the process of construction of conformity and nonconformity inherent in the concept of transgression. In his analysis, the initial proposition is that there are positions that are sacred, conforming or profane, nonconforming. For Foucault, power is constituted through the discourses that establish norms, through an authority on the subject. In this, "Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses" (Foucault, 1977, p 33-34). Thus, this limit encapsulates the action of transgression,

the catalytic moment where everything blows; moreover, it also contains the entirety of the life of those who do not conform, which will lead to the transgression act. Going further in his explanation, transgression can be comprehended as an act that "incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable" (p. 34). Then, what we can perceive in *The Fabulous Killjoys* is the representation of how some characters, such as Korse and the porndroids, expand the limits of the norm with little, daily transgressions, that also hark back to the entirety of their trajectories as subjects constantly negotiating lines of possibility.

Such limits, therefore, are not fixed. In Foucault's (1977) discussion on the aspects of transgression, he highlights the idea of uncertainty in the context where limit and transgression appear. These two sides of the transgressive act, which is enlarged to contain the limit as well, depend on each other. According to the author, "a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (p. 34). In this analysis, the dialectical relationship between both aspects, the crossable and uncrossable lines, carries the duality of each in relation to the other. From this intersection, comes a paradoxical relationship between boundaries ("limits") and what lies beyond them ("limitless"). On this point, the break between limit and limitless can be violent, and this implies that such rupture may be abrupt or forceful, not gradual or peaceful, complicating the relationship established between these elements. The construction of these boundaries is done, then, by imposing what is inside and outside, or permitted and prohibited. Such rejection of the outside aspects ends up by emphasizing and valuing these bodies and acts that compose the transgression. As previously mentioned, this limit is not rigid or fixed, but its flexibility depends on the transgressive interursions against it. The boundary, then, by being permeated by the very thing it sought to

control, becomes an idea that is fulfilled by the essence of the aspects previously and utterly rejected.

The limit is, thus, composed by a set of norms, which are also the subject of transgression. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault relates the existence and growth in importance of norms to the concept of bio-power, or of the technology of power responsible for managing human subjects in a group. In a Foucaultian approach, norms can be broadly defined as "a model of perfection that operates as a guide to action in any particular sphere of human activity, and normalization correlatively as the movement by which people are brought under these norms" (Kelly, 2019, p. 2). Foucault's idea of norm and normal is influenced by the author Georges Canguilhem, which wrote *On the Normal and the Pathological* in 1974 and is cited in his *Lectures du Collège de France*, especially in the volumes *Psychiatric Power* (1973–1974) and *Abnormal* (1974–1975). According to the scholar Mark Kelly (2019, p. 8), within the Foucaultian discussion on norms, these "are strictly speaking fantastical, never entirely realized, [and] normalization nonetheless does exist in reality as a kind of heterotopia generated by the norm". In sum, transgression itself is done in a virtual negotiation of imagined boundaries, performed by a deviant body, which effectively queers borders and limits imposed. This defiance of social norms is usually performed by the figure of the rebel as the agent of nonconformism.

Considering this, this study analyzes manifestations of nonconformity as an instrument for a portrayal of transgression in the issues of *The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys: California* (2013). In the process of investigating this main objective, three research questions emerge: Which violences are the characters subjected to in their context of living? How do the characters respond to the acts of violence? And are the characters categorized within the idea of conformity to the system or of deviance to societal norms? In view of these questions, three specific objectives were elaborated: to examine which violences are imposed

upon the subjects, or how power is inflicted on them, oppressing their existence; to determine how they respond to it, how it occurs and how it is portrayed; and to analyze it from a point of view of the politics of emotions that appear in the comics.

1.1. CONTEXT

To understand the themes to be analyzed in this study, it is relevant to understand it as a trans medial project. First, to take a look into the history of the band is necessary, the album that originates the universe to the comic that encapsulates it process and the first Killjoys story. Foremost, it is important to state that the album *Danger Days: the True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys* (2010) comes from what the bassist, Mikey Way, calls "optimism" (Bryant, 2010a) after the turmoil that followed the band's previous productions, in particular *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge* (2004) and *The Black Parade* (2006). In the early 2000s, moral crusades against young popular culture were not exactly new, as both rock music and comics had run-ins with a concerned segment of society as early as the 1960s. Similar to the satanic panic¹ of the 1980s and 1990s (Peters, 2019), such effect was affected by the idea that only the deviants would adhere to alternative styles. Often exploring death, revenge and bloodbath, by 2006, My Chemical Romance were at the forefront of the "evil-suicide-cult-of-emo", the main villains of this movement (Petridis, 2006; Hickie, 2019). Their next album would, however, attempt to bury this past alongside *The Black Parade's* uniform in the desert².

Its most bright and colorful album to date, *Danger Days* was their summer renaissance, mixing pop punk influences with comics aesthetics and enabling a fresh start for them in 2010, after all the persecution. The album and the comic concepts came from one trip Gerard Way, the lead singer of My Chemical Romance, made in the desert, looking for this

¹ Satanic panic was a wave of moral panic around the presence of "worshippers of Satan" in the society. This was based in connecting the existence of games, books, music, and other forms of displaying juvenile deviancy with a bigger idea of being related with criminal fanatics who are responsible for things such as kidnappings, human sacrifice and sexual abuse of children. That panic was reinforced by journalists, police, and fundamentalists (Victor, 1993).

² One of the band's old uniforms for the album *The Black Parade* can be found lying, covered in dust and sand, in the desert in the music video of 'Na Na Na' (2010).

new creative direction, "and his head was awash with laser guns, muscle cars and masked characters" (Bryant, 2010a). The need to run away from corporative lives and standard rock style was a challenge of capitalism for major rock band members, and that difficult journey is a main topic in the album. As it's said in the band's interview for *Kerrang! Magazine* in 2010(b), conducted by the photographer Tom Bryant (also the band's biographer), they started to put their thoughts on consumerism, pop-art and the process of turning pop culture into art in the process of writing lyrics and riffs. The intention, now, was to honor the title of 'the most dangerous band in the world'.

In the production of the album, the band came to embody the idea of Killjoys that would later drive the comic production. Steeped in the myth-making culture, they defy the homogeneity of the fictional Battery City, which functions as the backdrop of the album, with bright colors and anti-capitalist pro-art slogans. In this universe, the outlaws Party Poison (Gerard Way), Jet Star (Ray Toro), Kobra Kid (Mikey Way), and Fun Ghoul (Frank Iero), known as The Fabulous Four, are the main symbol of resistance in a world after war, and they were sought out to be exterminated as government traitors by their dangerous ideals. As the following images convey, they are put on a position of "government traitors" by BL/Ind, which adds to their role as the original leaders of the resistance to this power (Image 1). Provoking and resisting the safeness but boredom of the City – a space where fear has been supposedly eradicated, along with freedom. In two music videos, "Na Na Na" (2010) and "SING" (2010), they inform that their mission is to protect the Girl, a child with power to defeat the oppression of Better Living Industries (BL/Ind). In this mission, they may die, but their ideology and the counter-discourse that they represent in the Zones resists.

Image 1: The Fabulous Killjoys' exterminate posters.



Source: Rock Sound (2019).

The process of transition from the album to the comics has always been intertwined. According to Gerard Way, "the comic inform the album, and then the album refined the idea of what the comic would become" (MCR's [...], 2012). In this, some key characters of the music realm are also plot drivers in the comics, being explored in-depth in one or other medium. Korse, for instance, brought to life by Grant Morrison in the music videos (Image 2), has its motivations and secrets investigated by the comics. Also, in this, the legacy of the Killjoys movement is inspected, with the philosophy of "art is the weapon" and revolution through resistance to power being distorted by a new leader. These ideals appear in the

non-human characters as well, therefore Blue and Red represent the attachment to a future where change and freedom is possible. Therefore, in order to explore the involvement the characters have with power and discourse, how they react to the violences that arise, how it portrays resistance, and how the politics of emotions is explored by this portrayal, this study proposes an analysis of the characters presented in two of the main plotlines of the comics: Korse's and the porndroids'.

Image 2: Korse (Grant Morrison) and a pair of draculoids in the music video of "Na Na Na" (2010)



Source: My Chemical Romance, 2010a.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided into three parts: an overview of the emo subculture and its sociopolitics developments; a conceptual framework of power, oppression and transgression, borrowing mostly from Foucault and Queer theory; and comics theory, exploring the ways in which these media deploy meaning. The sections will be informed both by theoretical sources and by my own experience as a fandom member in the last ten years, making use of this history to explore the connections created by the fans with the story, under Stanley Fish's (2004) concept of reception aesthetics in "Interpretative Communities".

2.1. ROOTS BLOODY ROOTS

In the 2000's, the rise of the emo genre marked a reimagination of the processes through which music was already going on, characterized by raw emotional expression and the comeback of countercultural rebellious spirit³. It emerged as "emotional hardcore" between the 1980's and 1990's, still under the dominance of post-punk and grunge influences and its nihilistic views but with a softer, pop-punk sound (Hermes; Michel, 2005). The emo arisal was profoundly influenced by the emergence of the internet, which provided a platform for fan communities to organize and connect in unprecedented ways. Also, this movement has connections to neoliberal politics under these new regimes of thinking, such as individualism and high demand consumption, which is exemplified in Raegan's government with the emergence of hardcore⁴ that latter led to the first emo bands (also identified under "emotional hardcore"). Furthermore, there is a process of rejection of the term "emo", and until recently most bands of the subculture preferred to be recognized as only rock, alternative or hardcore bands (Miernik, 2013). This, according to My Chemical Romance's (MCR) lead singer Gerard Way (Interview [...], 2007), is similar to the process of association with a dominant genre a lot of bands goes through, such as Nirvana and The Smashing Pumpkins with grunge, but there is a differentiation in the way the bands in and outside the subculture look, sound, and act. In my experience, this denial partially affects fans as well, as they may either prefer to be recognized as countercultural agents identifying with gothic or punk subcultures instead of fully adopting the emo aesthetic and facing the negative social consequences, such as the self-harm stigma and persecution, but the claim of the previously denied identification is more common nowadays.

³ Emo can be understood as an aesthetic concept, where beyond the subcultural aspect it also means a special kind of relationship between fans and artists encompassing fashion, culture and behavior.

⁴ This can be understood alongside the idea of neoliberal subjectivity, in which how people develop their identities and the relation between self and discourse is used to fuel consumption to produce their own satisfaction (Houghton, 2019). Regarding this neoliberal dogma of individualism, Andy Greenwald (2003, p. 5) describes emo as "a specific sort of teenage longing, a romantic and ultimately self-centered need to understand the bigness of the world in relation to *you*".

As stated before, being recognized as deeply emotional in its lyrics and positions, members of the emo subculture often searched for a safe space online. These communities of fans, as discussed by Judith May Fathallah (2020), played a significant role in shaping the musical style and aesthetic of emo and pop punk genres. By organizing online and engaging in active dialogue, fans exchanged ideas, shared music, and collaborated on creative projects, which allowed for a dynamic evolution of the genres. This interaction fostered a sense of belonging and identity among fans, who often drew inspiration from each other's experiences and tastes. The introspective and often confessional nature of emo lyrics extended its influence to those spaces, providing ways of expressing feelings that are frequently marginalized, and allowing youths to experience vulnerability (Fathallah, 2020). It was, as "rock music" authorship and performance spaces often are deeply masculinized (and therefore deeply homoerotic), but with an extensive fan community composed by women and queer people that have seen this as a space for free development of the emotions of youth (Ryalls, 2013; Mack, 2021). Such aspects have deep relationships with the ideal of "masculinity" and the ways through which such subjects queer these norms.

In this, the "crisis of masculinity" encountered in emo subculture is met by the arousal of queer and feminine identified emotions and actions that defy the hegemony of masculinities in the genre. According to Sam de Boise (2014, p. 225), "emo has been brought into focus in the Western media for its stress on 'gender bending' and 'identity queering'". The previously cited moral panics against emo subjects also encompass the effect of "effeminization" some boys could go through when entering the subculture, characterized by a stress on emotional expression which locate emos as representatives of gender inequality in modern society⁵. Discussing on Raewyn Connell's (1995, p. 77) concept of masculinity hegemony, the author brings up the expected organization of society under patriarchy, where hetero, cis males who have a dominant position are constructed in relation to femininities and

⁵ See also Ryalls, 2013; Mack, 2014; Mack, 2021; and Fathallah, 2022.

"other" masculinities, such as homosexual males. Such effect of effemination was, then, related with a form of "(problematic) melancholic behavior" (p. 230) instead of performing traditional masculine traits. Therefore,

emo captures the changes in cultural attitudes about masculinity [through] the musical signifiers of emotional weakness – that is, such 'undesirable' qualities like vulnerability, femininity, weakness – while attempting to retain the musical signifiers of aggression that are the bedrock of the punk/hardcore musical style (Williams, 2007, p. 152).

Such disposition explains the ways through which the genre is, conversely, walking the lines between being deeply masculinized (by its producers) and genuinely effeminized (by its fan community).

2.2. POWER, BODY AND RESISTANCE

Power, as explored in this study, is a multifaceted concept encompassing the capacity to influence or control the behavior, beliefs, and actions of individuals and groups. It operates within various contexts, shaping the dynamics of relationships, institutions, and entire societies. According to Michel Foucault (2014), power in society is not solely about exerting control through negative means like punishment; rather, it manifests as a productive force that generates things such as pleasure, knowledge, and discourse. Foucault describes this as "a productive network which runs through the social body" (2014, p. 45), highlighting power's role in actively shaping social reality. Moreover, power dictates what constitutes "truth" within a given system, as truth is produced through discourses surrounding knowledge, which are intimately linked to power dynamics. These forms of truth, therefore, become materialized as forms of power in themselves, subject to political contestation and social conflict.

Power is not homogenous, and the conflicts within can be seen through acts of resistance. Foucault (1990) posits that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95), highlighting the inherent coexistence of power and counterpower within any regime. According to Foucault, resistance does not exist outside of power but rather operates within its framework, shaping its dynamics from within. The very existence of power relies on these

points of resistance, which function as adversaries, targets, supports, or handles within power relations. These points of resistance serve to destabilize, reshape, or even reinforce power structures, illustrating a complex interplay that characterizes social and political dynamics. Thus, according to Foucault, understanding power necessitates investigating the discourses that constitute it as well as the possibilities of resistance within those structures. Hence, transgression represents a unique mode of resistance, aimed at avoiding the authority's inclination to overlook, obscure, or control it. These reactions are often overt acts of deviance.

As such, this normalization is part of the social process of disciplining bodies. This is relevant in this analysis because Foucault (2012, p. 184) posits that "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another". It is in this opposition of the power of normalization that lies the concept of discipline. According to Foucault (2014), authority and discipline over the body are established through the deployment of discourses of power on the subject. This process defines norms regarding the ideal and healthy body, as well as what constitutes "normal" behavior and beliefs. However, this exercise of power also triggers a counter-response: individuals assert claims over their bodies, particularly concerning pleasure and its regulation, such as rights related to sexuality and decency. Closely intertwined with these dynamics are localized expressions of power and the meticulous examination of its technical operations, which exert comprehensive control over bodies. This control extends to regulating "gestures, attitudes, behaviors, habits, discourses" (Foucault, 2014, p.14), thereby shaping societal norms and individual behaviors through subtle and overt mechanisms of influence. In essence, Foucault's analysis underscores how power operates not only to reinforce norms but also to provoke responses of resistance and assertion from individuals, illustrating the complex interaction between power and the embodied subject within social structure. In *The Fabulous*

Killjoys comics, for example, this can be seen in the conflict between BL/Ind's exterminators and the Killjoys, where they reinforce each other as opposed positions within the same power structure.

Moreover, the embodiment of the subject highlights how experiences come alive, take material form, and find their place in the world through the body. Expanding the view of the body in the Introduction to *Writing on the Body* (Conboy; Medina; Stanbury, 1997, p. 1), the authors implicate the articulation between the "lived bodily experience" and the "cultural meanings inscribed" in it. Judith Butler, in the same volume, comments on the concept of embodiment for gender or queer theory. In this, Butler states that gender (and its performativity) is understood through the "stylization of the body" (p. 402), thus the movements, behaviors, and beliefs that this body manifests. The author challenges traditional understandings of embodiment by emphasizing the ways in which bodies are not passive objects but sites of agency and resistance. By exploring how individuals use their bodies to subvert or challenge normative gender categories, thereby disrupting conventional ideas about embodiment as purely deterministic or biologically determined, the author scribes in the subversion of normativity by the body. This acts also in the site of political contestation, as it affirms bodily autonomy and agency, thus its ability to be transgressive in its own existence and resistance to conformity. In *The Fabulous Killjoys*, the function of the body as elements of dispute can be perceived through the porndroids storyline, in which they overturn the authority of the City over their bodies and achieve autonomy to escape.

2.3. PANEL PRESSURE

In the 1960s and 1970s, the comix movement emerged as a vibrant part of the U.S. counterculture. Known as "underground comix," these independently published comics challenged traditional storytelling by addressing social issues and satirical themes that resonated with the era's spirit of rebellion. According to Roger Sabin (1996), unlike

mainstream comics regulated by the Comics Code Authority⁶, underground comix embraced taboo subjects like explicit drug use, sexuality, and graphic violence, allowing creators to explore personal and societal issues. The author describes these comics as "as politically radical as they were artistically innovative" (p. 92), emphasizing their role in political critique and artistic experimentation. Many featured autobiographical narratives, offering intimate reflections, such as Justin Green's *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), while others boldly addressed political themes, critiquing the war and civil rights issues, as for instance Julian Bond and T. G. Lewis' *Vietnam* (1967). This radical departure not only redefined the comics medium but also contributed significantly to the cultural dialogue of a transformative period in American history, reflecting the ideals and challenges of the countercultural movement (Sabin, 1996). This context of contestation of traditional narratives in comics highlighted specific elements of the medium, which would later prove useful to critics intent on analyzing the nature of the genre through a series of tensions.

Such tensions are originated from the opposition of formal elements, which in a mixed art form provides the reader with a tension-filled experience. As Charles Hatfield (2009, p. xiii - xix) states, "the fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols" presents the reader with an abundance of interpretative possibilities, then "creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable". In this regard, the reader has total responsibility for negotiating the meaning between and betwixt the written and the visually drawn parts, thus generating one's own interpretation⁷. Even the discontinuity of the page has a relevant role in this, repeatedly propelling the reader to transition from passive reading to active interpretation (Hatfield, 2009). In this, the technical, formal elements constitute a major part of the process of construction of meaning,

⁶ Comics Industry self-regulatory (or self-censoring) arm, whose function was to guarantee that the comics published were safe for children and as a defense for the accusation of generating juvenile delinquents. It was ended in 2011, "following the withdrawal of the last two publishers that used its services" (Wolk, 2011).

⁷ This concept is also discussed by Thierry Groensteen in *Système de la bande dessinée* (1999).

mediated by the artist. Its tensions, based on the relations and oppositions between the elements, are mainly of the domains of word vs. image and single-image vs. images-in-series.

The distinction between image and written language in comics is related to the distinction between symbols that "show" and symbols that "tell". In *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud explores the ways in which the written and visual languages have developed from the pictograms in caves to contemporary uses. In this, he unveils the journey of signifier and signified, in terms of meaning and resemblance, from concreteness to abstraction, and the collision of both in modern applications. Comics appear as a medium where this collision is more outwardly explored. In the position of one inserted in another, this interplay allows the languages to be positioned against each other, creating tension effects such as glossing, illustrating, contradicting or complicating the meanings of either image or text (Hatfield, 2009). Along these lines, McCloud (1993, p. 157-159) explains how the opposition of these two ways of displaying meaning can interplay: on one hand "When *pictures* carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area. [...] On the *other* hand, if the *words* lock in the "meaning" of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off." This tension can be seen in the following two pages of the comic:

Image 1: Killjoys never die.



Source: Way; Simon; Cloonan, 2013, p. 27-28.

In this example, it is possible to observe the ways in which written and visual discourses can be contrasted and compared in the process of creating meaning. The words lead the reader to a manifesto of Killjoys' lifestyle, while the images display some of the difficulties encountered through this. Thus, it is possible to notice the way through which written and visual languages are shown initially in tension with each other, and this eventually explodes on the page. In the written parts, we have the narration of Dr. Defying, a wheelchair user DJ in the middle of apocalypse, who makes from his illegal transmissions a way of carrying out the life and legacy (thoughtful resistance) of The Fabulous Four in the Zones. The lines of his recording, something that displays a more positivist manifesto-like disposition, are then opposed by the new Killjoys image, which are more akin to bloodlust and have way fewer constrictions in attacking the average citizen of Battery City instead of BL/Ind directly. Finally, the narration of "Killjoys never die" in the last frame, alongside the

explosion, is emblematic of the contrasting nature of visual and written discourses in comics. At the same time that the narrator adheres to the myth of the killjoys, professing the immortality of the group, the image is one of obliteration, suggesting the certain death of all those involved.

Similarly, there is tension in the relation between images, the sequence, and the frame, which can be enhanced by the addition of words. The panel, their placement on the page, and their relationship to the frame all produce meaning. The ways in which paratextual marks, such as the border of each panel, the gutter, the layout, and the background color, are crucial in shaping the meaning of a sequence can be perceived by looking at one comics page. The smallest unit in the sequence is the panel, capable of conveying meaning both independently and as a part of the whole, through connotative and denotative elements as well as intertextuality. The way in which connections between panels are made is determined by the disposition of the panels on the page, or the sequence. This is regulated between the author's exercise of creating a visual series and the readers' exercise of translating the series into a narrative sequence; here lies the relation between author, text, and reader in comics (Postema, 2018). By analyzing the portrayal of rebellion and defiance through visual storytelling, the comics can be seen in its particular organization of frames and sequences to constitute the breaks in narrative flow necessary to create these tensions:

It can be seen in the previous image, and in particular in the oppositional effect it creates. Firstly, this tension is unveiled in the antagonistic sequence in the first page. The way through which the characters' defiance of each other is presented via the ordered apparition of major groups and leaders in separated panels adds to the aspect of confrontation in this, essential to understand the views each character has of the conflict. Then, it convolutes in the two final panels of the page, where the antagonist forces of BL/Ind and Killjoys are put to prove through the preparation and the blows, with the laser guns creating the reverberation of

the issue to the next page. This sequence has an elongating effect to each panel, a characteristic that builds on the idea of both the long-lasting confrontation and a freezing of the panels that appear in this format, such as the freezing of frames in western movies confrontations. Therefore, the way in which all the frames are constituted by the opposition of the forces between corporation power and resistance counterpower, and it ends in an explosion displaying how such forces, despite being antagonistic in nature, are active participants of the same power structure. This final image fills in an entire page, which makes it detached in significance from the other panels.

3. ANALYSIS

In this section, there will be two parts, which are analysis of characters' acts of non-normativity, the violences they suffer, and how they respond to it.

3.1. CORPORATION PROGRESS

The first scenario to be explored is Korse's and his life changing secret. This character is introduced in the music video of "Na Na Na" as a cold and cruel example of Exterminator at the S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W unity. It is surmised that he is not a totally organic form of life because he appears being "activated" by BL/Ind to persecute the Fabulous Killjoys in the music video. Also, it seems that he is controlled through a dose of drugs, as in the comics he is seen taking a considerable amount of pills that should help to avoid emotional attachment. However, he holds some agency over his actions, despite being expected to kill a certain number of deviants to maintain his position, he has been lately demoted for not corresponding to expectations. In the comics, the reader is also introduced to his past as a creative child that was abused for not being manly enough and his secret lover, which helps to understand the positions the character takes in the series. This opens a channel to explore his emotional and

sexual deviancy⁸ as a kind of nonconformity to the norms which are imposed by the corporation. As his lover is killed by BL/Ind's Head and his suffering is exposed to his colleagues, he seeks revenge and embraces a life in the Zones.

The character first appears being "activated" by the Director, and the discursive entailment that follows this introduction highlights his position as one of the corporation's leaders of extermination in the Zones. The small panel where he first emerges, pressed by the frame and the words of the Director saying "Korse has been activated. Instructions—eliminate" and justifying as "For commerce. For cleansing. For expansion", which identifies his position as a type of henchman for these works. This also foregrounds his function and how he is dehumanized in his situation as a heartless serial killer, as if he was a non-emotional robot. In opposition to it, we are later introduced to his personal life and routine, living together with childhood nightmares, a lover, and a considerable amount of pills. These three fundamental aspects can be seen as related and controversial with his said nature as a robot-like weapon. First, the nightmare displays his abusive relationship with his father, in particular as a fact coupled with his normal, child-like expression of feelings, and the presence of this implies that it still has a hold over his life. Then, the pills are said to be a kind of "mood controller" and reduce his emotional response to daily life activities, such as killing, and can be traced back to his emotional behavior as a child and the consequences it had. Thus, the existence of a lover seems paradoxical, as he is not allowed to show emotions or engage in a romantic relationship according to his position.

Borrowing from the topic of the pills, this is a clear representation of power over bodies exercised by the corporation. Explained by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (2012), the idea of modern power can be seen as encoded into human practices as well as human

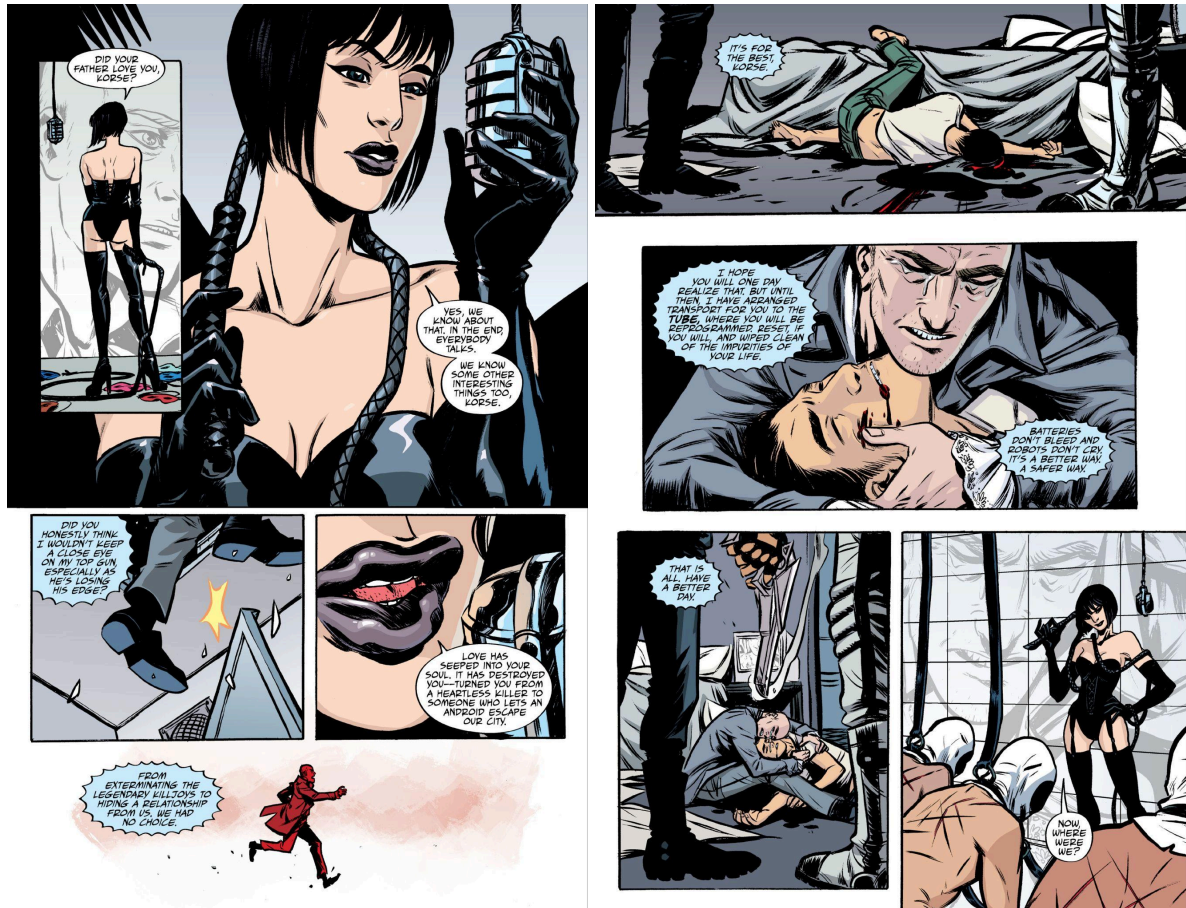
⁸ In fanfiction about the Killjoys' universe this is evoked through allowing his romantic relationship with the future Killjoys, especially Party Poison and Fun Ghoul, and also alongside gender nonconformity explorations, as the authors of the fandom seem to adopt Grant Morrison's (the impersonator or the character) that is gender non-binary as a main settler of aspects to be applied to their view of Korse's fictional character.

behavior, and relies mainly on the factor that the human subjects gradually becomes docile to the regulations and expectations of social norm. In this situation, the pills are taken to maintain the corporation's control over the emotions and actions of its employees, in particular those with extermination functions. When the bodymind being pressed by this dehumanization process of suppressing all emotions in order to be able and effective to perform a robotized work of killing without a blink becomes a non-conformative subject, the power in use is threatened. As a reaction to this, the corporation introduces a major violence, aiming to reestablish the power control over this body and its activities. A thought-provoking factor that can be added to these events is the question of how many times this process already occurred with Korse, and how so he is able to overcome the reprogramme operation and the pills control and conduct a life of his own.

For instance, a moment of great emotion in his path from childhood to killer for hire is when his partner dies at the hands of his employers. At the moment that the pills control start to fail, and he is able to develop emotions, such as love, and perform activities, such as engaging in a relationship, the corporation decides to revitalize its power by killing his partner and conducting a "reprogramme". This, then, can be seen in this scene of the comics, where the color palette and the disposition of the panels in the page have an outstanding position. The use of a grayscale in most of the page, conflicting only with the addition of neutral tones, such as brown and beige, is a symbol of the space where the scene takes place; the core of the corporation. This is explained by the large application of neutral colors, technology, and lack of art forms preferred in this space. The disposition of the frames signals the positions of power in this plot. BL/Ind's Head is always positioned as higher or bigger than her henchmen, including Korse. Such disposition is presented diminished in the frame both in the last panel of the first page and in the penult of the second, which serves to represent his loss of power position in the narrative by putting him as a suffering, emotional subject instead of an

objective, heartless killer. The close-ups are used to emphasize this difference in power relation, with her as an active spectator to his downfall in the mirrored images that can be seen in sequence:

Image 3: Korse's downfall



Source: Way; Simon; Cloonan, 2013, p. 93-94.

From this, two tensions can be highlighted: Korse's escape vs. observation; and his display of emotions vs. violence. The first is seen in the first page presented previously, where the Director is directly speaking and observing Korse. He initially appears trapped, but manages to literally escape the elevator and his control by the Director. The final panel of this page represents how he, led by emotions and by knowledge of the situation, leaves behind all his loyalty to the corporation. An image which is countered by the Director's lines, stressing his previous, recognizable actions in favor of the corporation. The panel him, in red (color of love and rage), against a white background, which stands in for this disintegration of his

anterior beliefs. The second aspect is seen in the following page of the sequence, with the dead body, the cry, and the oppression of violence. The dead body is symbolic, here, of the death of his conformity, and can be seen as an impactful sign of violence, which will later drive him to a major transgression. The following panel is detached from the rest, making it stand apart from the rest of the sequence. In this panel, the reader is confronted with a close-up of Korse, once a heartless killer, crying over his dead lover. This is a display of raw emotion, itself an act of transgression, and it connects to his previous nonconformity, which was to engage in a relationship and allow himself to become emotionally attached to someone. Finally, the two bottom panels contrast the effects of the violence imposed on these bodies, in a reinforcing of the boundaries not to be crossed in this universe. The framing of the gun, on the bottom left panel, highlights the precariousness of Korse's position, with his figure shown crying on the floor, while on the bottom right panel, the character of the Director stands tall, fully clad in leather and whip, imposing herself over other kneeling subjects.

A point that can be made for this disparity of power is the fetishization of the situation. First, she is watching and interacting with Korse in the most suffering event that she can cause. This voyeuristic approach may represent, in the story, a reduction of a moment of complex emotional involvement into a simple spectacle through the characters' own characters actions. Moreover, the way she is portrayed and dressed indicates this relation of pleasure in relation to generating suffering, whilst the position of others next to her can be associated with a common practice. From the first aspect highlighted, can be emphasized her attitude with the whip, by itself a sexual object, and the detachment of her figure in the first panel and with regard to the henchmen present in the last scene (all of them who are on their knees in front of her, also). Concerning the dressing, she is using a body and over-the-knee boots that refer to a dominatrix, which reveals a need for control and a desire, or pleasure, in causing pain and suffering. This can be seen in the speech too.

Analyzing the dialogue, there is a sense of pleasure in abuse, from her part, as explored before. The first thing she asks is if his father loved him, which in this case, where parental abuse in childhood was a reality, seems a painfully graphic way to make someone angry or sad for remembering something that they are sensitive about. She then proceeds to unite it with his arisal of feelings caused by the failure in pills' ability to control emotions, which may be the reason why he was ultimately failing in doing his job well. For a corporation so intimately involved in controlling every single thought or emotion their employees (and citizens) go through, to lose their "top gun" to something seen as so childish such as love can mean a huge collapse in the process. The way she highlights his fiasco of letting the droids escape the City after years of being a major killer can also be related with shaming as a manner of abuse, as she is humiliating him in addition to killing someone that is important to Korse. Moreover, the use of a paraphrase of the corporations' motto, by saying that it is for the best, is interesting here, because it shows how that "better living" thing is only a way of oppressing people into doing the corporative interests and that this has nothing to do with providing a real better way of living to them. The way she talks to him as if he is an object that can be "reprogrammed, reset, [...] and wiped clean" also refers to the dehumanization through which he goes and that will be further discussed in sequence.

The topic around (de)humanization of non-organic, robot forms of life is very present in this comic. Korse displays a set of behaviors and emotions inherently humane, such as love and attraction, as well as pain and suffering. In contrast, his attitude as a killer can be more related to a common programmed robot-like thing, devoid of agency. In this, arises the idea of dehumanization and robotification of an organic form of life, as we see him in his childhood, which implies he was once a human. The way Korse is treated by the corporation, however, suggests that he is no longer seen as a person, especially not one that can exhibit feelings. The phrase "Batteries don't bleed and robots don't cry," adds to the interpretation that he is

mind-controlled to become something similar to a robot. However, besides the said "activation" and the subsequent "reprogramme", there is no other indication of him being a real non-organic form of life, whilst there is textual evidence of him being a human. The process of dehumanization through which he goes, then, is an extreme version of the process of hygienization in relation to emotion and behavior imposed over everybody in the City, be it via the headphones or the amount of pills they take in order to be allowed to live there. His escape from the City, leaving his hyper controlled life behind, shows autonomy and agency, two aspects that were suppressed in him and that he fights to maintain.

By analyzing this character and his story, it is possible to verify both nonconformity and transgression, and also the violence within these actions and reactions. First, nonconformity is something that the character presents since childhood and that is also reflected when he challenges his non-human position and seeks for a partner. In both cases he suffers the consequences of such transgressions with violence, once imposed by shoutings and beatings from his father and later expressed through the dehumanization and controlling process that he goes through. These violences act in suppressing the human-like attitude he can present and intend to make him conform to a non-human, non-emotional position within society to abuse his abilities and conscience in killing others that, ironically, fail in conforming. And when he goes against this, he loses everything and is put on a humiliating condition to force him to conform.

3.2. RUN AWAY WITH ME

The porndroids' plotline is deeply related to Korse's narrative and process of recovering agency and autonomy, in particular related to perceived human-like attitudes. At first, the reader is introduced to the seeming couple, Red and Blue. Both are android sex workers in the City's Lobby, but as Red's energy condition deteriorates, she cannot provide more in her function, causing Blue to assume her schedule. Such a situation reinforces the

idea of power over bodies brought by Foucault, as their function in society is to deliver pleasure to some selected subjects while being destitute from their very life conditions. In this, the "health" aspect is very relevant in their narrative; it is the catalyst for them to try to leave the City after new batteries are denied by the android assistance service and Blue's intention to steal one dose of Plus, a battery specially manufactured to be addictive, which weakens in power as the price rises, fails. Therefore, as they leave the City and are intercepted by Korse's taskforce, the Red system goes overload, and she dies after crossing the border. Blue survives and flees to the Zones, where she is able to awaken Destroya, a massive android abandoned in the Zones that, according to the Graffiti Bible, a sacred book for the City droids, would lead to the destruction of the City and free the androids from the oppression they suffer.

Faith, in this circumstance, is essential to the construction of the porndroids storyline. Firstly, this seems to have been introduced by Red when she finds Blue crying and warmly welcomes her in living together. Then, it is expressed by her in her sacrifice as a way of achieving freedom from the dehumanizing position she is in as a malfunctioning, seen as useless by the corporation, porndroid. This is passed from suffering droid to oppressed droid in the City as a gospel: the history of Destroya, the mage droid that will take down the power of the corporation and free all the droids from its brutal exploration. This is well known by the City regulators, as we can see some draculoids discussing the naivety of those droids in the scene they capture Blue out of the City (page 116). As long as it is professed by Red, Blue does not seem to believe so much in this *deus ex machina* type of salvation. In these terms, it can appear as a mostly ironic factor that she is the one that activates the partially torn down Destroya and leads the liberation of the droids by damaging the electricity lines that circle the City.

The excerpt of the comics selected to illustrate nonconformity and transgression in this part of the narrative is the scene where they escape from the City. In the technical aspects of

the comics, again, it is possible to observe the color palette and the disposition of the frames as ways to locate the reader in space and progress of the situation. Contrary to the scene on Korse's plotline, analyzed previously, which was set in the core of the City, this one happens in the outskirts. Therefore, the use of colors and visual pollution is more present in this scene, as a transition from the monotony grayscale of the City to the artistic, colorful Zones. This can be seen as an example of how those who live in these parts are under a heavier submission to the commandants of Battery City, as they have less resources and suffer with the stigma of being deviants to the ideal citizen that is located in the center. It is possible to notice such policing of these citizens seen as less valuable, for instance porndroids, as a suppression that leads these people to the Zones.

In this, two frames can be highlighted: the first and the last (Image 4). The overture of the page, the first panel is set in the android's shared room, highlighting a tone of comfort and the mundane through the commonplace disposition of the objects in the scene, which means that there are lives occurring in this place and addressing a certain sympathy for their condition. Here, the colors are more neutral and Red and Blue are at the front and center of the frame, with their corresponding white and strong color outfits being a bright dissonance with the environment. A similar effect of contrast between the characters with the scene occurs in the last panel, where they are embracing, shadowed in the corner of the page, against a less colorful urban ambience. The two panels in the middle reflect its predecessor and successor. So, in the second there is an emotional close up to the characters' faces, in which Blue is warmly adjusting Red's wig, a gesture of comfort. Then, in the third panel they are seen running away in the streets, hand-in-hand as a signal of their proximity. This is set in the midst of the big outdoors that can be understood as representatives of BL/Ind's propaganda in the outskirts, to maintain the control over these less favored and make it easy to explore and oppress them. Also, it can be said that this escape parallels the message given in

the previous page as a kind of execution of the ideas presented there, such as the sequence "We can't make out our friends in the darkness. We can't see our enemies. To the friends we lost... And the ones that lost us– Don't let the night take you. Find your way." (p. 73). In this sense, they are finding their fates and ways by transgression through an escape.

Image 4: Blue and Red run away.



Source: Way; Simon, 2012, p. 74.

The transgressive status of their alleged non-humanity as porndroids is called into question by the narrative here. Throughout the representation of their relationship in the comics, there are indications of romantic love and sexual life that are not usually associated with the humane capability of androids. One example that can be brought to this analysis is the sequence that comes before they escape, where they are sitting in the bed and talking with each other, discussing life philosophy and the purpose of this existence. This scene begins with the implication that they had sex, making it a representation of affection instead of a

signal of the oppression they suffer. Their main purpose in this society is to serve as unaffected sex workers, thus the characterization as "porndroids". They are built for sex, after all, but engagement in sexual encounters in a non-commercial way is not a part of their programming. Sex for pleasure and affection are, then, signs of transgressions for the characters. In any case, despite accounts that refer to a humane quality of the characters, such as displays of affection, the main reaction of this society in relation to them is objectification.

Image 5: Red and Blue share intimacy



Source: Way; Simon; Cloonan, 2013, p. 73.

Also, their performativity of humanity, in the form of human-like thoughts and behavior, such as autonomy, is vital to their narrative. In this sense, performativity of humanity, often related with the power of words to perform actions in the real world, in particular identity aspects, can be perceived in the transition from word to action in the escapade story of the porndroids. The last, can be seen in their interactions with each other, as they see themselves as subjects with the ability to think and act out of their programming, and also in the implication of a supposed human feeling such as the love they share. Moreover, some aspects such as the failure in Red's battery can be paralleled with human starvation, as she lacks the fundamental nourishment needed for her survival. The way that the City

administration deals with this situation, leading most of the "problematic" droids to perish in the streets or be treated as garbage is a form of degrading their position as subjects. In this, also, Blue's scratched knee with blood present in the story is an indication of a more organic-like quality of the androids in this piece, contradicting the dehumanization imposed over the droid citizens as mere objects.

The violences imposed over the subjects are of two kinds, but both acts in the realm of dehumanization. The first concerns their own positions as porndroids, or sex workers, as it reflects on the agency of the characters, making them to be seen as objects to the desires of others and not subjects to their own. The second can be analyzed in the process that the droids go through to acquire a new battery set, which in the comics is described as a long and unfruitful process. This relates to the very human process of abjection of disabled subjects, even when they are non-human, in a dehumanizing process that deems them disposable, once they are no longer fit for duty as porndroids, to which they do not receive access to an adequate care and health system. The characters respond to it by rupturing with the norms of society, therefore, their escape from the City is the highlight of their position as transgressive. It can be seen in the situation where they were first portrayed as sexual objects, without desires or feelings, an idea that is contradicted by their very humane depiction. In this, it is possible to verify that they go through violences, thus they respond to it by subverting the normalization process that is imposed over them and their final escape from the City is emphasized as the peak moment of this narrative of recovery of agency and autonomy, therefore their humanization process.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up some of the aspects presented by the three characters brought out in the analysis, there is the way in which they display nonconformity and perform in the realm of transgression. In this, transgression resides on the line that divides what is the "normal" from

the "abnormal", the "compliant" from the "rebel", the "able-bodied" from the "disabled", the "human" from the "non-human", and the "domestic" from the "foreign". In relation to these opposed sides of the same conditions, Korse is the abnormal from what is expected from a scarecrow in Battery City, displaying a set of complex emotions, such as love and rage, and acting on it with agency. And the porndroids, less autonomous in their lives than those comprehended as human but extending the limits of this humanity to new grounds, in particular in Red's situation and the idea of disease applied to a non-organic body, are as much as symbols of able-bodied and disabled as of humanity and non-humanity.

In this, both Korse and the porndroids' actions happen in the disturbances, or hollow points, in the limit advocated by Foucault. Such porous quality of the limit can be seen in Korse's story as, for a certain time, he is permitted to perform non-normativity in little actions, such as taking on a lover, something prohibited to one in his position. Hence, as he allows himself to feel emotions, the reader can have a deep understanding of his contradictions and beliefs, and this is a standing position from what he is imposed to do under Battery City's power. The corporation's violence acts, then, as the closure of this window where the transgression was permitted, and it requires him to return to a conforming status. Despite this, he floats between conformity and nonconformity, performing in his final detachment from the corporation, a major transgression that breaks his bond with this power. In relation to the porndroids, their own existence becomes a factor of nonconformity, and the way through which they choose to act in relation to the violences they suffer leads them to an active performance of transgression. First, they have an established, romantic relationship, which defies their position in society as mere objects to the corporation to maintain power over their henchmen through providing pleasure. After this, Red's health condition and the form in which they choose to act about this, organizing an escape and staying together against the power, is an instance of this interplay on the borders of limit, between what is allowed and

what is transgressive. The violence they suffer, therefore, is more than the process of dehumanization by the City they go through, but is also the active prohibition of a life of their own. The escape, as a final transgression, occurs when the pore of the limit is closing, and by refusing to die or be considered discardable, they leave the City and by it displays a new version of agency. Ultimately, for the characters analyzed in this study, transgression occurs in a continuum, from the minutiae of everyday actions of nonconformity, such as liking someone, to grand acts of rebellion, such as escaping the city or blatantly challenging authority.

Lastly, this research explored the specific ways the characters of Korse and the porndroids deal with the transgressions, but the narrative offers other possibilities regarding the dialect relationship between limit and transgression. Such interplay, as stated before, is never fixed or stable, being altered by the constructed relations between people and institutions, and displaying power in different manners. In this, the presence of the Killjoys is an instance of the explained correspondence between power and counterpower, as the group acts in the most extended limit of nonconformity, being most part of the time on the verge of transgression. The myriad of ways through which this ideal of resistance and of the rebel are explored by the comics, however, were beyond the scope of this particular monograph. Another avenue for future research within this topic is the one related to embodiment, or the transgressive power of the non-conformative body, in the narrative. This concept is intersected by the productive power, subjectivity, and capacity of resistance of the body in challenging normative social structures, identities and expectations. Embodiment refers to the ways in which an individual experiences and expresses themselves through their physical bodies. As such, this idea of the embodiment of transgressive attitude is observed by the examples of bodies in the narrative that fail or refuse to conform to the norms in its essence,

be it through emotions, humanity, disability, or others. This aspect can be explored further through a new set of analysis in a future study.

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