The Moon is Flicts: Political and Queer Uses of Negativity in a Brazilian Picturebook*

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Abstract

This article presents a queer reading of *Flicts* (1969), the first fully-colored picturebook printed in Brazil, published in the worst phase of the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. In conversation with queer aesthetics of negativity, it investigates how the picturebook deals with difficult themes—such as inclusion, exclusion and exile—through its employment of negative affects, and how *Flicts* can represent a discourse of dissent from the hegemonic vision of its social and political context. By weaving together textual and visual analyses, I propose that affects such as failure, isolation and withdrawal in *Flicts* become a tool for political criticism.

* In this article I follow the nomenclature suggested by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2011), who differentiate a "picturebook" from a "picture book". In the authors' understanding, in picturebooks both words and images contribute to the construction of meanings and are inextricably linked, whereas in picture books illustrations and text can sometimes function independently from each other.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many Latin American countries faced political and social conflicts that were aggravated by economic crises, demands by popular movements, and the macro-context of the Cold War. As a consequence, a wave of *coup d'états* overthrew national democracies and established dictatorships that lasted decades. In Brazil, a coup committed by high-rank military officials, with the support of part of the elite, deposed the democratically elected president João Goulart on 31 March 1964, and seized control of the country. The military regime established itself with the promise to defend Brazil from the communist threat, and to protect the traditional family, Christian values, and morality from being corrupted by 'subversive' leftist ideas. As such, it prosecuted political opposition through forced exile, closed civil associations, and arrested, tortured, and assassinated civilians (Gaspari envergonhada; Gaspari escancarada; Brasil Relatório I; Brasil Relatório II). Society's resistance had various manifestations, such as public protests and general strikes. In December of 1968, the Institutional Act number 5 (AI-5) brought the suspension of civil liberties including *habeas corpus*, the possibility for the president to overrule and close the Congress, and the institutionalization of prior censorship of cultural products. As such, the AI-5, effective until 1978, paved the way for State-practiced torture and for a second wave of exiles, marking the aggravation of the regime in which open discourses and manifestations of difference and dissidence were mostly silenced.

Despite the fact that the regime relied on strategies such as censorship to control cultural products, it seemed to deal with children's literature differently. Instead of censoring it, the government invested in the production of children's books by giving tax incentives to graphic and paper industries, purchasing books to be used in schools, creating and distributing awards, and more. By facilitating the success of publishing houses and ample book circulation, the regime attempted to control the content of publications dedicated to children. Even so, children's books published in the 1960s showed critical potential by timidly tackling social problems like poverty, rural exodus and even the dictatorship itself:

> It is quite gradually that the children's characters move away from exemplary [characters], that the stories incorporate other segments of the Brazilian population, addressing major social problems, although in the first books the paternalistic approach dilutes their critical potential in the final 'happy ends'[1] (Lajolo 73).

Amid the many Brazilian children's books that infused their happy endings with hope and positivity, Ziraldo's *Flicts* (1969) stands out as a special case. Although its ending has been received by parts of the public and reviewers as conveying an inspiring message of hope (Novaes Coelho), I argue that its ending is infused with a queer negativity that unleashes the book's potential for political criticism.

Queer Negativity

In this article, I work with an understanding of *queer* that exceeds its traditional association with sexuality and gender, and instead describes more broadly counterhegemonic, non-heteronormative modes of common sense (Halberstam 89). Specifically, I use *queer* as a description of embodiments that are simultaneously non-normative and surrounded/moved by a set of negative affects to analyze Flicts (Amin 277) *Flicts*. In this vein, I understand *queerness* as a quality held by things and people that are labeled or self-identify as queer and *queering* as the act of approaching something in a non-normative way, aiming to identify its queerness.

Among the affects that surround queer people and queerness is negativity, which is central to my reading. Negativity, often ascribed to queer individuals by society, is envisaged by antisocial queer theories as an alternative to positivity, optimism and future-oriented thinking, and plays

[1] "Só muito devagarinho outros brasis vão despontando no horizonte da literatura infantil brasileira dos anos sessenta. É de forma bastante paulatina que as personagens infantis vão se afastando da *modelar* Glorinha, que as histórias vão incorporando outros segmentos da população brasileira, tematizado grandes problemas sociais, muito embora nos primeiros livros o enfoque paternalista dilua seu potencial crítico nos *happy ends* finais." All translations are mine.

a central role in the works of Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam. In *No Future: Queer Future and the Death Drive*, Edelman embraces the conception that homosexuality is intrinsically antisocial, understanding queer negativity as antagonistic to the promise of a settled, peaceful future:

> Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, [an] ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order—such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer—but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane. (4)

Edelman argues that it is better to unravel what queer negativity can bring about, or how it can challenge the social order, than it is to try to force such negativity into a stable, hopeful form that reinforces the status quo (whose refusal will be perceived as unthinkable). Moreover, Halberstam understands negativity as a group of affects (such as failure, sterility, emptiness, and loss) that pertain to queer people and can be instrumentalized as methodology and lifestyle (23).

In line with their theories, I argue that negativity is a moving force within *Flicts*. Its meaning and location changes throughout the narrative: it is initially located in, and avoided by, the main character, Flicts. As the narrative evolves, negativity is accepted by Flicts and plays a central role in the ending of the story. Unlike most of children's literature, the ending of *Flicts* does not resolve the negative affects by providing a happy ending. This is in sharp contrast to recurrent types of negativity in children's literature, which tend to perform a pedagogic function. Maureen Nimon points out that violence, for example, can be displayed as a punishment and admonition to misbehaved children (29). In my perception, the shapes negativity assumes in *Flicts'* visual and textual narratives allow for a queer reading of the book that unleashes

its potential for political criticism. My queer reading recognizes, in the subversion of the happy ending, as well as in the appropriation of negativity by the main character, a counterhegemonic opposition to norms, especially potent when the book is read in conversation with the context of political repression and strict social norms of 1969 Brazil.

Flicts

Once upon a time a color
very rare and very sad
named Flicts
//
they[2] did not
have
the
strength
of
Red
//
they did not have the immense light of Yellow
//
nor the peace that Blue has
//
They were only
the fragile and
ugly
and afflicted
Flicts[3]

[2] I chose to use the gender-neutral singular pronoun *they* to refer to Flicts in my translation, as it seems the best fit for my interpretation of the book. In Portuguese, the character is only gendered through the use of masculine pronouns, which might not be enough to consider them as a 'male' character, since Portuguese is a gender marked language, thus all nouns are attributed either a masculine or a feminine gender, including those that refer to non-gendered/sexed objects, like chairs, or, in this case, colors.

[3] "Era uma vez uma cor / muito rara e muito triste / que se chamava Flicts // não / tinha / a / força / do / Vermelho // não tinha a imensa luz do Amarelo // nem a paz que tem o Azul // Era apenas / o frágil e / feio / e aflito / Flicts" (Ziraldo 5-11).

The opening pages of *Flicts* introduce the main character, Flicts, a color whose hue lies between yellow, orange and beige, and set the tone for the story. Flicts not only lacks all positive traits attributed to Red, Yellow, and Blue, but might, in fact, be described as the opposite of these colors: fragile while Red is strong, ugly while Yellow is bright, and afflicted while Blue is peaceful. The pages following further specify the ways in which Flicts is sad, lonely, and displaced, as there is "nothing in the world that is Flicts."[4] Their construction as a main character is peculiar: in the 48 pages that compose the book,[5] Flicts is depicted in only nine. Even when Flicts addresses other characters in their speech, it is their interlocutors that graphically occupy the page, rather than Flicts themself.

As in any other picturebook, the materiality and visuality of *Flicts* are of utmost importance for a complete reading experience. The illustrations are made of colorful papercuts set against monochromatic backgrounds—mostly white, with a couple of exceptions. While some elements are represented in a figurative style, the representation of characters is completely abstract and symbolic; the illustrations alone give no information of age, gender, sexuality, race, or body ability—no information that could be somehow linked to identity. The characters—all colors—even change shape and size throughout the story. Text and negative space help to construct the mood of the episodes in the narrative.[6] The disproportionate amount of negative space surrounding Flicts, who is never in direct contact with other colors, accentuates the

[4] "[não existe no mundo] nada que seja Flicts" (Ziraldo 12).

[5] Throughout the years, *Flicts* has undergone several alterations in its graphic design and its materiality. The first edition was composed of 82 pages, and published in hardcover. Recent editions are printed in paperback cover, and have only 48 pages—a reduction achieved through transforming spreads in single pages, editing illustrations, and rearranging the text without altering it. The logic behind the system used by the publishing house Melhoramentos to number *Flicts*' editions is unclear. In one of the paratexts of the fortieth anniversary special edition, the information is that *Flicts* has had 64 editions between 1984 and 2009. However, the edition used as a reference for this work, published in 2016 (seven years after the fortieth anniversary special edition), is registered as the thirty-fifth reprint of the second edition.

[6] In graphic design, negative space is one of the terms that designate the empty space lacking text or image. It is named in opposition to 'positive space,' which is the space taken by forms in visual elements. "A positive space is always emphasized by the corresponding negative space, thus, the more negative space present the more the emphasis is placed on the positive space" (Hyung Lee).

character's vulnerability and isolation, and can be seen as a visual representation of Flicts' loneliness.

Like fairy tales, *Flicts*' narrative starts with "Once upon a time" and is situated in a more or less abstract world, whose few defined elements, like the school or the schoolyard, are relatable to a child reader. However, not the whole universe of the book is similar to what one supposes would be the universe of a child. While it is possible to infer that the characters are colors in 'school age,' there seems to be no authority in the book that derives from age difference. In this sense, *Flicts*' world would be a world without adults, or at least without some of the most important authority figures in an ideal child's life—such as parents or teachers—to mediate conflicts, install 'peace' or promote inclusion. The lack of age-related authority figures does not signify, however, a lack of power dynamics or oppression in the narrative.

The story is composed of Flicts' failed attempts at being included in their environment. Each attempt reveals the possible ways of belonging in Flicts' universe, all of which are also acceptable modes of belonging in heteronormative, capitalist societies, including the Brazilian one. In said universe, one can belong by forming a couple (or a family); making friends; playing team games; respecting tradition; getting a job; belonging to a nation; or occurring in nature. However, in order to do any of that, Flicts needs permission and acceptance from the other colors. They deny them this permission every time, thereby showing to be concurrently both Flicts' peers—in their supposed age and interests—and superiors—as they hold the social power to include or exclude Flicts.

For example, Flicts tries to participate in playtime at the schoolyard. They are first ignored and then repelled by the seven colors of the rainbow after offering to play diverse roles in diverse activities, showing their flexibility to occupy spaces that other colors might not want for themselves. Taking turns, each color explains the reasons for rejection: Red considers the group to be perfectly complete without Flicts; Orange bluntly says that there is no place for Flicts; Yellow stresses Flicts' inadequate appearance; Green claims that the seven colors are a family, in which there is no place for Flicts; Blue argues that their name cannot be tainted by Flicts; while Indigo Blue and Purple both warn

Flicts against breaking with tradition and "the natural order of things" (20). The social norms of this world, rooted in tradition and family values, are instrumentalized to perpetuate a 'natural order of things,' to which the abnormal—Flicts—is seen as dangerous. Similarly, in Brazil, those who contested the social order were often understood as threats to the national security and, as such, could be surveilled, arrested, tortured, exiled and even assassinated. After this episode the colors close themselves in a circle and spin away, blending into white, graphically reinstating Flicts' isolation. Moreover, white is a key to understand *how* lonely Flicts is: they are alone even when surrounded by others, which is *always* (as white is the sum of all colors, or wavelengths of light, to be precise). After failing to be included in their community's leisure activities, Flicts tries, but again fails, to socially fit in by belonging to the workforce, to national identities, and to nature.

During this journey to seek belonging, Flicts is never depicted in the illustrations. It is in the moment that Flicts decides to stop trying to fit in that they reappear graphically, only to disappear once more: Flicts "looks far, far away" and flees to the Moon, slowly disappearing from the page and the narrative (38-39). The negative, white space, ubiquitous up until this point of the book, disappears, as the background in the last seven pages of the book are black. This switch in the background color from white to black—from the sum of all colors to the absence of color—can be read as a switch in the isolation experienced by Flicts, from one felt in the presence of others due to exclusion, to a self-imposed, deliberately chosen, one. After the change in background color, Flicts is not mentioned again until the end, and the reader's attention is drawn to the Moon and its color, which changes in different situations: the Moon is blue on clear days, red across the ocean on Autumn afternoons, and yellow on bright nights. As the book arrives to its end, the reader learns that "NO ONE / KNOWS / THE / TRUTH / (except for / the astronauts) // that from close / from real close // the Moon is Flicts."[7]

[7] "[...] ninguém / sabe / a verdade / (a não ser os astronautas) // que de perto / de pertinho // a Lua é Flicts" (Ziraldo 45–47).

A Queer Character

Flicts is queer in many ways. Their non-normative appearance sets Flicts apart from other members of their society, making them unable to establish friendships, take part in communal activities, find a job, or belong to any nation. Even their name is not an officially recognized color name, like blue or green, which is further evidence of the lack of formal recognition and of a designated space in the social order for Flicts. The lack of a name also reinstates Flicts' perceived abnormality, setting them further apart from their peers. They have no family and have limited agency and possibilities within the system but are still perceived as disruptive in their potential to break the 'natural' order of things. Indeed, Flicts is perceived similarly to how those breaking away from heterosexuality have been by capitalist logic: "as in-authentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption" (Halberstam 95).

Initially, the negativity that surrounds Flicts—in the form of solitude and lack of social ties—is something they try to escape, as they continue to try to fit into the hegemonic vision of their world. But as their exclusion is consistently confirmed, a change in Flicts' behavior is called for. Flicts finally makes the counterhegemonic decision to altogether refuse existence in that exclusionary world. As a result, they choose to inhabit darkness—both the graphic black darkness that surrounds the Moon in the illustrations, and the symbolic darkness of being an outcast. This episode recalls what happened in Brazil after the decree of the AI-5, when thousands of Brazilians were forced to leave the country and go into exile ("Exílio é a saída para milhares de brasileiros"). However, unlike most of these Brazilians, Flict is not forced but rather chooses to leave and, in doing so, embraces solitude and negativity, opening up a queer alternative to a life of exclusion from the hegemonic order. In other words, by fleeing, Flicts gives up a future on Earth through a calculated hopelessness, in a way similar to the one advocated by Edelman.

The Moon is Flicts

The conclusion of Flicts' path is interestingly queer. Unable to find their place in the world, they embrace instead an extra-terrestrial environment, the Moon, where they can finally be themself while being invisible to the other colors—Flicts' presence in the Moon is a secret only known by the astronauts (Ziraldo 45). For Flicts, fleeing to the Moon means closing all earthly doors, choosing a permanent hiding spot and receding from any possibility for connection, present or future. There is literally no turning back: in the final spread of the book, the illustration shows a big surface—supposedly the Moon—colored in Flicts' color, and the text informs the reader that "The Moon *is* Flicts" (Ziraldo 46–47, my emphasis). This echoes the success of the Apollo 11 landing in 1969 which marked the Moon as a new frontier for the expansion of capitalist, heteronormative societies, transforming it into a symbol of hope and of the future. In the narrative, by incorporating Flicts, the Moon embodies their queerness, becoming queer itself. As a place where there is only Flicts, with no social order to be reproduced, the Moon can be read as a symbol for a queer non-reproducible future.

This ending is especially interesting given that it challenges the common narrative structure in children's literature in which the main character starts the story at home, is led to leave it, and returns safely home at the end of the story. This structure emphasizes the importance of the home in the lives of characters and children by characterizing it as a space where children are both safe from dangers and under the protection of adults, more commonly the family (Nodelman 224). In *Flicts*' case, however, even if the Moon offers shelter from danger and protects Flicts from pain, it lacks the protection of a family, a community, and therefore it cannot be equaled to a home.

As such, the ending of the book challenges the traditional conception of the home and, in doing so, questions the role played by happy endings in children's narratives. Happy endings are perceived as essential to children's literature, helping to establish children's literature as optimistic in tone and hopeful in nature (Nodelman 243). Additionally, these endings can perform a pedagogic function, such as providing children with a sense of justice by showing them that good behavior is rewarded

and ill behavior is punished (Bettelheim 144). Consequently, happy endings can be understood as forms of social endorsement or promotion of specific ways of living, as "[i]deas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy 'in the right way'" (Ahmed 13). If *Flicts* does not have a happy ending, what can its ending communicate to a reader?

Even when Brazilian children's books from the same period present some level of social criticism, many endings are still infused with hope and positivity, which makes *Flicts*' negativity-infused ending stand out. When read in conversation with the context in which it was published, *Flicts* insinuates a total hopelessness and refusal to engage with the hegemonic visions of the military regime, its normative discourses and attempts to surveil and control the population through practices like censorship, torture, and forced exile. The inexistence of a future for someone like Flicts in the dominant narrative can be read, through the concept of queer negativity, as mirroring a lack of hope and trust in the outcomes of trying to directly deal with and challenge the dictatorship. When positioning the self-exile of Flicts in the reality of Brazil being controlled by a military regime at the time—a regime where dissidence, difference and defiance were not only rejected, but often quite literally eliminated—this poses the following question: If those who openly denounce, challenge or battle oppressive systems are met with violent reactions, is there power in choosing to altogether refuse engagement? Placed in conversation with queer theory, *Flicts*' final embracement of affects such as failure, isolation and withdrawal can be seen as a tool for political action: instead of giving Flicts a method to being happy 'in the right way,' the picturebook spotlights the possibility of self-imposed isolation and, in doing so, it exposes the potential of altogether refusing any participation in oppressive systems.

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Biography

Elisa Melo Franco Santos is a graphic designer and Ph.D. student in Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bologna (Italy). Interested in the intersections between queer theories, literature and visual culture, she is currently researching picturebooks published during the military dictatorships in Argentina (1976-1983) and Brazil (1964-1985) from a queer perspective.