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## Undermining Authoritarianism: Retrofitting the Zombie in "Seminário dos ratos" by Lygia Fagundes Telles

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“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...”  
William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

“The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more  
star systems will slip through your fingers.”  
*Star Wars Episode IV*

“This is the rat that ate the malt  
that lay in the house that Jack built.”  
Mother Goose

At present, the zombie phenomenon has invaded all facets of popular culture including—but certainly not limited to—film, television, videogames, literature, music, social media, fan culture, and even smartphone applications. Undoubtedly, the creativity and artistry of many of these cultural expressions will withstand the test of time while capricious imitators, seeking to capitalize on the “zombie renaissance”<sup>1</sup> will continue to crank out hordes of zombie-themed schlock until such activities cease to be lucrative. The zombie has even penetrated the inner walls of academia with scholars theorizing the phenomenon across a diverse spectrum of fields of study.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is within criticism that the zombie will survive the inevitable “double tap”<sup>3</sup> of unprofitability as scholars continue to develop, what David Laraway has termed, a “zombie hermeneutic” (135). Responding to the foundational work of others, such as Lauro, Embry, and Bishop, Laraway proposes using the trope of the zombie as a critical lens to analyze other texts, even ones that do not contain the traditional zombie figure.<sup>4</sup> Although the zombie has proved to be quite popular in recent years in Brazil—thanks in large part to the wave of imported graphic novels, television shows, and movies—Brazilian literature does not possess a strong tradition of autochthonous zombie narratives.<sup>5</sup> Only in the past decade, a rash of zombie-themed novels has appeared in Brazil. These predominately (post)apocalyptic, survivalist-horror novels appeal to a small, yet dedicated fan base, but they have not entered the mainstream.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Portuguese translations of *The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*, and even *Pride, and Prejudice, and Zombies* have experienced greater popularity and commercial success than home-grown zombie literature.

The first recorded use of the word “Zombi” in English was in reference to Zumbi dos Palmares, a significant historical figure in seventeenth-century colonial Brazil,<sup>7</sup> but in this instance the term does not correlate with the socio-cultural and religious concepts associated with syncretic African religious traditions in Haiti. Zumbi dos Palmares was the last of several chieftains who led a community composed mostly of escaped slaves, known as a *quilombo* or *macombo*. The Quilombo dos Palmares resisted Portuguese military expeditions for nearly ninety

years, from 1605 until its eventual destruction in 1694.<sup>8</sup> Zumbi dos Palmares and the *quilombos* evoke images of escaped slaves rising against colonial oppressors, but Zumbi's name does not conjure the Haitian tradition of reanimated corpses enslaved by witch doctors. Perhaps the closest parallel to the Haitian *zombi* in Brazilian folklore is the *corpo-seco*, a malicious undead entity doomed to roam and terrorize the countryside. However, any connection between the two, as Lúcio Reis Filho posits, resides in a shared lineage with the revenant of European folklore (4).

Within Brazilian literary traditions, one is hard-pressed to find equivalents of either the folkloric Haitian *zombi* or Romero's contagious undead cannibal, although several canonical texts could potentially lend themselves to a zombie interpretation. Authors such as Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado, Érico Veríssimo, and Murilo Rubião, famously incorporated deceased characters in their work.<sup>9</sup> Robert Moser observes that the trope of the carnivalesque *defunto* in Brazilian literature clearly resides within "the irreverent and subversive voice" of Menippean satire (267). Although these authors did not write within the zombie framework, the zombie lens presents rich analytical possibilities to these and other texts. Of all potential works of Brazilian literature, one story in particular calls out for the zombie treatment. In her 1977 short story, "Seminário dos ratos," Lygia Fagundes Telles describes a world plagued by rats.<sup>10</sup> The thematic and stylistic approaches she employs bear a striking resemblance to what Priscilla Wald calls the "outbreak narrative," but specifically, as we shall see, to the trope of the contemporary, post-Romero zombie invasion. In this story, local politicians and foreign dignitaries meet in an opulent country manor in Brazil for the seventh in a series of conferences. Interestingly, unlike many outbreak narratives, no scientists appear in this story. The dignitaries primarily view the incursion as a threat to sociopolitical and economic stability and not as a public health crisis. During the deliberations on how to eradicate the infestation and reassume control, thousands of rats—having already taken over urban centers—overrun the premises and devour everything, leaving one lone survivor as an eyewitness.<sup>11</sup> In this modern allegory, Fagundes Telles surreptitiously decries the political corruption, censorship of the press, foreign intervention, class warfare, and abuses of power of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985). Reading "Seminário dos ratos" through a zombie hermeneutic highlights the underlying themes of uninhibited consumption, unbridled proliferation, and the threat of unmitigated annihilation as forces that undermine authoritarianism.

### **Criticizing the Dictatorship**

Lygia Fagundes Telles (1923–) is one of the most distinguished and celebrated contemporary Brazilian writers. Recipient of numerous national and international literary awards, including the prestigious Prêmio Camões. In 1987,

she became the third woman elected to the Academia Brasileira de Letras and in 2016 was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature by the União Brasileira de Escritores—the first Brazilian woman to receive such an honor (“Lygia Fagundes Telles”). Known as a “psychological writer,” her novels and short stories explore “the problematical relationships” of primarily middle-class and upper-class women (Baden 364). Her fiction eschews realism and embraces “imagination, nuance, suggestion, ellipsis, and fantasy [...] look[ing] at the imaginative side of the human experience, the supernatural, and what must remain unexplained” (Baden 364). Susan Quinlan adds: “She approaches women’s reality on all levels, the macabre, the fantastic, the ephemeral, the intimate and the political” (57). Many critics consider *As meninas* (1973) her best novel. Written during the height of Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964–1985), the novel depicts “three young women who live in a boardinghouse under the watchful eye of nuns during turbulent times” (Baden 366). Rotating through the points-of-view of three protagonist-narrators, the novel presents the challenges of Brazilian youth culture, including “excessos culturais, abuso de drogas, insurreição armada e materialismo crasso” (Silverman 201). Set against the backdrop of the repressive military regime, the three young women search for “a new foundation for identity in the gaping fissures of a fractured patriarchal society,” resisting the “defined and marginalized roles” prescribed to them within that society (Nielsen 134). Although the author certainly criticizes the abuses of authoritarianism in *As meninas*, she is more direct in the titular story of the collection *Seminário dos ratos*.

In “Seminário dos ratos,” Lygia Fagundes Telles tries her hand at political satire, while incorporating the conventions of science fiction and horror (Vincent, “Review” 58).<sup>12</sup> The first half of the story relates a conversation between O Chefe das Relações Públicas, a young public relations officer at the beginning of his career, and O Secretário do Bem-Estar Público e Privado, a high-ranking official who has served in the government for over forty years. During a debriefing, they discuss a number of pressing issues. Brazil is hosting the seventh in a series of conferences to discuss a recent plague of rodents. The press officer reports he has seen to every detail in the arrivals of the national and international delegations. The older official’s detailed line of questioning belies his desire to maintain tight control while mistrusting external and internal threats. For example, the government has specifically invited a technocrat from the United States to assist in the eradication of the rats. Suspicious of all the foreign dignitaries, but especially the American, the bureaucrat expresses concern to the PR officer: “Os ratos são nossos, as soluções têm que ser nossas. Por que botar todo mundo a par das nossas mazelas? Das nossas deficiências? Devíamos só mostrar o lado positivo não apenas da sociedade mas da nossa família” (153). In order to maintain the appearance of order and progress, the government has gone to great lengths to provide luxurious accommodations for the delegates. They have spent millions in restoring an opulent

manor out in the country, building an airstrip, installing a heated pool, and hiring a cadre of servants and cooks. In stark contrast, the hunger amongst the urban population is so severe that they have resorted to eating their cats, which has exacerbated the rat problem. The press criticizes the government severely for these lavish expenditures. Consequently, conference organizers have barred members of the press from the proceedings, providing their own press releases underscoring the administration's complete control of the situation. The older bureaucrat applauds the public relations department's efforts in controlling the flow of media, commenting: "Boa tática, meu jovem, é influenciar no começo e no fim todos os meios de comunicação do país" (156). While the official does not deny that the influx of rats presents a problem, he primarily views it as a social issue blown out of proportion by the press, thus generating a public relations nightmare.

In this section, Fagundes Telles criticizes the convoluted hierarchy, exorbitant excess, and pervasive suppression of free press by the authoritarian regimes that ruled Brazil for over twenty years. The author scatters a number of connotations that the informed reader will immediately understand. The aging bureaucrat asks what vintage of wine will be served with dinner that evening, to which the PR officer replies: "Pinochet, naturally," a tongue-in-cheek reference to Augusto Pinochet, dictator of Chile from 1973 to 1990. The official mentions having fought in both the "Revolução de 32," e no "Golpe de 64." The first refers to the Revolução Constitucionalista, eighty-seven days of armed conflict between the State of São Paulo and the authoritarian government of Getúlio Vargas.<sup>13</sup> The "Golpe de 64" refers to the military coup d'état of April 1, 1964, which deposed left-leaning João Goulart, the democratically elected vice president who had assumed the presidency after the resignation of Jânio Quadros three years before.<sup>14</sup> From 1964 to 1985, a US-friendly military regime ruled Brazil.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, we can assume that the old official fought for the winning side, since he has climbed the bureaucratic ladder for over four decades. Although, being part of the authoritarian regime, he would have referred to "O Golpe de 64" as the "Revolução de 64." With this slight shift in terminology, Lygia Fagundes Telles subtly introduces ambiguity and uncertainty, although unbeknownst to the characters in the scene.

Seemingly lost in memory, the Secretário do Bem-Estar Público gazes upon a bronze statue of "uma opulenta mulher de olhos vendados, empunhando a espada e a balança" (157). He wipes the dust off the scales of justice, symbolizing a long period of inattention and neglect. When he complains about his swollen foot, a symptom of gout—or *gota* in Portuguese—the younger Chefe das Relações Públicas, in a play on words, half-sings: "Pode ser a gota d'água! Pode ser a gota d'água!" When his superior refuses to respond, the subordinate adjusts his tie and explains: "é uma canção que o povo canta por aí" (158). Fagundes Telles alludes to songwriter and author Chico Buarque's 1975 musical, *Gota d'água*. His cowriter,

Paulo Pontes, had to negotiate with censors, cutting and revising many of the lyrics, in order to secure its release (Homem 131). Even though censorship had relaxed somewhat during Ernesto Geisel's *distensão*, this did not apply to the theater (Homem 131).<sup>16</sup> Despite the imposed revisions, the musical was a commercial and critical success.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, in referencing *Gota d'água*, Fagundes Telles surreptitiously alludes to her own experience with the censors a few years earlier, with the publication of *As meninas*:

Era época pesada da ditadura militar e eu me inspirei, entre outras coisas, num panfleto que detalhava a violência física sofrida por um preso político. Coloquei isso no meio da trama e fiquei apreensiva quando o livro foi enviado para a censura. Enquanto aguardava, nervosa, o veredicto, fui surpreendida pela chegada, alegre, de [meu marido] Paulo, em nosso apartamento. Ele trazia uma garrafa de vinho e estava muito disposto a comemorar. Logo explicou: aborrecido com uma história em que não acontecia nada, o censor só lera algumas páginas, não chegara àquele ponto da tortura e liberava a obra. (Brasil)

Not only did the torture scene escape the red pencil of the censors, the entire message of the novel, as we have seen, subverts patriarchal systems of authority.

Several years after the publication of *As meninas*, Lygia Fagundes Telles dramatically opposed the censorship of artistic expression, in all its forms. On 25 January 1977, the same year as the publication of the collection *Seminário dos ratos*, she traveled to Brasília, along with historian Hélio Silva, and writers Nélida Piñon and Jefferson Ribeiro de Andrade. There, they presented the government with the signatures of over a thousand Brazilian intellectuals who opposed censorship. The “Manifesto dos Intelectuais,” was the largest manifestation of intellectuals since 1968. In a 1994 interview with the *Folha de São Paulo*, only a year after the document was made publicly available, Fagundes Telles discusses her involvement in the movement:

A censura vinha exorbitando em relação ao teatro, ao cinema, às artes plásticas, livros e jornais. Nós fomos nos sentindo frágeis. É bonito isso, o sentimento do homem fragilizado politicamente, a sua vontade de se reunir, de formar seus círculos. Em 1976, jovens escritores em Belo Horizonte, em mesas de bar, já estavam se levantando, tentando também armar não se sabe bem o quê, não se sabe se um manifesto ou um memorial. As ações estavam coincidindo, embora não houvesse ainda entre nós contato mais profundo. O movimento de Belo Horizonte acabou liderando grupos esparsos de São Paulo e do Rio, que tinha à frente Rubem Fonseca e José Louzeiro. Eu me

sentia dentro de uma nova inconfidência, de origem mineira e âmbito nacional. (“Manifesto”)

Emboldened by her experience in averting the censors with *As meninas*, as well as her outward opposition of censorship in delivering the “Manifesto dos Intelectuais,” Lygia Fagundes Telles imbeds “Seminário dos ratos” with not-so-subtle insinuations of the abuses of power of the military dictatorship.

In order to avoid censorship of the story, which was a considerable factor at that time, Fagundes Telles masqueraded her criticisms of the military dictatorship in a hyperbolically absurd and horrific allegory. Nelson Vieira examines the concepts of high and low art as cultural products rooted in the elite’s perceptions of what is acceptable. Much like the work of Rubem Fonseca—the object of Vieira’s study—Fagundes Telles’s fantastic stories straddle the culturally imposed notions of high and low because she writes genre literature with literary erudition. She wrote under the specter of both political and cultural totalitarianism, which Vieira defines as, “a microdespotic, hegemonic and authoritarian mentality linked to systems of hierarchical thinking implanted historically by the dominant classes and absolutist States of the past” (109). Vieira argues that the Brazilian military regime’s desire for total control ignored the heterogeneity and diversity of not only Brazil’s populace but also their artistic production. Within this atmosphere of cultural pretentiousness and socio-cultural hegemony, however, numerous Brazilian writers, like Fagundes Telles, explored the margins and sought to break down false binary structures while also enjoying moderate commercial success. Much like humanity defines the rat and zombie as threats, many Brazilian writers during the dictatorship were defined as subversive and rebellious because the powers-that-be deemed them as such.

### **Retrofitting the Trope of the Zombie Invasion**

The second part of “Seminário dos Ratos” builds up to the rat invasion and describes its aftermath, sharing many similarities with the trope of the zombie invasion. Perhaps if Lygia Fagundes Telles had seen George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, for example, she may have employed the figure of the zombie instead of the rat to denounce consumerism, authoritarianism, and excess. Kyle William Bishop, in *American Zombie Gothic*, asserts that the zombie apocalypse story “has remarkably specific conventions that govern its plot and development” (19). In addition to the threat of “violent death,” zombie narratives recount “the collapse of societal infrastructures, the resurgence of survivalist fantasies, and the fear of other surviving humans” (19). “Seminário dos ratos” shares many of these same “generic protocols.”

As we have mentioned, national and international dignitaries have retreated to the Brazilian countryside to deliberate on how to combat the increasing threat of the rodent infestation. The opulence of the surroundings in which they hold the conference underscore their misunderstanding and mishandling of the situation. They show more concern for their own comfort and political self-preservation than for the welfare of the masses. Earlier, we discussed the senior official's disparaging contempt for the press. His disdain for the people is equally palpable:

O povo, o povo. [...] Só se fala em povo e no entanto o povo não passa de uma abstração. [...] Que se transforma em realidade quando os ratos começam a expulsar os favelados de suas casas. Ou a roer os pés das crianças da periferia, então, sim, o *povo* passa a existir nas manchetes da imprensa de esquerda. Da imprensa marrom. Enfim, pura demagogia. Aliada às bombas dos subversivos, não esquecer esses bastardos que parecem ratos [...]. (158)

A common trope in the “outbreak narrative,” as Wald points out, is that those in power appeal to emotion to affirm and elevate “the fundamental values, hierarchies, and taxonomies” of their identity (9). In one breath, the aging bureaucrat condemns the socioeconomically underprivileged and marginalized, the left-leaning media outlets, as well as subversive radicals—comparing the latter to rats. By promoting his worldview, he asserts authoritarian dominance over those he considers inferior and seditious. One characteristic of the genre of the zombie invasion narrative, as Mabel Moraña explains, is that those in power fear the abject Other:

[E]l temor a sujetos desterritorializados o alienados de su medio natural que pasan a constituir una amenaza social (refugiados, prisioneros políticos, desposeídos, desplazados, marginales, indigentes, enfermos contagiosos, ilegales, exiliados, locos, etc.) y que merodean los espacios sociales representando un desafío latente a la seguridad y al *statu quo*. (276–77)

The Secretário do Bem-Estar Público e Privado concedes that the rats threaten the status quo, but the atmosphere in the debriefing is initially not one of anxiety, fear, or panic; rather, it is one of authoritarian control and assured dominance. He blatantly disregards the needs of the citizens of his country and mocks their suffering.

While on the surface everything seems to be in order, the bureaucrat appears unsettled and anxious. During the debriefing, he keeps hearing an odd noise, as if coming from the floor and then rising to the ceiling. The young man apparently does not hear it. At first he suspects the Americans have bugged the room, stating: “Onde essa gente está, tem sempre essa praga de gravador” (155). But the



bureaucrat continues to hear the noise: “Está ouvindo? Está ouvindo? O barulho. Ficou mais forte agora! [...] Aumenta e diminui. Olha aí, em ondas, como um mar... Agora parece um vulcão respirando, aqui perto e ao mesmo tempo tão longe! Está fugindo, olha aí...” (157). The official’s gut instinct, tempered by years of suspicion and paranoia, tells him something is amiss, although he cannot quite pinpoint what exactly *it* is. The public relations officer finally hears the noise, leaving the room to discover its source. What he witnesses is the exact moment when social order and government control collapse, as Max Brooks outlines in *Zombie Survival Guide*:

When the living dead triumph, the world degenerates into utter chaos. All social order evaporates. Those in power [...] hole up in bunkers and secure areas around the country [...]. Perhaps they continue the façade of a government command structure [...]. For all practical purposes, however, they are nothing more than a government-in-exile. (155)

The fact that the Brazilian government holds the conference away from the cities serves as a contrast to the implied chaos and social disorder in the urban centers. Likewise, the costly restoration of the country estate, the primary objective of which—by their own admission—is to propagate the illusion of order, further exhibits their tenuous grasp and lack of control.

As the young man leaves the room and enters the corridor, he confronts the head chef who is fleeing the manor. The chef informs him that rats have invaded the kitchen and devoured everything in sight: “As lagostas, as galinhas, as batatas, eles comeram tudo! Tudo! Não sobrou nem um grão de arroz na panela. Comeram tudo e o que não tiveram tempo de comer levaram embora! [...] Até os panos de prato eles comeram. Só respeitaram a geladeira que estava fechada, mas a cozinha ficou limpa, limpa!” (161). Due to his initial shock the PR officer does not fully comprehend the severity of the situation. He insists the chef stay and finish preparing dinner, to which he replies, “Jantar? O senhor disse *jantar*?! Não ficou nem uma cebola!” (162). As the press officer attempts to regain control of the situation he inquires as to the whereabouts of the servants, to which the chef frantically explains: “Empregados? Todo mundo já foi embora, ninguém é louco!” (162). The young man refuses to accept the reality of these unfolding events, but he realizes his authority is slipping. Misunderstanding the chef, he thinks the servants have stolen the vehicles and fled, but the chef explains that rats have chewed through the wires of the cars, as well as the telephone lines. They are trapped without means of transportation or communication. As panic sets in, the rats enter the main house:

[N]esse instante a casa foi sacudida nos seus alicerces. As luzes se apagaram. Então, deu-se a invasão, espessa como se um saco de pedras borrachosas tivesse sido despejado em cima do telhado e agora saltasse por todos os lados numa treva dura de músculos, guinchos e centenas de olhos luzindo negríssimos. Quando a primeira dentada lhe arrancou um pedaço da calça, ele correu sobre o chão enovelado, entrou na cozinha com os ratos despencando na sua cabeça e abriu a geladeira. Arrancou as prateleiras que foi encontrando na escuridão, jogou a lataria para o ar, esgrimou com uma garrafa contra dois olhinhos que já corriam no vasilhame de verduras, expulsou-os e, num salto, pulou lá dentro. Fechou a porta, mas deixou o dedo na fresta, que a porta não batesse. Quando sentiu a primeira agulhada na ponta do dedo que ficou de fora, substituiu o dedo pela gravata. (163)

The overwhelming incursion of rodents, filling every recess of the manor, evokes the image of hordes of zombies devouring and obliterating everything in their path. It is the multitude, the conglomeration, and not the individual rat that causes such chaos, as Moraña explains: “el zombi evoca la idea de multitud [...] que suele presentarse en grupos amorfos y acumulativos, que, aunque no tienen voz ni consciencia ni admiten liderazgo . [...] tienen una *presencia* proliferante e inorgánica, que amenaza el orden social y los modelos cognitivos dominantes” (175). The infestation exposes the government’s severe lack of preparation, the inadequacy of its defenses, and its inability to respond to the visceral threat of extinction. The young public relations officer barely saves himself by hiding in the refrigerator.<sup>18</sup> After several hours, he cracks the refrigerator door. Here, Fagundes Telles evokes the image of the womb, but instead of providing nurturing maternal warmth the space resembles a dank, solitary prison cell: “[Ele] jamais pôde precisar quanto tempo teria ficado dentro da geladeira, enrodilhado como um feto, a água gelada pingando na cabeça, as mãos endurecidas de câimbra, a boca aberta no mínimo vão da porta que de vez em quando algum focinho tentava forcejar” (163–64). Silence descends and the young man emerges, reborn in a world in which he is no longer in control. He walks through the ravaged kitchen and the hollow house. The rats have devoured everything, including furniture, curtains, and rugs. Only the walls and the impenetrable darkness remain. The tsunami of social upheaval and disorder, encapsulated in the image of the rat invasion, inexorably reaches, penetrates, and overcomes the inner sanctum of the elite, thus bringing down the last bastion of their civilization.

### “They’re Us”

On the surface, “Seminário dos Ratos” presents a seemingly straightforward allegory of the dialectic of power vs. resistance in that the rat plague threatens

economic, political, and social stability. Nevertheless, this reading presupposes the notion that the rats react against the hegemony of the ruling class. However, the *raison d'être* of the rat, like the zombie, is not to rebel, to retaliate, or to destabilize, but to consume and to multiply. In “‘We Are the Walking Dead’: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative,” Gerry Canavan observes: “Remorselessly consuming everything in their path, zombies leave nothing in their wake besides endless copies of themselves, making the zombie the perfect metaphor not only for how capitalism transforms its subjects but also for its relentless and devastating virologic march across the globe” (432). As Lauro and Embry point out, there is no such thing as a “‘bad’ zombie (which has been reduced to an object by the capitalist system, which works as a slave for others, which loses itself in the machine)” or a “‘good’ zombie (which resists being a tool of capitalism, which is destructive rather than productive, which resists the rational, which becomes the anti-individual, antsubject)” (106). The zombie possesses no morality, no values, and no consciousness, but that does not mean it is not destructive. Even though Deleuze and Guatarri claim “The myth of the zombie, of the living dead, is a work myth and not a war myth” (425), Dunja Opatić sees parallels between their concept of the nomad war machine and the zombie horde:

Their organization is numerical ‘quantity is everywhere.’ They destroy the striated spaces, all enclosures, turning them into smooth spaces. Zombies decode and deterritorialize the State apparatus bringing forth into visibility their mutilated form created by systemic violence. They are the ‘deterritorialized *par excellence*.’ (5)

Despite their amoral destructive capability, interpreting the actions of the rat—or the zombie—as a form of resistance is only sustainable from the perspective of those in power. If anything, it is a passive or even accidental subversion.

Zombie narratives, therefore, are not really about zombies, but about humanity’s fears. The zombie serves as what Peter Dendle calls a “barometer of cultural anxiety,” laying bare “concerns over environmental deterioration, political conflict, the growth of consumer-capitalism, and the commoditization of the body implicit in contemporary biomedical science” (45). Building off this idea, Bishop observes:

[Z]ombie narratives manifest the predominant cultural anxieties of their times, anxieties usually repressed or ignored by the mainstream media [...]. The zombie functions primarily as a social and cultural metaphor, a creature that comments on the society that produced it by confronting audiences with fantastic narratives of excesses and extremes. (*American* 26, 31).

In the case of George Romero, critics have viewed his works as social commentaries on the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the threat of nuclear war, as well as a critique of rampant materialism and unchecked capitalistic exploitation.<sup>19</sup> Statements by Romero allow for these interpretations, as well as others. In an interview with Cinema Blend he stated:

I don't care what [zombies] are. I don't care where they came from. They could be any disaster. They could be an earthquake, a hurricane, whatever. They don't represent in my mind, anything except a global change of some kind. And the stories are about how people respond or fail to respond to this. (McConnell)

For Romero, the zombie invasion represents humanity's response to social and global turmoil; it does not convey any intrinsic significance in and of itself. The zombie trope, therefore, acts as a floating signifier onto which we ascribe meaning, projecting our own anxieties and fears. It inhabits an interstitial epistemological space that eludes definition. Moraña explains:

El zombi es solamente visible cuando queda capturado en la brecha inestable del *entre-lugar*, limbo espacio-temporal y epistémico que muchos críticos han interpretado como el espacio ideológico existente entre el Estado y la multitud, o entre la hegemonía y la resistencia. (165)

In "Séminario dos ratos," therefore, the image of the rat occupies different fields of significance depending on the perspective of the characters, the author, or the reader.

From the point of view of the Secretário do Bem-Estar Público e Privado, the rats are merely a nuisance. We learn he is more concerned with the confrontational press, the impoverished populace, leftist subversives, and the foreign dignitaries. Each of these groups, however, threaten to destabilize the social and political stranglehold of the totalitarian State. The rats, therefore, come to symbolize forces that undermine authoritarianism, exhibiting the two sides of Lauro's zombie dialectic: "the specter of colonial slave and that slave's potential for rebellion" (5). In the case of the "favelados," the real threat resides in any form of upward mobility. A rising middle class leads to increased economic stability, which leads to a desire for increased individual rights. On one hand, the people are like the "disempowered, vacant zombie," disenfranchised slaves to a consumerist culture. On the other hand, the "specter of potential violence" always remains, like that of the "terrible, powerful zombie" (5). Perhaps this is why the aging bureaucrat despises the "povo." Although they manufacture the goods that prop up the

regime's economic policies, the ever-present possibility of a proletariat uprising lurks in the shadows.

In contrast, the target of the author's disdain for uninhibited consumption is not the lower- and middle-classes, but rather those who are in power. While the rats swarm and engulf the impoverished people in urban centers, who result to eating their cats, the military bureaucrats feast on lobster and imported wine, ensconced in a remodeled country estate, largely sheltered from the pestilence. The elite embody the inequities of unchecked capitalistic consumption. In the closing lines of the story, the author flips the structures of power, the rats physically and symbolically replacing the humans. As the young man emerges from the refrigerator, wandering through the desolate silence of the ransacked mansion, he hears "um murmurejo secreto, rascante" emanating from the conference room. He imagines the rats meeting together behind closed doors. The story ends with the following: "Não se lembrava sequer de como conseguiu chegar até o campo, não poderia jamais reconstituir a corrida, correu quilômetros. Quando olhou para trás, o casarão estava todo iluminado" (164). He manages to escape, fleeing into the unknown.

This role reversal echoes an exchange between Francine and Peter in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). As zombies pound on the entrance to the shopping mall, she asks, "What the hell are they?" to which he responds, "They're us." In *Dawn of the Dead*, Romero uses the zombie as a "rather overt criticism of contemporary consumer culture" (Bishop, "Idle Proletariat" 234). Bishop explains: "The insatiable need to purchase, own, and consume has become so deeply ingrained in twentieth-century Americans that their reanimated corpses are relentlessly driven by the same instincts and needs" ("Idle Proletariat" 234). Consequently, the zombies return to the temple of consumerism—the suburban shopping mall. But even the four survivors are not immune to the effects of "pervasive consumerism," as Bishop elucidates: "Having been essentially brainwashed by capitalist ideology, they cannot see the shattered world around them in any terms other than those of possession and consumption—and this misplaced drive ultimately proves strong enough to put all their lives in jeopardy" ("Idle Proletariat" 235). In some ways, the public relations officer and the official in "Seminário dos ratos" are like these four survivors—deeply entrenched, but also trapped, within a looped system of consumption of wealth and power. The figure of the zombie, according to Moraña, serves as a metaphor of Marx's dead labor and immaterial labor, autonomist processes by which "el cuerpo social se auto-cannibaliza para preservar y reproducir capital y ganancia" (167). Extrapolating this idea of self-cannibalism, the two main characters in "Seminário dos ratos" are both purveyors of the abuses of unchecked consumption and the eventual victims of its detrimental effects. The institutions for which they work and the ideologies they espouse have created the conditions of their downfall. The rat infestation has

reached catastrophic proportions due, in large part, to delayed, drawn-out, and bloviated bureaucracy—we must remember this is the *seventh* in a series of conferences addressing the emergency. The bureaucrats, technocrats, and military leaders assured their demise by implementing socioeconomic policies and capitalistic modes of production that concentrated wealth and power in the hands of the few while promoting a consumer culture. In a word, *they* are the rats.

Lygia Fagundes Telles's treatment of the rodent epidemic and ensuing devastation anticipates many of the "generic protocols" of the post-apocalyptic zombie invasion. Reading "Seminário dos ratos" through a zombie hermeneutic allows for several lines of inquiry regarding the harmful consequences of authoritarian regimes. Lygia Fagundes Telles denounces the centralization of power by a military elite, the excesses of consumer capitalism, censorship, and exploitation of the working class. The author does not provide solutions to these injustices; she only points them out through a hyperbolic display of horrific destruction. Lauro and Embry argue that the zombie's "dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement." Zombie and rat alike "can offer no resolution" (96). Likewise, Lygia Fagundes Telles leaves her readers, much like her lone survivor, in a nihilistic state of resignation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> While Kyle William Bishop may have first used the term “zombie renaissance” in “Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance,” many critics have adopted it as a broad term to describe “the recent upsurge of interest in the zombie motif” in recent years (Hubner, Leaning, and Manning 3).

<sup>2</sup> As one of many recent examples, *This Year’s Work at the Zombie Research Center* (Comentale and Jaffe, 2014) examines the zombie in the fields of psychology, physiology, philosophy, demographics, race, politics, linguistics, and literature. Likewise, *Zombies in the Academy: Living Death in Higher Education* (Whelan, Walker, and Moore, 2013) takes a creative approach by adopting the language of zombie culture to examine the effects of increased corporatization in higher education. No less than four collections of essays theorizing the zombie were published in 2011: *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (Christie and Lauro); *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Dead in Modern Culture* (Boluk and Lenz); *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition* (Moreman and Rushton); and *Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead* (Moreman and Rushton).

<sup>3</sup> Here I refer to the second of a list of rules “Columbus,” portrayed by Jesse Eisenberg in the film *Zombieland*, has developed to survive the zombie apocalypse.

<sup>4</sup> In “Teenage Zombie Wasteland” Laraway extracts a “distinctive set of questions and interpretative strategies” from his reading of Mike Wilson’s *Zombie*, ironically containing no Hollywood-style zombies, which he then uses to analyze Edmundo Paz Soldán’s *Los vivos y los muertos* (135). Comentale and Jaffe have also used similar language regarding the potential richness of the zombie as critical apparatus: “The latter definition of zombie—the R-Zombie—remains the ruling hermeneutic when it comes to celebrity zombies today” (38).

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to literature, there are a number of Brazilian zombie movies that have appeared over the years, beginning with the work of João Rosendo, an artist and sculptor from Minas Gerais, who filmed three low-budget films: *O embrião satânico* (1979), *Reencarnação diabólica* (1985), and *Terror no colégio* (1992). The following is a list of zombie-themed shorts and feature-length films, based on the research of Alfredo Luiz Suppia, Lúcio Reis Filho, Rodrigo Carreiro, Daniel Serravalle de Sá, as well as the Internet Movie Database: *Zombio* (Baiestorf, 1999), *Crônicas de um zumbi adolescente* (Pagnossim, 2002), *Minha esposa é um zumbi* (Caetano, 2006), *Era dos mortos* (Brandão, 2007), *A capital dos mortos* (Belotti, 2008), *Mangue negro* (Aragão, 2009), *Porto dos mortos* (Pinheiro, 2010), *Mar negro* (Aragão, 2013), *Zombio 2: Chimmarrão zombies* (Baiestorf, 2013), *A capital dos mortos 2: Mundo morto* (Belotti, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Amongst the dozen or so zombie-themed titles that have appeared in Brazil in the past decade, three book series stand out. First, Alexandre Callari has published three titles under the banner *Apocalypse Zumbi*, including *Os primeiros anos* (2012), *Inferno na terra* (2013), and *Depois do fim do mundo* (2017). Callari employs many of the themes, situations, and grisly zombie carnage one would expect within the survival horror genre. He tends to rely on caricatures and archetypes, at times sacrificing character development for overly descriptive scenes. Other than topography and place names, there is little development specific to Brazilian culture or history. Second, Rodrigo de Oliveira’s on-going series, *Crônicas dos mortos*, currently boasts four novels: *O vale dos mortos* (2014), *A batalha dos mortos* (2014), *A senhora dos mortos* (2015), *A ilha dos mortos* (2016), and a stand-alone novelle, *Elevador 16* (2014). The fifth, and concluding novel, *A era dos mortos*, was published in two volumes in 2018. While Oliveira seeks inspiration from a variety of sources, he is the most successful in creating a saga firmly rooted in a Brazilian geographical, cultural, and sociopolitical context. Finally, Tiago Toy originally started his series, *Terra Morta*, as a blog, which was then picked up by Editora Draco, known for publishing Brazilian speculative fiction. *Fuga*

(2011) and *Infecção* (2014) tell the story of how Tiago and his friends survive the zombie apocalypse in the small town of Jaboticabal in the interior of the state of São Paulo. Draco also published *Terra Morta: Relatos de sobrevivência a um apocalipse zumbi*, a collection of stories that take place within the world created by Toy, including three of his own stories and eight by other Brazilian writers. One of Toy's stories, "Obsessão de Vitória," was adapted as a graphic novel, written by Cirilo S. Lemos and illustrated by Victor Freundt.

<sup>7</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "Zombi" first appeared in 1819 in the third volume of Robert Southey's three-volume *History of Brazil*. Southey writes that the title of "Zombi" meant "Deity, in the Angolan tongue" and he includes the following explanatory footnote: "[Portuguese historian Sebastião da] Rocha Pitta says the word means Devil in their language. This appeared to me so unlikely, that I examined a book of religious instructions in the Portuguese and Angolan languages, to ascertain the fact; and there I found that *NZambi* is the word for Deity; ... *Caiapemba* is Devil" (24). Rocha Pitta does indeed state, in a parenthetical comment, that the name "Zombi" means "o mesmo que diabo" but offers no linguistic or etymological basis for this assertion (215). While this may seem a minor quibble, Rocha Pitta's brief account of the Palmares resistance became "o mais impactante escrito sobre Palmares e Zumbi publicado ao longo do período colonial [inaugurando] uma linha de tradição no que diz respeito à descrição do quilombo e de seu líder" (França 42).

<sup>8</sup> In speaking about the origin of the word "zombie," some scholars have muddled the facts when discussing the events surrounding Zumbi dos Palmares and his leadership. The Quilombo dos Palmares existed in what is present-day Alagoas and not the northern neighboring state of Pernambuco, as Troost indicates (2). Less excusable is Marina Warner's confusion when she writes: "Southey is recounting the terrible revenge taken by the *Spanish*" (emphasis mine, 119). She perpetuates this slight yet significant error in "The Devil Inside," a 2002 newspaper article that appeared in *The Guardian*. Warner somehow misremembers and misattributes Rocha Pitta's 'zombie as devil' definition to Southey, even though the information in *Fantastic Metamorphoses* is correct. This may seem an insignificant detail, but it weakens her discussion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's marginalia found within the British Library's copy of *History of Brazil*, which Coleridge had received from Southey, his friend and brother-in-law. For a full account of this fascinating bit of literary history, see Marina's *Fantastic Metamorphoses* (119–20, 150) as well as Lauro's *Transatlantic Zombie* (37).

<sup>9</sup> Here I refer to the novels *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1888), by Machado de Assis, *Quincas Berro D'água* (1959) and *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (1966), by Jorge Amado, *Incidente em Antares* (1971), by Érico Veríssimo, and Murilo Rubião's short story "O pirotécnico Zacarias" (1974), published in the collection of the same name. In fact, Marcel Verrumo provides a brief zombie reading of *Incidente de Antares* in Chapter 49, "Apocalipse zumbi contra a ditadura," in *História bizarra da literatura brasileira* (301–305).

<sup>10</sup> The story under consideration appeared as the last of fourteen stories in the collection of the same name, *Seminário dos ratos*, which won the national literary prize of the PEN Clube do Brasil ("Biografia"). Readers and critics alike have noted the ways in which Fagundes Telles incorporates mysterious, gothic, fantastic, and uncanny elements in stories such as "As formigas," "Tigrela," and "Lua crescente em Amsterdã." In fact, one could argue that Fagundes Telles—along with her compatriots Murilo Rubião and José J. Veiga—share broad similarities with Spanish American writers known for works of *lo real maravilloso* or *realismo mágico*, such as Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez. See, for example, Milton Hermes Rodrigues's "Antecedentes conceituais e ficcionais do realismo mágico no Brasil" and "Narrativas absurdas em torno do realismo maravilhoso," the tenth chapter of *Fantástico brasileiro: O insólito literário do romantismo ao fantasma* by Bruno Anselmi Matangrano and Enéias Tavares.

<sup>11</sup> Berenice Sica Lamas provides a commented plot summary of the story in *O duplo em Lygia Fagundes Telles: Um estudo em literatura e psicologia* (211–33).



<sup>12</sup> One can make the argument that it is easier to read “Seminário dos ratos” within a framework of horror fiction than science fiction. Perhaps this is why Roberto de Sousa Causo does not include the story in his study, “Science Fiction During the Brazilian Dictatorship,” even though it clearly allegorizes the Brazilian dictatorship.

<sup>13</sup> Getúlio Vargas served as Brazil’s president for 18 years in two separate periods. He served as interim president from 1930–1934, president from 1934–1937, and dictator of the Estado Novo from 1937–1945. Vargas was overthrown in 1945, but returned as a democratically elected president in 1951, serving until his suicide in 1954. His authoritarian nationalism set the stage for the military regimes of later years. (For a complete overview, see Lira Neto’s three-volume biography on Getúlio Vargas.) From 1894 to 1930, the two most powerful states—São Paulo and Minas Gerais—took turns selecting the president of the republic, a policy known as *café com leite*. In October 1929, reeling from the Stock Market Crash, and in an effort to maintain economic supremacy, the powerful coffee barons broke with tradition, indicating Júlio Prestes as the successor of then-president Washington Luís. The governor of Minas Gerais decided to back an oppositional candidate, Getúlio Vargas. Although Prestes won the election, Getúlio marched from Rio Grande do Sul to Rio de Janeiro and—with the support of the states of Paraíba and Minas Gerais—deposed Washington Luís, thus preventing the president-elect, Júlio Prestes, from taking office. Vargas installed a “Governo Provisório,” which increasingly marginalized the wealthy oligarchs and political elites of São Paulo. After several armed confrontations, including the death of five university students at the hands of Vargas’s troops, *paulistas* formed clandestine armed movements in hopes to reassert political and economic control. The people of São Paulo underestimated their ability to resist the federal government’s economic embargo, naval blockade, and superior firepower—including the threat of aerial bombardment—and surrendered. For further information, see Donato’s *História da Revolução Constitucionalista de 32*, Hilton’s *A guerra civil brasileira*, Skidmore’s *Politics in Brazil: 1930–1964*, as well as Bradfurd Burns (351–52), Boris Fausto (189–92), and Michael Reid (81–82).

<sup>14</sup> Democratic rule continued in Brazil for a decade after Vargas’s death. From 1956 to 1961, Juscelino Kubitschek’s administration implemented the “Plano de Metas”—an ambitious strategic plan to achieve fifty years of development in a variety of sectors in a mere five years. These “anos dourados,” emblemized by the international popularity of *bossa nova*, were followed by the election of Jânio Quadros. Running on an anti-corruption platform—using a broom as his symbol—Quadros’s social reforms proved deeply unpopular and he refused to negotiate with the congressional leaders. He resigned after fewer than seven months in office. Vice-president João Goulart, who had been elected on a split ticket—thus, Quadros’s opponent—was returning to Brazil after having visited Communist China. Conservatives in the armed forces and Congress hoped to depose Goulart. Nevertheless, they brokered a truce, albeit unconstitutional, allowing him to assume the presidency in a parliamentary format, which a plebiscite revoked two years later. Goulart and his supporters sought a number of banking, administrative, fiscal, urban, agrarian, and university reforms, which his detractors viewed as socialist and anti-constitutionalist in nature. The middle-class center moved away from the extremism of the left, joining the opposition on the right. As Reid observes: “a small clutch of right-wing conspirators morphed into a broad coalition in favour of military intervention to overthrow the government” (96). Tensions came to a head after Goulart condoned a sailor’s mutiny in Rio de Janeiro and met with the rebellious NCOs. Military support of his government faltered throughout the country, but on the morning of 1 April 1964 General Mourão Filho marched his troops from Juiz de Fora to Rio de Janeiro, triggering a *coup d’état*. The governors of the three most powerful states (São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Guanabara—part of current-day Rio de Janeiro) supported the coup. Other groups welcomed military intervention, including “the middle class, fed up with inflation and strikes [...] most of the press, the Bar Association, the Catholic bishops,” as well as politicians along the spectrum from the center to the right (Reid 97). The coup saw little bloodshed and met little resistance from the public. In fact, the military and their

supporters viewed themselves as “leading a popular revolution, rather than a counter-revolutionary coup,” (Reid 97). Goulart soon went into exile in Uruguay, dying in 1976 having never returned to Brazil. See Skidmore’s *Politics in Brazil: 1930–1964*, as well as Burns (423–44) and Fausto (243–56).

<sup>15</sup> Over the course of twenty-one years, from 1 April 1964 to 15 March 1985, five presidents oversaw a nationalistic military government that strongly opposed a perceived threat of communism. From 1964 to 1969, the regime passed 17 “Atos Institucionais” with the purpose of legitimizing and legalizing its political actions. The most authoritarian of these acts, “Ato Institucional 5,” or AI-5, established the power to intervene in state or municipal politics as well as to suspend or revoke political and civil rights of any individual. Congress was forced into recess while the regime assumed its legislative functions. AI-5 suspended habeas corpus for political prisoners and implemented severe censorship of oppositional news outlets, as well as books, music, and art it deemed subversive. Many artists went into self-exile and left the country. For general information on the military dictatorships see Burns (445–64), Fausto (257–70), and Reid (99–114). For more in-depth treatments, see the following: Skidmore’s foundational *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964–85*, Jorge Luiz Ferreira’s *O golpe que derrubou um presidente, pôs fim ao regime democrático e instituiu a ditadura no Brasil*, as well as Elio Gaspari’s five-volume series, *A ditadura envergonhada, A ditadura escancarada, A ditadura derrotada, A ditadura encurralada, and A ditadura acabada*. For a journalistic perspective of the military regime, see Carlos Chagas’s *A ditadura militar e os golpes dentro golpe*. See also the award-winning documentary *O dia que durou 21 anos*, which examines the influence of the US government in overthrowing Goulart.

<sup>16</sup> Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979) sought to gradually reintroduce democratic rule through a *distensão*, or political detente. AI-5 was suspended, officially restoring habeas corpus and eliminating many of the harshest repressions of the military regime, although unsanctioned torture continued against communist sympathizers and urban guerrillas, even resulting in the death of a few political prisoners. Geisel faced political opposition from hard-liners in a period of economic instability due to the global petroleum crisis, which continued well into the presidency of his successor, João Batista Figueiredo (1979–1985). In August 1979, Figueiredo’s administration passed a general amnesty for political prisoners and even those accused of torture, which led to the hard right bombing a number of left-wing targets. These actions galvanized public opinion, demanding presidential elections, known as *Diretas Já*. After a few false starts, a civilian government was reinstated with the election of Tancredo Neves, who unfortunately passed away the evening before his inauguration. His vice-president elect, José Sarney, became president on 15 March 1985, thus marking the end of over two decades of military rule. For further information regarding the transition from military to democratic rule, see Burns (464–91), Fausto (270–310), Reid (103–108, 118–120). For information regarding specific texts reviewed by the *Divisão de Censura de Diversões Públicas*, see Sandra Reimão’s *Repressão e Resistência: Censura a livros na ditadura militar*.

<sup>17</sup> The Associação Paulista de Críticos de Arte awarded Buarque and Pontes the Prêmio Molière, which they declined in protest of the censorship and probation of two other plays that year: *O abajur lilás*, by Plínio Marcos, and *Rasga coração*, by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho (Homem 131–32).

<sup>18</sup> One cannot help but be reminded of a similar plot device used more than thirty years later in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), in which the titular character hides himself in a lead-lined refrigerator to save himself from a blast at a nuclear test site. While it is unlikely Fagundes Telles indirectly alludes to the threat of nuclear war in “Seminário dos Ratos,” the fridge certainly represents one of the few places protected from the imminent threat of annihilation. (As a side note, the waterfall scene of *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* was filmed at Foz de Iguaçu, at the junction of the Paraná and Iguazu rivers, on the border of Argentina and Brazil.)

<sup>19</sup> For critical discussion on these topics, see Dendle’s *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, Paffenroth’s *Gospel of the Living Dead*, Shaviro’s *The Cinematic Body*, and Williams’s *The Cinema of George A. Romero*.

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