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Postcolonial Pandemics and Undead Revolutions: Contagion as Resistance in Con Z de Zombie and Juan de los muertos

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“Morir por la patria es vivir”

--*La Bayamesa*

Argentinian director Alejandro Brugués’s 2011 Cuban-Spanish film *Juan de los muertos* and Mexican playwright Pedro Valencia’s 2013 play *Con Z de zombie* spring from similar roots: both initially place the blame for each country’s zombie apocalypse at the feet of the United States. In Brugués’s film, the accusation is clear but never proven: news reports interspersed through the film state that the country is being invaded by “dissidents” paid by the U.S. government, though there is no political or military U.S. presence in the film beyond the symbolic presence of the country’s flag. In Valencia’s Mexico, the cause is entirely unknown: Randy, the zombie-narrator-protagonist, does not know how it began. He does, however, take satisfaction in the knowledge that the plague is heading north, since the undocumented zombie immigrants would be impossible to contain: “[L]o que hubiera dado por ver a un zombie latino partiéndole su madre a la border patrol, ¡por fin se habrían metido su ley antiinmigrante por el culo!” (I.2, unpaginated) Both texts propose the idea of contagion as a double-edged sword that can be an instrument of resistance or oppression; as such, they underline the political and economic structures that dictate how human life is valued (and not) in both post-revolutionary countries. Brugués and Valencia portray the 21st century Latin American zombie as a vector of and participant in this double-edged contagion, unraveling and complicating apocalyptic outbreak narratives while articulating sociopolitical critiques of their respective countries that operate on a national and global level.

In *Juan de los muertos*, La Habana is overrun by zombies—or, as the news programs insist, “dissidents”—sent from the United States to cause trouble. The anti-hero and military veteran Juan (Alexis Díaz de Villegas) and his group of friends find a way to profit from the invasion by starting a business to kill the “dissidents” when their family members cannot or prefer not to. Their tag line explains the film’s title: “Juan de los muertos, matamos a sus seres queridos.” As they struggle to stay alive and collect their fees, Juan tries to establish a fatherly relationship with his long-estranged adult daughter Camila (Andrea Duro) while they battle zombies together. In the end, the surviving members decide against going into the Sierra Maestra (drawing a clear parallel to the 1956 retreat of Fidel Castro and his few surviving followers after an initial clash with Fulgencio Batista’s army) and set sail for Miami instead. Juan stays behind to continue the fight, leaping into a crowd of moaning zombies as the film credits roll.

Valencia’s *Con Z de zombie* follows Randy, an advertising major turned taxi driver turned (mostly) zombie in the midst of the zombie apocalypse in Mexico City.¹ While telling the audience his story, Randy happens upon an injured child

whom he dubs Pumocu (short for “puta mocoso culero”) and attempts to help him without giving into his desire to eat him. Pumocu turns out to be a girl dressed as a boy, trained in combat by her tío Mauro, a veteran of various Latin American conflicts from the 1970s on. The play is interspersed with video clips played on three screens behind the actors on the stage that fill in the characters’ memories and illustrate their stories and desires. As in *Juan de los muertos*, they set off for Miami at the end, this time in hopes of finding Pumocu’s mother. Neither work tells us whether or not they make it.

My analysis is divided into three parts that follow the three stages of a traditional post-Romero zombie narrative: outbreak, resistance, and containment.² In the first section, I use Priscilla Wald’s work on contagion and outbreak narratives as a platform from which to examine the ways in which these particular zombie infections emerge and spread, as well as the participation and responsibilities of the news media and political entities in representing and responding to the crisis.³ Giorgio Agamben’s theorizations of bare life and the state of exception are essential to my analysis as well, as it offers a useful position from which to read the apocalyptic environments of these outbreak narratives and the beings that populate them. Finally, I am interested in the social anxieties and critiques that are laid bare through the outbreak narratives in Brugués’s *La Habana* and Valencia’s *Mexico City*, as well as the ramifications of the outbreak and its state-controlled and diegetic narratives on a national and global scale.

In the second section, the resistance to the zombie apocalypse is presented in the form of alliances of small groups that have formed to fight for their own survival against the zombie hordes. In Brugués’s and Valencia’s productions, the idea of resistance is complicated by problematizing the idea of the zombie itself. Brugués’s crew of zombie killers for hire frequently remark that the city and its inhabitants seem unchanged to them, suggesting that the zombified state of decay of the nation and its citizens has been in effect for much longer than the state-sponsored news outlets would admit. In doing so, he draws on a classic trope in zombie films: what Bill Clemente calls “the common identification of the living dead with the living humans who strive to survive” (70). Valencia, meanwhile, plays with the potential and power of the sentient zombie, as explored by Emily Maguire in this issue and by Kevin Boom, Kelly Gardner, and others. Randy’s zombie state is not an either/or binary, but rather a fluid continuum between the thinking, articulate human and the rabid, speechless zombie, and Randy speaks and acts from various points on that continuum throughout the play. The concluding section on containment carries a question mark, as both play and movie are open-ended in ways that push back against the paradigmatic outbreak narrative that Wald critiques in her own work. This narrative is meant to end neatly: the threat is contained, the disease is cured, and humanity, civilization, and science triumph. Instead, Brugués and Valencia explore the double-edged potential of unruly

narratives and uncontrollable subjects (zombie and otherwise) as well as the consequences of the imposition of the framework of the outbreak narrative in response to national and global crises.

1. OUTBREAK, OR, APOCALYPSE WITHOUT A CAUSE

While neither *Juan de los muertos* nor *Con Z de Zombie* offers a concrete origin or cause of the zombie apocalypse, both texts propose a number of possible causes to the zombie apocalypse. As such, the outbreak narrative is destabilized from the beginning by suggesting multiple readings of the context of the outbreak and its consequent networks of contagion. These range from individual to national to international, and as such resist the simplistic readings or constructions of “us” and “the other” created by that narrative. Furthermore, as Wald observes, “Outbreak narratives and the outbreak narrative have consequences” (117). As Brugués and Valencia explore the concrete consequences of these multiple and unstable origin stories, they also interrogate the ongoing state of exception (à la Agamben) in which both storylines play out, recognizing the bare life produced by the zombie plague and offer the uncomfortable (if not exactly groundbreaking) reminder that the distance between zombie and human is not so great after all. In this section, I explore the outbreak narratives from *Juan de los muertos* and *Con Z de zombie*, the institutions that produce and shape the narratives, and the ramifications of these narratives on a national and individual scale.

In *Juan de los muertos*, the news of the outbreak and the state’s response is communicated solely through the media. After Juan and his friends observe the film’s first public zombie attack at the headquarters of the Comité de la Defensa de la Revolución in La Habana, the film cuts to an official news report that issues a warning about “grupúsculos de disidentes pagados por el gobierno de los Estados Unidos.” This is the first proposed source of the outbreak: not just U.S. imperialism, but the U.S. dollars paid to these ‘radical groups of dissidents’ to cause trouble on the island. The U.S. has been a convenient boogeyman for the Castro regime over the years, but it has also done much to earn that reputation, given the economic sanctions that have been exercised by the United States against Cuba in the form of various embargos since 1958.⁴ Nonetheless, none of the characters are deceived by this or other official discourses or explanations. Rather than focus on the economic implications of the first news report, however, Maribel Cedeño Rojas draws a direct line from that scene to article 53 of the Cuban constitution, in which free speech and freedom of the press are listed among the rights and privileges of Cuban citizens. This freedom has its limits, however since it must also be

conforme a los fines de la sociedad socialista. Las condiciones materiales para su ejercicio están dadas por el hecho de que la prensa, la radio, la

televisión, el cine y otros medios de difusión masiva son de propiedad estatal o social y no pueden ser objeto, en ningún caso, de propiedad privada, lo que asegura su uso al servicio exclusivo del pueblo trabajador y del interés de la sociedad. (VII.53, unpaginated)

Given this constitutional context, Cedeño Rojas dryly notes, “no sorprende que en el noticiero se propague una información ajena a la realidad” (285). The idea of the news media misleading the general public is a common trope in horror and action films and is far from unique to Cuba. It is not “fake news” in general but rather the specific and continuous parody of revolutionary political discourse throughout Brugués’s film that grounds it in the Cuban communist regime.

While the characters in *Juan de los muertos* are never misled by the unreliable news reports and other political propaganda that appear throughout the film, these apparently comedic intervals demonstrate that even the most blatantly false outbreak narratives have their consequences. Wald explains, “As they disseminate information, they affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies” (117). If we consider *Juan de los muertos* in the light of Wald’s theory, even blatantly unreliable information can be effective in this regard, as the lack of reliable information leaves Juan and his friends at a loss as to how to read and react to the crisis unfolding in front of them. This plays out for laughs in an early scene in which Juan’s elderly neighbor Yiya (Elsa Camp) calls him for help, since her husband Rogelio (Argelio Sosa) has just died. Soon after Juan arrives, Rogelio opens his eyes, stands up, and begins to groan. Since he has spent the last fifteen years in a wheelchair unable to walk, Yiya thinks it is a miracle. Juan, recognizing the symptoms, calls his friend Lázaro (Jorge Molina) and Lázaro’s son Vladi (Andros Perrugoría) to help. Once Rogelio turns violent, an alarmed Yiya blames his condition on “las medicinas que dan de donación vendidas en el policlínico,” suggesting a critique of a system in which, as Cedeño Rojas states, “hay que conformarse con lo que hay, así sea dañina para la salud” (289). This scene is also noteworthy in that it offers its first plausible origin story, rooted in a corrupt or inadequate healthcare system.⁵ Juan and his friends, meanwhile, are at a loss, since no one in the film is familiar with zombies or zombie folklore—which is a curious lapse of cultural knowledge, given the widespread dissemination of the U.S. Romeroesque zombie and the zombie’s own origins in the Caribbean.⁶ While they know Rogelio is not a dissident, they have no idea what he *is*, and as such have to shuffle through half-baked notions of religious or mythical folklore in their attempts to defeat or subdue him. It is only by accident that they discover what will kill the undead: a direct blow to the head, administered with the cross that Juan had been using in a humorously profane attempt at an exorcism.

Unlike Juan, Lázaro, and the rest of the zombie-killing crew, Valencia's Randy knows exactly what a zombie is, and exactly what he is. In terms of zombie lore and popular culture, *Con Z de zombie* is even more deliberately derivative than *Juan de los muertos*, to the point that the cast and crew watched episodes of *The Walking Dead* during the rehearsal process (Dalton 7). Mixing a comic book aesthetic with a long line of influences from Mexican and U.S. zombie films, Valencia creates a zombie protagonist who can only speak to the audience for most of the play; when he tries to speak to other characters, they hear the grunts and growls that one might expect from a post-Romero era zombie. Randy spends an entire scene bemoaning his fate before telling the audience what has happened. As with *Juan de los muertos*, the media reports from government sources are unreliable and ineffective, but Valencia's text explores more deeply the security and economic ramifications involved in the various outbreak narratives.

Recalling Wald, these narratives affect survival rates and contagion routes, decide which groups and individuals will be stigmatized, and change economics. In Valencia's play, the incompetent Mexican government (no names of individuals or political parties are used) issues a series of guesses, all with significant fallout. It blames the H1N1 virus, after which people stop touching each other. The blame is then shifted to the bird flu, to Mad Cow Disease, and then to a particularly lethal combination of bird flu and Mad Cow Disease, all of which quickly sends the agricultural and food service sectors of the country into financial ruin. Later it was decided that the disease was transmitted through saliva, and "en esos días darse un beso en la boca era una verdadera prueba de amor" (I.2). A frustrated Randy relates, "El puto secretaria de salud salía diciendo que todo estaba bajo control, no tenían ni una puta idea de lo que era pero lo tenían controlado" (I.2). In the desire to impose an outbreak narrative to make sense of the pandemic, Mexican government officials issued inaccurate narratives and explanations that devastated the country's economy and fomented tremendous mistrust and physical distance among its citizens. It was no longer safe to greet one another, touch, or kiss, since any of those actions were believed to carry the risk of exposure and contamination.

Recalling Wald's suggestion that "[c]ommunicable disease is a function of social interactions" (485), Valencia's narrative goes one step further to illustrate the isolation, alienation, and stigmatization that come from the fear of face-to-face social interactions on any scale. It also clearly echoes the real-life cautionary measures that were taken in Mexico during the swine flu outbreak of 2009: large public gatherings (including church services, soccer games, and theater events) were discouraged, and citizens were advised to wear masks and to avoid hugs or handshakes in an attempt to avoid spreading or contracting the virus (Centers for Disease Control 469).

This fear and isolation are heightened in Valencia's Mexico, since his zombies have a long incubation period from infection to full zombification and can

infect a great number of people before completely transforming. If anyone can be what Wald calls a “healthy carrier” –an asymptomatic, contagious subject—then nobody can be trusted, everyone is an Other, and the very social fabric of the country comes unraveled. As Randy recalls, “Nadie tenía la certeza. El gobierno nos mentía, qué raro, narcos, olas de ilegales centroamericanos, si eras moreno, lacio y con acento extraño, te jodías, ¡bang!” (I.2) Even though anyone might be a carrier, it is no surprise that the most feared potential carriers are narcos, “illegal” immigrants from Central America, or those who fit the alarmingly broad physical profile, thus implying that anyone with indigenous features (straight hair, dark skin, and a strange or foreign accent) is suspect.

If we follow Wald’s paradigm in which countries are framed as ecosystems in the outbreak narrative, Valencia indicates two primary threats to the health of the Mexican national ecosystem in the ever-shifting yet potent official outbreak narratives: the narcos, a local strain that the government has apparently struggled to eradicate for years, and the flow of migrants from Central American countries, presented as foreign invaders that pose a threat to the general health of the nation. Equating immigrants or perceived foreigners with illness and contamination is nothing new since, as Wald indicates, there is a long history of outbreak narratives that create a sense of “epidemiological belonging” in response to microbes that know no borders (33). The zombie also has a long history of defying borders, and even more so in its posthuman and sentient theorizations, as I explore in more detail in the next sections. Part of the potency and the attraction of the outbreak narrative, Wald argues, is in making the invisible visible, and this is evident in the way the government’s own narratives attempt to associate visual markers with an invisible disease (38-9). Rather than shore up the rule of law through attempts to calm the populace by stating that the infection has been identified and controlled, those statements dissolve it. The surviving citizens, like Juan and his friends, do not believe the government’s statements, but the Mexican government’s outbreak narrative and its scapegoats (narcos, immigrants) still have the power to evoke enough fear that the survivors respond by shooting first and asking questions later.

In *Con Z de zombie*, there is a particularly high concentration of healthy carriers among sex workers, and it is through an encounter with an asymptomatic prostitute that Randy himself is infected. While this initially suggests a conservative, moralistic reading of the zombie state as a sexually transmitted disease or as punishment for purchasing sex, the following scene indicates that the origins of Randy’s zombification are more personal than his original story would indicate. He was a widower before the outbreak, he tells us, and describes how he met his wife during one of his shifts driving a taxi. They marry and she becomes pregnant, but she begins to hemorrhage about four months into the pregnancy. The doctors operate to try to save the child, but cannot, and one of the surgeons accidentally leaves a glove inside her while stitching her up, which causes an

infection and kills her also.

As in *Juan de los muertos*, the critique of the national health system in this scene is clear, but without the comedic gloss of Brugués's film.⁷ "Hace tres años que la enterré," Randy tells us. "Desde entonces soy lo que soy. No hay diferencia" (I.3). As articulated by Lauro and others, a significant majority of post-Romero zombie films present the zombie apocalypse as a response to consumerism and capitalist exploitation of the masses. Valencia articulates this critique as well, but includes a more intimate cause for zombification: grief produced by loss, which in this case is the result of an incompetent national health care system. Randy hates driving a taxi and cannot find work related to his degree in advertising; as such, the play suggests that the sudden loss of his wife and unborn child were what really turned him into a zombie before any kind of infectious contact with the carrier/sex worker. Valencia has said in several interviews that the play "uses the backdrop of a worldwide zombie apocalypse as an allegory for contemporary Mexican drug violence" (Dalton 1), and his use of the zombie figure offers multiple readings. While the parallels between the zombies and the narcos (specifically, the Zeta cartel) are unmistakable (Dalton 3-4), Valencia also shows a population zombified by fear and grief over personal losses due to drug violence as well as an inadequate state apparatus that cannot keep its own population healthy and an economy that requires its citizens to take jobs that require long hours of mind-numbing work to survive. Brugués's and Valencia's refusal to offer a single cause or origin story for the ensuing apocalypses requires the characters and the viewers to consider all of them, since even the most evidently false outbreak narratives have concrete consequences for the residents of the countries that produce them.

2. RESISTANCE AND REBEL ALLIANCE(S)

Juan de los muertos and *Con Z de zombie* push back against the implications of the respective outbreak narratives through the formation of alliances to survive, which is a canonical response to zombie invasions for the last half-century or more. The zombies in both texts may be read as part of the resistance as well, particularly if we follow the double reading of the zombie that Sarah Juliet Lauro proposes in *The Transatlantic Zombie*: "For the zombie signifies both of these things at once, inseparably: the positive, resistive return of the revenant and the specter enslaved, doomed to repeat. Therefore, the zombie may be the most apt hauntological figure, representing both our adaptation to existence in a "condition of aftermath" and the futility of attempting it" (2). Lauro's focus on the zombie's Haitian roots of slavery and rebellion provide the zombie with the double-edged force that offers productive readings of the zombies in Brugués's and Valencia's texts.⁸ While she recognizes that the post-Romero zombie and its U.S. audience have largely lost touch with (or are unaware of) the zombie's Haitian colonial roots, she also insists that those roots

have maintained a spectral presence in contemporary zombies. “It is not my claim that this animation of the zombie metaphor is unique to the undead...but only that its historical content (as an appropriated imagery that resists its own appropriation) is uniquely in synch with its form, which originally represented a slave raised from the dead to labor, who revolts against his masters” (4). This alignment of historical content and form in the posthuman, border-defying zombies of *Juan de los muertos* and *Con Z de zombie* offers an alternative parallel reading that highlights the tension between the oppression and resistance of the zombie figure in the context of the play and the film.

This is particularly true in regard to Randy, whose liminal status between zombie and human allows him to articulate and reflect upon his situation in a way that has the potential to, as Kelly Gardner suggests in her work on the sentient zombie, “[discover] the complex nature of its othered monstrosity” (142). Read in the specific context of Valencia’s play, this self-examination requires and insists upon an individualization that, as David Dalton argues, “undermines the reigning biopolitics of the drug trade in present-day Mexico by asserting Randy’s *bios*” (5). I would take this one step further to suggest that the assertion of Randy’s *bios* reverberates within and beyond the biopolitics of the drug trade to establish his life as a citizen in the face of the other zombifying forces in the play as well, encompassing the structural violence of the political, economic, and medical infrastructure of the nation-state in his critical gaze.

As Maribel Cedeño Rojas notes, “una película de zombis requiere además del monstruo que garantiza su pertinencia al subgénero, un grupo de personajes que en la situación de crisis formen una alianza fraternal” (280). She is largely correct in this assertion, since it is only in the last decade or so that comic books, films, and TV shows have emerged to work against the grain of the post-Romero zombie genre.⁹ Both *Juan de los muertos* and *Con Z de zombie* work within the classic Romero-esque paradigm in which “los héroes son...los marginados de la sociedad, los antihéroes que se unen en una situación de excepción” (281). Unlike Romero’s films, in which the uninfected humans generally proved more dangerous to each other than the zombies themselves, the bonds between the characters in Brugués’s and Valencia’s texts prove vital to not only survive the apocalypse but also to propose a way out of the state of exception in which they have been living.

“Yo soy un sobreviviente,” Juan tells his friend Lázaro in the first few minutes of the movie. “Sobreviví a Mariel, sobreviví Angola, sobreviví al Período Especial y la cosa esa que vino después. A mí nada más que me das un filo y yo me las arreglo.” The speech appears to be a mantra of sorts for Juan that is not (only) in response to the zombie crisis, since he first relates it early in the film, just before the outbreak. Juan, Lázaro, Vladi, la China (Jazz Vilá), and El Primo (Elicer Ramírez) were already a “team of outcasts” before the film’s events began (*Transatlantic Zombie* 102). The outbreak, then, did not shape their community so

much as give it a new purpose by forming a zombie-killing business.

Notably, it is Juan's military experience, acquired in various international and domestic conflicts over the years, that best prepares him to confront the crisis at hand. The film reminds us of this frequently, as in an early scene in which he dispatches two zombies at a time in an impressive maneuver with a broken television antenna and explains casually, "Esto lo aprendí en Angola." Juan's service in the Cuban military does not foster any loyalty to or belief in the ideas of communism or the Revolution; instead, his training and combat experience are explicitly linked to his ability to survive and to effectively assess and confront crisis situations. As such, his military past is the foundation of what Emily Maguire calls his "unorthodox, unsanctioned habits of survival" (179). Maguire further notes that the ideal person to confront the zombie apocalypse is not "a shining example of Cuba's "New Man," the model socialist individual envisioned by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, but someone Guevara might have viewed as a social failure" (181). Bianka Ballina reinforces Maguire's point in her analysis of *Juan de los muertos* as a "zombie-slacker film" and suggests that the film "uses the slacker to redefine productivity and propose new modes of social homogeneity/inclusion outside the revolutionary rhetoric" (199). Omar Rodríguez goes so far as to suggest that Brugués's Juan functions as a sort of anti-Juan Quin Quin, the model of the "New Man" described in Guevara's famous essay "El nuevo hombre" (198). In other words, the paradigms and the ideologies of the Cuban revolutionary regime have become zombies themselves, and new models must be created to contend with current realities.

The group's mishaps as they fight to survive are frequently played for laughs, as in the previously described episode with Rogelio, the newly zombieified neighbor. However, these misadventures have a purpose, if we follow Sara Armengot's work on "emergency thinking" in Brugués's film. Drawing from Elaine Scarry's *Thinking In an Emergency* (2011), Armengot reads *Juan de los muertos* as a series of lessons of what not to do in moments of crisis, though the surviving characters manage to adapt and learn over time. Scarry observes that the "implicit claim of emergency" in a nation-state requires swift action and the suspension of thought (and therefore governance) (7-8). The United States, the country supposedly responsible for Cuba's zombie outbreak, is also a country that is alarmingly "saturated with emergency rule" (Scarry 4), and so it is no surprise that the film's zombies are the "American-made contagious cannibal variety spawned in U.S. cinema" (*Transatlantic Zombie* 102). Even so, Lauro reads resistance in the mere act of returning this appropriated zombie to its Caribbean origins, and it is through their confrontations with these American/ized zombies that Juan and his friends gradually adapt tactics of habit and deliberative thinking that Scarry proposes in times of emergency (Armengot 12, *Transatlantic Zombie* 102, Scarry 98-9).

If, as Wald proposes, communities are shaped by crises that “[make] visible the social interactions of the imagined community” (37), Juan’s soliloquy recounts a number of the crises that could have brought the group together prior to the zombie outbreak. Juan and his crew begin to shape an effective response plan when they begin to deliberate: that is, they meet to discuss what they know about the ‘dissidents’ and shape their training accordingly. However, it is not until they also focus on each other as a group and are prepared to make sacrifices for one another that they reach a place in which they can make the choice to stay or to leave the island. While *la China* and *El Primo* are dispatched about halfway into the film, the core group of Juan, *Lázaro*, *Vladi*, and *Camila* remain to the end, intending to set sail for the United States as so many have before them. In her analysis of Brugués’s film, *Lauro* recognizes their disaffected state, but also argues: “That Juan ultimately prefers to join the zombie horde (or die in battle) rather than go to the United States is the ultimate act of defiance, even if his politics and his economic philosophy seem to run counter to this grand gesture” (102). Juan’s soliloquy functions as a secular rosary of sorts, even as it suggests to the viewer that his death might not be so certain after all. The potential for resistance increases when, during the credits, we see that the other three have returned to fight alongside him as the soundtrack shifts to *Sid Vicious*’s sneering rendition of “My Way.”

The outbreaks of *Juan de los muertos* and *Con Z de zombie* also serve to create and strengthen family or family-like bonds; this happens with Juan and his daughter *Camila*, and, as we will see later, with *Randy*, *Pumocu*, and *Tío Mauro*. *Camila*, who had returned to Cuba after years of living in Spain with her mother, finds herself trapped by the zombie outbreak on an island with a father whom she barely acknowledges as such, calling him by his name for most of the film. During the resistance, however, *Camila* forms an integral part of Juan’s group, revealing impressive acrobatic zombie-fighting skills while clad in attire that roughly resembles that of *Lara Croft* from the *Tomb Raider* videogames and films. Near the end of the film, Juan rescues a child from the clutches of his zombified father and places him in the boat the crew has built, choosing to stay behind and fight. It is this selfless act that prompts a tearful *Camila* to call him “Papá” for the first and only time. If we follow *Armengot*’s claim that “survival is intimately connected to concern for others (12),” Juan’s sacrifice and *Camila*’s concern for her father offer a note of hope for the daunting battle that awaits them.

This connection between survival and concern for others is evident in *Con Z de zombie* as well, as seen in the trio that *Randy*, *Pumocu*, and *Tío Mauro* eventually form. To reach this place of concern, however, *Randy* must first mount his own resistance against his rabid and nonverbal zombie state. The initial connection to his own sense of self and of humanity is through space and through memory, both of which he accidentally accesses when he stumbles upon a bunker on the outskirts of the city. *Valencia* said in an interview that he would have liked

to present the bunker as a visible map of Randy's brain, with spaces reserved for images that would represent his memories of his wife, his sense of self, and other elements of his past.¹⁰ While the realities of staging prevented this, the idea of the bunker-as-mental-map is still a striking one since, as Randy tells the audience, "Estando aquí [en el bunker] aún puedo conservar lo que me queda de humano" (I.1). This is further indicated when Randy stocks the bunker with food and medical supplies that he does not need but that a human would, suggesting that he is preparing either for an encounter with a human, or even with his own humanity should he ever be able to eat normal food again. That space provides him with the solitude and the silence necessary to think – to deliberate, in Elaine Scarry's terminology – to distance himself from his thoughtless zombie state, and even to prepare for future emergencies.

The bunker's humanizing space is also what prevents Randy from eating Pumocu, whom he finds asleep on the floor in the middle of the bunker at the beginning of Act I, Scene 3. The battle between thoughtless action and deliberate habit is in play during the scene since, as Randy admits, "Mi instinto me dice trágatelo pero mi cabeza me dice ¡acuérdate!, ¡acuérdate!" Even so, their relationship gets off to a difficult start: when he reaches out in a gesture of affection to the sleeping child, she awakens and promptly shoots him in the chest with the gun she has been clutching.¹¹ The two spend the next scene trying to understand one another; Randy has enough humanity or self-control to not eat her, but he has still not regained the power of speech—only the audience can understand him. Pumocu, as it turns out, is mute and communicates in sign language, which Randy cannot understand, so the two must create their own way of communicating.

Pumocu's skill with weapons and hand-to-hand combat come from long training sessions with Tío Mauro, a veteran of various military conflicts in Latin America. Much like Juan, Tío Mauro has his own short litany that he recites to conclude memories of his experiences in combat. Something will provoke a memory of a particular conflict and the terrible injuries incurred there, and he always closes his stories with, "pero al igual que las cucarachas que pisotean, me levante y escapé" – in Argentina during the Dirty War, in the Salvadorian Civil War, in Colombia with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), in the Andes mountains during an expedition, and finally during the zombie apocalypse. For Valencia, Tío Mauro is "la Latinoamérica lastimada, la Latinoamérica que ha luchado, que ha esforzado y que sigue luchando por sus derechos contra la corrupción."¹² Tío Mauro, like Juan, is a battered but resilient symbol of hope in a struggle that seems as endless as it does hopeless.

Even so, Sara Armengot's assertion that "survival is intimately connected to concern for others" applies to Valencia's text just as much as it does to *Juan de los muertos* (12). *Con Z de zombie* takes this assertion one step further and suggests that humanity is intimately connected to this same concern as well. After Pumocu

is injured during a fierce battle with zombie attackers, Randy is finally able to produce intelligible speech to another character (Tío Mauro) as he expresses his worry for her and begs her to wake up (II.8). If we follow Kelly Gardner's work on the sentient zombie, Valencia's play may be read as a zombie memoir of sorts "wherein a certain bond of contract is established between reader and zombie narrator" (147). That Randy relates his story aloud to an audience further heightens the sense of connection and bond of contract, since the audience spends much of the play as the only ones who can understand what he is saying. Indeed, the fact that the members of the audience are the only ones who understand him in his liminal state is telling, as it insinuates that the members of the public may well occupy a liminal state between humanity and thoughtless zombie-hood alongside Randy. In a pattern similar to Armengot's and Scarry's emergency thinking, Randy's own search for humanity and declaration of his sense of self lay out ways of continuing the struggle that do not involve lamenting or assigning blame—but neither do they absolve the responsible parties of their own contributions to the current state of affairs at the local, national, and global level.

3. CONTAINMENT (?) BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

While it is never confirmed that the United States is responsible for the zombie outbreaks in Brugués's Cuba and Valencia's Mexico, the country is also never entirely declared innocent. Both film and play turn the traditional outbreak narrative on its head by daring to suggest that the infection might have come *from* the First World *to* the Third instead of the other way around.¹³ While neither Brugués nor Valencia ignores issues of corruption or dysfunction in Latin American countries, their narratives do insist on the global nature and impact of the threats at hand. This stands in sharp contrast to the classic outbreak narrative (particularly in the U.S.), which tends to reduce global threats to a national solution, thus encouraging xenophobia and isolationism in the face of the diseased and contagious Other (Wald 51). Indeed, both Brugués's *Juan de los muertos* and Valencia's *Con Z de Zombie* speak to anxiety and resistance in the form of unruly im/migrant or foreign bodies that threaten to spill over the borders meant to contain them. If we read the zombie as posthuman, as Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry do in their 2008 "A Zombie Manifesto," these figures do not only disregard borders, but they threaten to eliminate them entirely.¹⁴ Jeremy R. Strong agrees in his 2015 chapter on posthuman futurity, describing 21st century popular culture zombies as creatures that "represent the final breakdown or destruction of [borders of biopower] and other borders" (213). It is in this final reading, then, that these zombie apocalypses offer the most potent resistance, and that pushes back most effectively against the idea of its containment. Eliminating or containing the zombie as threat is not a sufficient response, as Gardner and Strong have argued elsewhere, as revolutions

can imply repetition or rupture.¹⁵ Both Brugués and Valencia present characters who must constantly choose their revolution: that of an undead, unthinking trap of repetition, or of a combined struggle that offers the potential for positive transformation.

Notes

¹ “Valencia’s independent theatre group, Colectivo Sinetiketa, staged over fifty performances of *Con Z de zombie* both in Xalapa and Mexico City” (Dalton 2).

² By “post-Romero,” I refer to what Gustavo Subero describes as the incarnation of the zombie that originates with George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*: “a kind of somnambulistic walking corpse with glaring eyes, emitting grunting sounds and pursuing human flesh to eat” (147). Jeremy Strong also offers an excellent description of “the Romeroverse” that covers the Romero zombie paradigm and the accompanying rules for such films (210-11). While I will talk about other types of zombies in this paper (Kevin Boom offers an excellent breakdown of zombie classifications in “And the Dead Shall Rise” (5-8)), both Brugués and Valencia base their works on the assumption that the viewers are most familiar with the Romero zombie and work with and against this paradigm accordingly. Emily Maguire offers a more explicit analysis of the Romero zombie’s influence on Brugués’s own monsters in “Walking Dead in Havana” (171).

³ While Wald is speaking in terms of actual microbes and illnesses, her work on outbreak narratives still relates strongly to these kinds of zombie narratives as ways of shaping and imagining communities and also underlines the need for national responses to emerging infections with a global impact that, notably, “know no borders,” much like the zombies themselves (53). She distinguishes “outbreak narratives” from “*the* outbreak narrative,” a paradigmatic but evolving narrative of disease emergence that “follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment (114, my italics).

⁴ In his 2017 chapter on *Juan de los muertos*, Bill Clemente observes, “given the United States’ precious invasions, economic domination, and threats contained in documents such as the insidious Platte Amendment (1901)” that initially gave the U.S. *carte blanche* to stage a military intervention in Cuba as they deemed fit, the general Cuban mistrust of the U.S. is understandable (65).

⁵ While the narrative of an inadequate health care system in Cuba is plausible, it is also more complicated than the film or some of its critics suggest, as the film’s critique ignores the impact of Cuban healthcare and medical aid programs on a national and international scale. A deeper examination of this topic lies beyond the scope of this article, but John M. Kirk and H. Michael Erisman’s *Cuban Medical Internationalism* (2009) and Kirk’s *Healthcare without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism* (2015) offer excellent reports and analyses regarding the nation’s approach to medicine and health care.

⁶ Through the ignorance of his characters, Brugués adds a layer of humor in which the zombie is not recognized in the very region in which it was born. Indeed, the only time the word “zombie” is uttered late in the film is by Padre Jones (Antonio Dechent), an American missionary. He explains what the monsters are and says he has a plan to defeat them, but this is lost on Juan and his band, since they do not understand English. The minister is killed by an accidental discharge from Lázaro’s harpoon before he can try to explain further.

⁷ As with Cuba, the narrative of the healthcare system in Mexico is complicated. On the one hand, Mexican immigrants who live a significant distance from the Mexico-U.S. border frequently return

to Mexico for medical services because it is still more accessible than in the United States, which is arguably in the middle of its own healthcare crisis (Bergmark et al. 610-11). The largest insurance provider, the IMSS (Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social), serves private sector employees (such as Randy and his wife) and is overstretched to the point that critical cases frequently end up in emergency care instead of with a specialist. Furthermore, a lack of guidelines for following up on patients can lead to missed diagnoses or a lack of structured care after the initial visit (González Anaya and García Cuéllar 190).

⁸ It should be noted that this argument is built upon Lauro's earlier work with Karen Embry in their 2008 "Zombie Manifesto" (see particularly pp. 90-92).

⁹ Examples include (but are not limited to) the DC Comics series *iZombie* (2010-2012), which would be adapted into a television series on Netflix in 2015; Mexican director Sebastián Hoffman's film *Halley* (2012), and *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-present).

¹⁰ Personal interview, July 11, 2016.

¹¹ Pumocu presents through most of the play as a boy for self-protection, drawing on a long history of female soldiers and warriors who cross-dress for their own safety, but I have chosen to use feminine pronouns from the beginning to avoid confusion.

¹² Personal interview, July 11, 2016.

¹³ See Wald 45.

¹⁴ Neither do they have reason to respect or care about those borders. Persephone Braham's 2015 chapter on Caribbean zombies offers a succinct reminder of that fact in choosing an epigraph from Gertrudis Gómez de Avallaneda's 1841 novel *Sab*: "Los esclavos no tienen patria" (153). Given the zombies' cultural and historic origins, it can reasonably be argued that they, too, have multiple reasons to lack—or, I would argue, to reject outright—the idea of a homeland or *patria* and the borders meant to contain it and them.

¹⁵ See Gardner 76 and Strong 213.

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