



Alambique. Revista académica de
ciencia ficción y fantasía / Jornal
acadêmico de ficção científica e
fantasia

Volume 6
Issue 1 *The Transatlantic Undead:
Zombies in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian
Literatures and Cultures*

Article 7

Eating the Past: Proto-Zombies in Brazilian Fiction 1900-1955

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Recommended Citation

Ginway, M. Elizabeth (2018) "Eating the Past: Proto-Zombies in Brazilian Fiction 1900-1955," *Alambique. Revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía / Jornal acadêmico de ficção científica e fantasia*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2167-6577.6.1.7>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/alambique/vol6/iss1/7>

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Eating the Past: Proto-Zombies in Brazilian Fiction 1900-1955

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to David Dalton and the readers of the manuscript for their insights and patience.

In a “cannibalization” of Gayatri Spivak’s 1988 postcolonial study *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gazi Islam asks, tongue-in-cheek, “Can the subaltern eat?”, thus pointing out the parallels between postcolonial discourse and Brazil’s cultural cannibalism.¹ Here I reformulate the question to ask, “Can the zombie speak?” to analyze the representations of silencing and speech in Brazil’s literary zombies. David Dalton, in an essay that appears in this same issue of *Alambique*, surmises that Latin American zombies are distinct from those of the global North because they may be linked to a long history of cannibalism and barbarism, characteristics attributed to the region’s historically disenfranchised masses. Drawing on works by Oswald de Andrade, Roberto Fernández Retamar and Carlos A. Jáuregui, Dalton makes the case for activist zombies, who, while inarticulate and often silenced, still manage to act against cultural centers because of their historical connection with “cannibalism,” both literal and cultural (5). Andrade’s 1928 “Manifesto antropológico” proposed the creative consumption of foreign models and paradigms as a way of parodying and cannibalizing foreign cultural models, while Retamar’s essay “Calibán” considered the monster to be the embodiment of the subaltern in Latin America within the context of the Cuban Revolution. Carlos A. Jáuregui examines cannibalism as a signifier of power (39) in a re-appropriation of discourse traditionally used to justify the control exercised over the indigenous and enslaved masses in the name of “civilization” (48-63).² Similarly, I argue that Brazil’s proto-zombies can be considered cannibals because they parody foreign models and consume bodies to question hegemonic power.

Who are these “revenants” or proto-zombies that return to haunt Brazil in the first part of the twentieth century? Unlike singular vampires or monsters, they are representations of the rural masses, former slaves, modern consumers, prostitutes and hustlers who remain invisible and faceless, who often cannibalize or parody a Western archetype or paradigm of “civilization,” serving as reminders of the past. While they can “eat,” they cannot always speak, and their mouths and speech are often distorted or reminiscent of the historical silencing of subaltern or cannibal.

I use the term proto-zombie because these figures are not the Haitian slave controlled by a bokor, nor are they the somnambulist zombies of Hollywood in the 1930s, nor the brain-eating zombies of George Romero’s classic 1968 film *The Night of the Living Dead*. As I explain later, zombies are characterized by their lack of speech. These figures of Brazilian literature or folklore bear resemblance to zombies through their lack of communicative ability, yet they are portrayed through language. The term proto-zombie is my own idea of how to speak about literary zombies whose violence, mental incapacity, lack of speech and haunting presence combine to recall characteristics of cinematic zombies.

Several Brazilian short stories and legends from the first half of the twentieth century serve to illustrate the silencing and cultural cannibalism of the proto-zombie: Lima Barreto’s “A Nova Califórnia” (1910), Monteiro Lobato’s “Café, café” (1900), Murilo Rubião’s “O pirotécnico Zacarias” (1943), Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s “Flor, moça, telefone” (1951) and Gilberto Freyre’s “Boca-de-ouro” (1955). Written by canonical authors, these stories have traditionally been considered to be parables condemning greed or madness, yet if we examine them more closely, we discover that they involve the living dead and the contagion characteristic of zombies. I argue that Brazil’s proto-zombie stories mark the transition from a rural, agricultural-based economy to an urban consumer society.

In each story, the disintegration of the rural community or family as well as the social hierarchy and institutions associated with them is manifested in the zombie-like behavior of its characters. While some zombies move fast, even destroying a town almost overnight, others move slowly, representing a bygone era as living-dead figures.

Brazilian folklore provides some antecedents for literary zombies, especially the legend of the “corpo seco,” which figures in stories told in small rural towns throughout the Brazilian interior. First collected by Basílio de Magalhães in his *O folk-lore do Brasil* (1928), such narratives effectively describe the zombie-like figure of the corpo seco,³ which Lúcio Reis Filho has compared to “revenants,” i.e., those who return from the dead in European myth and legend, including vampires and the wandering dead (4-5). He summarizes: “a lenda do corpo-seco porta a tradição do andarilho notívago, traço recorrente na representação dos mortos vivos” (7). The corpo-seco represents the horror of a body without a soul, which, according to folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo, occurred when a person was morally cursed for having committed incest or other acts against a parent or priest, such that his or her body was “rejected” by the earth after burial and condemned to wander like a forgotten mummy (259). In his 1947 *A geografia dos mitos brasileiros*, Cascudo notes that, “No norte do Brasil, o avaro, o incestuoso, o mau filho, tem o corpo rejeitado pelo túmulo. A terra não come a mão que se ergueu contra o pai, mãe ou padre” (259). Similarly, in the southeastern state of São Paulo, sightings of the corpo-seco are reminders of a body that is dried out and cursed, without a chance for an afterlife: “Chamam também corpo-seco, mas a referência se reduz ao encontro do cadáver ressequido e duro como pau, denunciando que houve pecado sem perdão divino” (259). This form of the living dead is not associated with labor, slavery and exploitation as it is in Haiti, where zombies are revived by a bokor in order to do the bidding of others. It is rather a figure representing moral crimes that are particularly repugnant to small town inhabitants.

In their 2008 “Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Age of Advanced Capitalism,” Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry trace the history of the zombie and eventually identify it as a symbol of the posthuman of consumer capitalism. They outline several iterations of zombies linked to different historical periods: those tied to the history of Haiti, slave rebellions, labor and *voodoo* traditions (which they denote with the French spelling, *zombi*); the mainly somnambulist zombies of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood movies, for which they use the *zombie* spelling; and finally the contemporary iterations of the figure in films, especially those associated with global capitalism and consumerism, for which they use the spelling *zombii*. Lauro and Embry postulate that humans now inhabit this third phase, as mindless zombies of global capitalism, feeding off the products of the global market (93). For them, the zombie simultaneously captures the idea of individual powerlessness, because it seamlessly combines the drone worker and the brain-eating consumer, ironically overcoming the subject/object binary, while providing us with an illusion of individuality and freedom (98). This paradigm conveys an increase in speed over time from slower zombies of the past (individuals either cursed or hypnotized by a bokor) to the fast-moving viral zombies of the present (as collective figures of mass culture).

Thus, according to the paradigm of Lauro and Embry, the zombie made its way into the American imagination after the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, and was subsequently popularized or transformed by Hollywood in movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), *Outango* (1936) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), films often interpreted as

reflecting American anxieties about race and sexuality as Ann Kordas explains in her study, “New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies.” Kordas notes that racial fears associated with the “health” of the social body were played out in the treatment of female sexuality in the 1930s and 40s, since turning into a zombie conveyed the idea of punishment for a possible racial or immigrant “invasion” of the American body politic. Kordas also explores psychological repression in the feminist subtext of early zombie movies from the 1930s and 40s. In this type of narrative, women become somnambulistic victims of a manipulative bokor who turns them into zombies that carry out the will of their racialized male masters (Kordas 24). This is captured on screen in the theme of white slavery, the punishment of an independent, sexual woman who threatens the racial, national and patriarchal order (28-29). This fear of female sexuality is hinted at in two Brazilian stories, one by Lima Barreto and the other by Drummond de Andrade, where young women are tempted and punished by death for small acts of defiance.

For some, Lauro and Embry’s concept of *zombii* is too vague, “a nearly-empty signifier carrying a few key-but-infinitely interpretable features (strength through swarming, lack of individuality or identity)” (Moreman and Rushton 4). For others, such as Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, this trait is a strength of the zombie metaphor: “what seems to be an essential characteristic of the zombie is its capacity for mutation and adaptation. Just as the zombie resists legal containment, it resists generic and taxonomic containment; it is remarkably capable of adapting to a changing cultural and medial imaginary” (9). This flexibility is part of the fascination with the zombie and, I would argue, its manifestation in literature.

In Brazilian literature of the first half of the century, the zombie phenomenon is linked to race via slavery as well as to social class via new technologies. I define the proto-zombie as a character who displays zombie-like behaviors and serves as a harbinger of the destruction of the previous order. These proto-zombies may wander, displaced in time, or become monsters that indiscriminately attack other humans. At times, we see an inner transformation of subjectivity, manifested in a sense of lurching or displacement or, conversely, in swarm-like movement. This may reflect the discontinuous pace of economic change in countries of the periphery and semi-periphery, indicating that, in part, the presence of zombies is more an economic phenomenon than a social one.

The disruption of zombies recalls the interruption or historical “spasm” in the social life of a community described by Roberto Esposito (*Communitas* 7). However, he also notes that a community can never completely free itself of those who have violated established boundaries and norms of acceptable behavior, because they are needed to define these boundaries and norms (*Immunitas* 8). Similarly, zombies trigger the action of “immunization,” since they, like a virus, must be surrounded and contained so that they cannot take over or destroy the community, yet remain a part of it in its collective memory.

While cinematic zombies are generally numerous, instinctual, inarticulate and anonymous, literary zombies retain a more individualized and conscious identity. In order to analyze proto-zombies I take my cue from two studies (LaRose and Harpold) of John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and the literary or metaphorical zombies it portrays. In this famous science fiction novel, after an astral phenomenon has blinded most of Earth’s inhabitants, mobile, carnivorous triffid plants appear on Earth, which stun their human prey with a whip-like stinger before consuming them.

Nicole LaRose discusses Wyndham's novel using the paradigm of a figurative zombie, pointing out various characters that manifest zombie-like behavior. The blinded humans in Wyndham's novel display zombie characteristics in their hesitant gait and their desire to hunt and enslave sighted humans. Likewise, the mobile carnivorous triffid plants are reminiscent of zombies in that they target the heads -- i.e., brains -- of their victims (LaRose 166). Finally, LaRose notes that the numbness and blindness of the victims can be interpreted as a literary representation of effects of the Blitz and the new crisis of the socio-economic order following World War II in Britain (169). She is among the first to speculate that the zombie and its mindlessness may be a representation of psychological trauma.

Terry Harpold confirms yet goes beyond LaRose's idea of triffid cannibalism as zombie-like behavior to associate the creatures' unsteady gait and sudden appearance to the uneven pace of economic change (160). The combination of lurching and swarming zombies manifests itself in the horror of emptiness and anticipation of shifting paradigms or the sense of paralysis while being overrun by change (161). Zombie stories, as Harpold notes, both anticipate and revise our reading of the zombie trope in a type of "zombie theory of unfinished history" (160). Here the relentless pace of the zombie, which can be either fast or slow, precarious yet menacing, captures anxieties of vast historic movements as individuals are swept up in waves of uncertainty.

In what follows I use the motifs associated with zombies—their cannibalism, lurching gait, somnambulist-like behavior, lack of speech and acts of violence — that are present in several canonical texts in Brazilian literature to illustrate paradigmatic shifts in the socio-economic order during the first part of the twentieth century. Viewed in isolation, these stories appear unrelated to each other, yet when viewed together, as zombie texts, they "eat the past," illustrating how Brazil's economic shifts have affected displaced populations and social relations. When newly urbanized capitals gained prominence at the turn of the century and continued to grow during the industrialization of the 1930s and 1940s, the result was the creation of mass societies of worker zombies and consumer zombies. Interestingly, the speed or gait of Brazilian proto-zombies correlates not so much to the pace of technological change of each era but to the urgency of the people's plights. Thus, the earliest proto-zombies, those associated with the rural exodus to the cities, move rapidly, while the living dead of resulting industrial societies tend to wander slowly through city streets or homes. The five texts examined here were published between 1900 and 1955. Roberta Cirne's recent graphic novel, *Boca de ouro*, is only partly anomalous, since it is based Gilberto Freyre's two-page text from 1955. By setting her own story in 1913, Cirne refers to the time of Lima Barreto, thus taking us full circle.

Lima Barreto's 1910 "A Nova Califórnia" [The New California] illustrates the idea of zombie contagion *avant la lettre*. When a well-intentioned foreign scientist/chemist named Flamel arrives in a small Brazilian town, his mysterious experiments evoke curiosity, especially after he recruits the most respected men in town—the pharmacist, the local politician and a military man—to help him carry out his research. At the same time, local inhabitants are outraged when they hear that grave robbers have invaded the local cemetery. The city mounts a guard to watch over the graveyard, with increasing curiosity regarding Flamel's experiments.

Later, when Flamel's secret is revealed—that he is able to convert human bones into gold—the idea spreads like a virus through the quiet town, suddenly turning its good

citizens into unthinking monsters who first turn to the cemetery in search of bones and then murderously to each other to obtain this source of potential wealth. The infection is so complete as to turn the town of three to four thousand into an apocalyptic wasteland in one night, without a single respectable soul left alive, while the foreign instigator and his cohort escape unscathed.

Roberto de Sousa Causo includes this story as the opening tale of his anthology *Os melhores contos brasileiros de ficção científica: Fronteiras* (2009), justifying the science fiction label by the story's reference to alchemy and the Philosopher's stone and interpreting the tale as a parable of greed that reveals the fragility of moral values (25). We first see cultural "cannibalism" in Barreto's borrowing a figure from the European tradition of alchemy and esoteric thought, Nicholas Flamel (1330-1418), who believed he could change base metals into gold. Barreto's modern-day Flamel uses bones—remnants of the human body—of small farmers and slaves, reinforcing the idea of the zombie/cannibal in Latin America.

Depicting a microcosm of Brazilian society in the First Republic, Lima Barreto's story uses what we may classify as zombie imagery to recall the use of slave labor in the past, while anticipating the dangers of technology, consumerism and competition implied by Brazil's economic transformation. For example, Cora, a young female inhabitant of the small town of Tubiacanga, is at first upset and outraged when she hears about the desecration in the cemetery. Aware of the opportunities that the city offers when compared to small town life, she longs to show off her beauty on the streets of Rio de Janeiro where she could win appreciation and perhaps make a successful match in the future. After learning the secret of the experiments, however, she concludes that desecration is not so bad, since the past has nothing to do with her: "Que tinha ela com o túmulo de antigos escravos e humildes roceiros? Em que pode interessar aos seus lindos olhos pardos o destino de tão humildes ossos? Porventura o furto deles perturbaria o seu sonho de fazer radiar a beleza de sua boca, de seus olhos e do seu busto nas calçadas do Rio?" (31). This is one of the few explicit connections made with slavery and Brazil's rural past, neither of which hold any interest or relevance for Cora, whose principal desire is to trade her looks for social ascension in the new urban social order. Her anticipated social mobility also suggests the fears of women and sexuality described by Kordas in the figure of the female zombie, representing the transformation of a domesticated woman into a more sexualized independent one, outside the parameters of small-town morality.

The story also appears to reflect Harpold's concept of zombie time. After pages of tedious, pedantic debates in which local pundits argue over who is the most powerful authority in town, along with insights into the hopes and dreams of the simple townspeople, the whole society collapses in a matter of two paragraphs at the end of the story. Similar to today's zombies, who do not recognize their former friends or family, Barreto's metaphorical zombies do not show any sentimentality towards loved ones: in fact, one character's child convinces his father to kill his mother in order to provide them with bones for conversion into gold. The only survivor of the apocalypse is the town drunk, who refuses to participate and remains untouched by the viral-like gold fever. As an alcoholic, he is uninterested in the ruthless competition of the new order and resistant to the lure of power and wealth, which destroys those who become infected.

It is significant that the town's residents begin their rampage by digging up the bones of slaves, those who for centuries created Brazil's wealth. In doing so, they unearth

this forgotten and repressed fact of rural life, which returns with devastating vengeance in the form of the imposition of neocolonial structures and socio-economic change. We note that, after the abolition of slavery in 1888, a collapse of the coffee market resulted in a large rural migration to urban centers, an event that may have inspired Lima Barreto to write this story.⁴

The son of a plantation-owning family in São Paulo and hence a member of the social elite, Monteiro Lobato takes a different view of rural life than Lima Barreto, an Afro-descendant from Rio de Janeiro's urban outskirts. Lobato's stories in the 1919 collection *Cidades mortas* refer to the slow death of the small towns in the coffee-growing region of the state of São Paulo in the Vale do Paraíba during the first decades of the early twentieth century. Lobato looks at the descendants of both slaves and the plantation class in his stories as they suffer from zombie-like symptoms. In the story "Café, café," which first appeared in 1900 (182), we witness the zombification of a coffee plantation owner, Major Mimbuia. As a landowner, he is not the drone or worker commonly portrayed in zombie literature, but rather a rich man who is unable to adjust to the new economic reality of falling coffee prices. He is immune to all the rational arguments and alternative crops suggested by neighbors and other farmers around him. He believes that the price of coffee will rise, and year after year, he loses more and more of his wealth, until he is finally forced to sell off his land and the family home. He ends up with only a small parcel of land where the coffee plants are so infested by weeds that they can no longer be harvested. The major is described as "um espectro, já nu de todo, os olhos esbugalhados a se revirarem nas órbitas com desvario. Um espectro sem carnes, só pele carniciada e ossos pontiagudos" (182). As an obsessed man, with his brain almost gone, he does not technically consume the flesh of others, but seems to devour his own flesh in his pursuit of the monocultural product that once brought him wealth. Major Mimbuia's repeated cry of "café, café" reduces him to basic speech and an ever more zombie-like state. Abandoned by all his workers, he alone is left to work the fields and his body takes on the role of slave laborers who once provided the wealth of the planter class. His repetition of a sole phrase robs him of articulate speech and thought.

In her study of the zombie, Mabel Moraña has noted that the zombie provokes the horror of slave labor, considered to be a fate worse than death by many (166), and Lobato evokes such an existence in the living death of the major. The power of Lobato's story lies in its compressed sense of time; years pass in a matter of paragraphs, as we watch the character transform from a confident planter into a metaphorical zombie. His transformation captures how an entire class that had existed for hundreds of years was destroyed in a short span of time, while rural villages were transformed from profitable agricultural communities into "cidades mortas." In these stories, the trope implies an interruption in the natural cycles of rural life and an uncanny sense of suspended or uneven leaps in time. Lobato's slow, lurching coffee baron contrasts with the fast-moving zombie-like ghouls in Lima Barreto's cemetery. When considered together, they illustrate a sense of discontinuous time combining fast and slow in the asynchronies of "zombie time."

While these proto-zombies mark the shift from rural to urban life, the zombies-not-zombies of the post-World War II period represent displaced workers or mind-numbed consumers who act like the living dead. In Brazil, the mid-century period is associated with state capitalism, when large-scale industrial expansion developed in the form of national industries (Hewlett and Reinert 4-5). This expansionist model, based on the American

example of cultivating factories, roads and the automobile industry, was also accompanied by developments in communications and television. Since workers were now also consumers, they became involved in a cycle of consumption that is often portrayed in motifs of zombification, where workers without consciousness or memory appear to be controlled by forces that demand mindless adherence to social pressures and conformism.⁵

The first Brazilian example of the explicitly living dead is the protagonist of Murilo Rubião's story "O pirotécnico Zacarias," originally published in 1943 (Schwarz 99). It is narrated by the eponymous peddler of fireworks, Zacarias, who begins the story by revealing that "Em verdade morri... Por outro lado, também não estou morto" (14). We eventually learn that he was run over by a car, but came back to life. When he attempts to communicate with others, they either flee or freeze, unable to speak: "os meus companheiros fogem de mim, tão logo me avistam pela frente. Quando apanhados de surpresa, ficam estarecidos e não conseguem articular palavra" (14). Interestingly, the colors he sees before and after his accident, are "azul, depois verde, amarelo" (14), then black and red, "semelhante a densas fitas de sangue" (14), recalling his violent death.

The fact he sees the blue, green and yellow of the Brazilian flag allows us to consider Zacarias a collective proto-zombie and to interpret the story in an allegorical way. As a simple street entertainer and peddler of fireworks, he belongs to a pre-industrial order of entertainment and art. Fireworks have no productive value: they serve only to evoke wonder and collective awe during traditional festivals and commemorations. The car that kills him, however, is product of high economic value that isolates drivers from lowly pedestrians. To capture the idea of this contrast of the artisanal and the industrial orders, Rubião uses a divided character who is both alive and dead. If Zacarias is an allegory of Brazil because of his connection with the colors of the flag, he represents those left behind by modernity, who continue to exist, but in a limbo or zombie-like state.

The circumstances of Zacarias's death also highlight marked differences in social status. He is run over by a group of young rich people, whose plan to abandon his body at the side of the road in order to avoid being questioned by the police is foiled when Zacarias unexpectedly stands up and asks to join them at a local bar. However, after this night of revelry with his new "friends," he never manages to find them again. Neither does any official notice of his death appear in newspapers. He appears to exist, but is virtually invisible in the new order, condemned to a living death, wandering like a zombie through the streets.

The name of Zacarias is perhaps a cannibalized or reappropriated version of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah's refusal to believe in the prophecy of the birth of his son rendered him mute, but his speech and faith were restored once he baptized his son. Rubião's Zacarias, on the other hand, is silent because he can no longer communicate with other humans. Condemned to wander, he remains rootless and speechless, outside the society of the new order.

Coincidentally, the story by Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, "Flor, telefone, moça" (1951)—begins in the cemetery of John the Baptist in Rio de Janeiro, where an adolescent girl picks a flower from the grave of an unknown man and carelessly tosses it away. This "deflowering" reverses the usual association of violation and virginity, but the consequences of the act punish the girl and the members of her family, who are unable to restore her peace of mind when the phone rings and a mysterious male voice demands the return of the flower to the grave.

The daughter's subsequent punishment recalls Hollywood zombie films, such as *White Zombie* (1932), in which a woman is hypnotized and controlled by a sorcerer or bokor. In this film, a spurned lover asks a bokor to turn his female love object into a zombie, so that she will bend to his will. The resulting supernatural possession is comparable to living death. In Drummond's story, despite the daughter's reasoned answers and pleas, the voice calls her everyday making the same demand. Living in dread of the phone call, she begins to lose all interest in life. After hearing of her troubles, her father, mother and brother attempt to help her, yet one by one, each fails to appease the voice. The young woman descends into a zombie-like trance, and finally succumbs.

Drummond's story could be interpreted as a conventional cautionary tale about the dangers of disturbing the dead and ghostly haunting. However, the mysterious voice can also be interpreted as a modern bokor, who uses technology, in this case a telephone instead of a hypnotic spell, to control the female zombie victim. When the father goes to the telephone company to disconnect his service, a telephone executive explains that do so, "Seria uma loucura. Então é que não se apurava mesmo nada. Hoje em dia é impossível viver sem telefone, rádio e refrigerador" (24). In the face of these arguments, he relents, showing that the family can no longer disconnect itself from modern conveniences even if it means losing their daughter. Her death is the price of the consumer goods on which they depend to connect them to modernity and its soulless logic. Here the dead man's voice is transmitted by the telephone and repeats the same phrase over and over, effectively "cannibalizing" an object of technology and civilization, momentarily converting it into something monstrous and zombified that silences the girl and her family.

In "Boca de ouro," a popular horror tale anthologized by anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, the eponymous zombie also repeats a single phrase, asking passersby for a light and revealing his gold teeth, laughing as they flee in horror. The associations of gold and tobacco with the New World is well established, tying the figure to colonial sources of wealth. However it is Boca de Ouro's irreverent guffaws that haunt his victims, voicing the revenge of the forgotten "malandros" or scoundrels that haunt Brazil's urban streets. While much of Freyre's work praises Brazil's harmonious synthesis of Europeans and Afro-descendants (*Assombrações* 28), the return of Boca de Ouro suggests that race and class continue to be problematic in Brazilian society.

Freyre is best known for his ground-breaking study *Casa grande e senzala* (1933) about the centrality of Afro-descendants and slavery to Brazil's national culture, yet one of his later contributions is a compilation of ghost, werewolf and vampire stories known as *Assombrações do Recife Velho* [Hauntings of Old Recife] (1955). Freyre's telling of the "Boca-de-Ouro" legend (described below), which is more of a zombie tale than a ghost story, has recently appeared as an online graphic novel written and drawn by Roberta Cirne, who sets her version of the story in 1913 Recife. With its more complex backstory, Cirne's graphic text evokes the horror of Lima Barreto's "A nova Califórnia" (1910), since it shares the motifs of gold and a zombie that moves with uncanny speed.

As one of the oldest regional capitals of Brazil, with a long history of slavery and sugar production, Recife offers a unique urban setting where the repressed past returns to haunt the present in tales of supernatural horror. Freyre recounts his version of the "Boca-de-Ouro" story in a succinct and straightforward way: at the turn of the last century, a man leaves a bar to roam the streets of old Recife in hopes of an amorous encounter, but instead runs into a male stranger wearing a cape, who asks him for a light for his cigarette. The

man then looks up and sees the stranger's decomposing face, sees his gold teeth and smells his fetid breath: "um rosto de defunto já meio podre e comido de bicho, abrilhantado por uma dentadura toda de ouro, encravada em bocaça que fedia como latrina de cortiço" (*Assombrações* 63). Frightened, the man runs away, only to be confronted again by the same putrid face and mocking laughter as he faints dead away. He is later revived by the driver of a milk truck, a black man who soon spreads the man's story of "Boca-de-Ouro" throughout the city.

Freyre notes at the beginning of the tale that, unlike the English ghost "tão preso à sua casa ou ao seu castelo" (*Assombrações* 62), Boca-de-Ouro is a figure that wanders through the streets, illustrating the urban nature of this metaphorical zombie in Brazil. With his gold teeth, decomposing flesh and ability to move extremely quickly, Boca-de-Ouro recalls the motifs found in Lima Barreto's story about gold fever and the desecration of bodies in the cemetery. Boca-de-Ouro's breath is compared to the collective latrine of the "cortiço" or slum, illustrating the inchoate fears of death and disease, typical of the concerns for health and hygiene that drove urban reform in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Brazil. The black milkman stands as a reminder of slavery and the shift in black labor to the urban milieu.

Despite its distance from the economic and political powerhouses of Rio and São Paulo, the northeastern capital of Recife was among the earliest to participate in large scale modernization at the turn of the twentieth century. As in Rio, this period in Recife brought about extensive urban reform linked to issues of public health, which included the demolition of slums and shanties, the renovation of the downtown area and refurbishment and modernization of the port (Pontual 89). Part of this process included the replacement of the old system of mule-drawn trams by a new electric one in 1914. In her re-interpretation of the Boca-de-Ouro figure in graphic novel form, Roberta Cirne refers to this period of modernization of the city, setting her tale in 1913. She also gives more context for the main character, Valdemar, whose story begins as he is asking someone for a light while on the job as a mule-tram driver. He later commiserates with a friend about how the poor are being displaced from the center of the city in order to provide space for new streets for automobiles and electric trams. Valdemar is soon fired as a driver, and without any chance of employment in a newly mechanized world, he turns to crime by running an illegal numbers game. After he becomes rich, he replaces his rotten teeth with gold ones. Later betrayed by his wife and murdered by his partner, Valdemar returns to haunt them as Boca-de-Ouro. Cirne uses Recife's location on the Capibaribe River to explain Boca-de-Ouro's rotting flesh, since his body was dumped in the river where its denizens nibbled away at his decomposing flesh.

In a brief introduction to her comic, Cirne recognizes the similarities between Boca-de-Ouro and other figures in Brazilian folklore as well as the Haitian zombie and modern iterations of the zombie figure in film and television. I would also suggest that Valdemar—although not an uncommon name in Brazil—also recalls that the title character of Poe's 1845 story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," about a man who is hypnotized at the moment of death and suffers in a grotesque zombie-like state for seven months before dying.

Here we have a group of stories about proto-zombies, all of which mark a collective sense of shifting economic paradigms in Brazil: Lima Barreto's ghoulish bone-hunters, Lobato's lurching landowner, and Freyre's putrid Boca-de-Ouro, who typified the diseased

model of zombie, contained and condemned to the past of slavery and monocultural production. The small town settings of the *corpo seco* legend and the threat of disease spread by the undead recall the devastated communities in the texts by Lima Barreto and Monteiro Lobato. Significantly, it is not individual moral crimes that threaten the small rural communities, but instead economic change and instability that provoke zombie outbreaks that can be compared to the spread of a viral disease explored by Esposito, who notes that collective life attempts to “immunize” itself by rejecting any outside threat, while never completely ridding itself of its presence.

For both Rubião and Drummond, the zombie theme takes the form of cultural amnesia in stories that portray more allegorical or metaphorical consumerist zombies. This is a kind of collective trauma that goes almost undetected by its citizens, who appear to willingly undergo their own zombification in order to enjoy the newfound sense of well-being afforded by consumer goods, despite a sense of uncanny conformity or sacrifice. In these stories, the subtler forms of capitalism and consumerist zombies displace the lurching monsters of the past. For some, capitalism means zombification, and as Webb and Byrland have observed, capitalism has an all-consuming underside that “doesn’t weigh human costs. It is simply zombie—hungry and hence focused on feeding and expanding regardless of the consequences” (qtd. in Rushton and Moreman 7). While the cemetery ghouls, the mindless coffee baron and rotting zombie with gold teeth illustrate the violence of economic and cultural change at the turn of the century, the wandering peddler zombie and the dead daughter capture the essence of mass culture and consumerism as it spreads during this period, contributing to a sense of isolation and hypnosis.

Through its strange time lapses and fissures, the zombie trope captures the inarticulate anxiety accompanying the incursion of social and technological change that erodes cultural traditions or institutions, provoking the return of the living dead who refuse to remain buried. These proto-zombies attest to the flexibility of the zombie motif, which resists strict taxonomic boundaries, as noted by Boluk and Lenz (9). As avatars of modernization, zombies can contribute to a re-reading of classic texts through science fiction. They also pave the way for actual zombies that appear in the 1970s, when canonical authors Erico Verissimo and Lygia Fagundes Telles use the zombie motif to denounce the military dictatorship and its repressive policies (1964-1985). While Verissimo’s *Incidente em Antares* (1971) brings back the dead to reveal the truth about torture and corruption, Telles’ “Seminário dos ratos” (1977) recreates the horror that the military leaders have of their own citizens, who appear to them as a relentless swarm of zombie marauders.

This article is a “science fictional” re-reading of several canonical Brazilian texts, i.e., an argument that, as in the case of these proto-zombie texts, the mixture of genres of horror and the fantastic may be at least partly incorporated into Brazil’s science fiction tradition. In addition, I suggest that zombies, as physical reminders of the body and the price of modernity, distort our continuous sense of time and replace its predictability with uncanny lurching and specters of an embodied past that still haunts the present.

Notes

¹ Islam's essay traces the historical and cultural background of cannibalism in Brazil by examining historical chronicles, then Oswald de Andrade's 1928 "Cannibalist Manifesto" and its re-appropriation of cultural power and subsequent revival in the Tropicália music and film scene in the 1960s as well as its potential for creative adaptations in institutions and organizational culture of the semi-periphery.

² In the first chapter of his 1984 study *La ciudad letrada*, Ángel Rama traces the history of urban centers in Latin America from Spain's refashioning of Tenochtitlán to Brazil's founding of Brasília, noting the parallelism between systems of signs and signification, associating urban centers with language (and 'civilization').

³ Magalhães recounts the legend of the corpo-seco in the following way: "Homem que passou pela vida semeando malefícios e que se viu a própria mãe. Ao morrer, nem Deus nem o diabo o quiseram; a própria terra o repeliu, enojada da sua carne; e, um dia, mirrado, defecado, com a pele engelhada sobre os ossos, da tumba se levantou em obediência de seu fado, vagando e assombrando os viventes, nas caladas da noite" (109). Thus, the corpo seco is a sign of incest that returns to haunt the living, threatening to contaminate the community, recalling Oedipus and the plague of Thebes.

⁴ After the abolition of slavery in 1888, many former slaves of the coffee producing area of the Vale do Paraíba moved to urban areas. As historian Stanley Stein noted in his 1957 study *Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County 1850-1900*—that coffee planting area had been over-cultivated, but the coffee boom of the early 1890s had masked falling profitability (277-278). Stein cites Monteiro Lobato's phrase "cidades mortas" to capture the social and economic devastation of the region (277). With the declaration of the Republic in 1889, Brazil's military government, along with support from emerging middle sectors, was bent on promoting industrialization. However, its inconsistent tariff policies designed to protect local manufacturing actually led to economic instability, and in raising capital for investment by issuing of bonds and paper money caused excess speculation and the financial crisis known as the Encilhamento in 1891. This, in turn, took its toll on wage earners and contributed to general social unrest of the 1890s (Burns 293-295). Coffee plantations continued to operate in the richer soil found in the state of São Paulo, where Italian immigrants worked the fields as wage earners. By 1900, national policies returned to promoting commodities that had traditionally provided wealth—mainly coffee—to underwrite industrialization, but overproduction required intervention to stabilize prices, a practice which would last until 1929 (Burns 309-312). During this period, the construction of railroads and urban growth skyrocketed. From 1890 to 1920, São Paulo's population went from under 100,000 to over 500,000, while the population of Recife and Rio de Janeiro doubled (Burns 313). In 1930, Getúlio Vargas shifted the economy to an industrial model, entering the phase of import substitution, investing in the steel industry and Petrobrás, the national oil company. In my view, these fluctuations provide the scenario in which individuals to feel out of step with their society as economic and technological paradigms shift suddenly—and what Harpold calls the anxiety of "zombie time."

⁵ As early as the nineteenth century, in works such as *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Dickens portrayed factory workers as machines stuck in "eternal repetition" (Wise 47). Boluk and Lentz note how a sense of sameness and a horror stems from the repetitive nature of modern life, personified by the zombie worker (4). Participation in urban life and mass culture, in which people are regulated by routines and work life, may have contributed to a sense of meaningless routine, as throngs of people fill the streets while going to work and coming home, regulated by the clock. The importance of the clock is described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* to control the incarcerated (7). Phillip Mahoney also describes the hypnotic power exerted over crowds in LeBon's work that has implications for the worker/mass zombie (116). The clearest modern example of this appears in the zombie parody *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), in which the protagonist and his fellow workers, deadened by their daily routines, are almost indistinguishable from the zombies that suddenly appear. As Dave Beisecker notes, the film's characters appear to "sleepwalk through lives of quiet desperation, shambling through daily routines" (200), in a zombie-like trance of repetition.

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