

Last Men of the Lusosphere: Postapocalypse in Twenty-First- Century Novels from Angola and Brazil

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Abstract: Angolan author Pepetela's *O quase fim do mundo* (2008) and Brazilian writer Luiz Bras's *Sozinho no deserto extremo* (2012) begin with a similar event: the instantaneous disappearance of almost all human life. From this point, the two novels' portraits of postapocalypse diverge as both authors consider multiple functions of apocalyptic narration. This article begins by comparing the works' respective depictions of apocalypse with a focus on didactic revelation, social critique, and hope for renewal. Departing from the religious apocalypticism associated with earlier Lusophone literature, these texts prioritize secular critique of globalized capitalism and offer skeptical visions of societal rebirth. While the immediate future appears dim for both novels' survivors, the article's final section argues that the texts subtly model a decolonial turn rooted in the embrace of Amerindian and traditional African ontologies suppressed since colonialism. In the wake of apocalypse, non-Western epistemologies attain a tenuous yet otherwise improbable degree of credence among even logocentric characters. Pepetela and Bras thus offer similar glimpses of a more equitable future for the Lusophone world and beyond, suggesting that humankind may still overcome the legacy of colonialism and counteract the excesses of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, contemporary literature, decoloniality, epistemology, science fiction

In an instant, nearly all human life on Earth vanishes. An isolated protagonist traverses a contemporary, urban landscape filled with abandoned vehicles and piles of clothing left behind by the disappeared. This lone figure at once searches for fellow survivors and seeks an explanation for the instantaneous solitude. This description applies equally to the opening pages of two Portuguese-language novels: Angolan author Pepetela's 2008 *O quase fim do mundo* and Brazilian writer Luiz Bras's 2012 *Sozinho no deserto extremo*. From this shared premise, these narratives diverge meaningfully as each author negotiates the conventions of contemporary postapocalyptic literature, the existential quandaries of the "Last Man" narrative genre, and the Lusophone world's legacy of religious apocalyptic prediction.¹ Even as the two novels' portraits of postapocalypse increasingly differ, however, the writers craft parallel critiques of a historical period marked by globalized capitalism and the post-1945 "Great Acceleration" of the Anthropocene epoch that saw a rapid intensification of the global crisis facing the interlinked ecological, chemical, and biological processes of the Earth system (McNeill and Engelke 4).²

The respective apocalypses of *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* instantaneously conclude the Anthropocene, juxtaposing early twenty-first-century society with fictional visions of a depopulated Earth. While this scenario suggests an ideal opportunity for the surviving characters to establish a new equilibrium with nonhuman life, recent history maintains residual influence. Although radical social or epistemological realignment initially appears unlikely in both novels, Pepetela and Bras pair their skepticism with allusions to the possibility of a decolonial, antianthropocentric future grounded in African and Amerindian ontologies marginalized since the colonial period. A brief presentation of both novels, their respective authors, and the context of their creation will facilitate further comparative analysis of this dynamic.

O quase fim quickly abandons the idea that Simba Ukolo is indeed the last man alive on Earth, as the protagonist encounters fellow survivors by the end of the first

¹ The Last Man on Earth has been a recurrent literary theme since the early nineteenth century in works like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) ("Last Man").

² Experts generally date the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which human activity is a primary influence on the Earth system, to the late eighteenth century (Steffen et al. 614–16). The subsequent Great Acceleration has included rapid industrialization and urbanization in much of the Global South, including Brazil and Angola, and contains three-quarters of all anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions (McNeill and Engelke 1–4).

chapter. Pepetela employs a linear chronology and a primarily realist mode throughout the novel, using an inquisitive, omniscient narrator to convey the thoughts and memories of several characters. A dozen people gradually band together in the fictional African city of Calpe and debate possible causes for their isolation and the shape that a new civilization should take. Some survivors eventually travel to Europe, where they discover the reason for the apocalypse: the far-right Frente Nacionalista Europeia (FNE) used futuristic weaponry to execute a global ethnic cleansing. Ironically, poor planning and the FNE's disregard for the so-called "Dark Continent" left *O quase fim*'s African characters untouched while vaporizing the white supremacists. The novel concludes with most of the survivors reunited in Calpe and facing an uncertain future.

Pepetela (b. 1941), born Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana dos Santos, is a monumental figure in the history of Angolan literature and the winner of the 1997 Prémio Camões.³ Pepetela's novels trace precolonial and colonial Angolan history, the War of Independence (1961–75), in which he participated, and the disillusionment of a postcolonial period defined by civil war, extreme socioeconomic inequality, and kleptocracy. His most recent output, including *O quase fim*, is often set outside of Angola and foregrounds international themes like neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism.⁴ Still, the relevance of these issues in contemporary Angola confirms the author's ongoing interest in the challenges faced by his home nation and other former colonies.

At the time of *Sozinho*'s publication, Brazil faced similar impasses. Having returned to democracy in 1988 after two decades of military dictatorship, Brazilian leaders embraced neoliberal policies and further integrated into the network of global capitalism. Stark socioeconomic and racial inequality continue to plague Brazil, yet the country enjoyed a period of relative prosperity and international influence in the early twenty-first century.⁵ Bras's protagonist, the middle-aged

³ Pepetela means "eyelash" in Umbundu, as does Pestana in Portuguese. The author earned this nom de guerre as a combatant in the War for Independence from 1969 to 1974 before making it his nom de plume.

⁴ Pepetela's historical fiction includes *Lueji: O nascimento de um império* (1989), while the War of Independence underpins texts like *Muana Puó* (1978; written 1969) and *Mayombe* (1979). *O cão e as caluandas* (1985) and *A geração da utopia* (1992) exemplify the author's postcolonial critique. A more international perspective defines works like *O terrorista de Berkeley, Califórnia* (2007), *O quase fim*, and *O planalto e a estepe* (2009).

⁵ The formation of the BRICS group in 2009 stands out as a symbol of the nation's economic and diplomatic ambitions.

marketing executive Davi, represents the bounty of the nation's upper classes during this period. The novel's setting in São Paulo, associated with cosmopolitanism, rapid capitalist modernization, and socioeconomic segregation, reminds readers of the deep divisions and resilient hierarchies that persist in the current, democratic period.

Whereas Pepetela's characters unite quickly, Davi spends roughly half of the novel in complete solitude after waking up to find São Paulo inexplicably empty. Divided into fifty-six brief chapters that cover the first hundred days after apocalypse, *Sozinho* includes flashbacks, flashforwards, and a stand-alone chapter recounting the gruesome deaths of other survivors across the globe. An ironic, omniscient narrator creates an informal tone that belies the grim plot centered on Davi's attempts to protect himself and ten-year-old Estela from the psychopathic murderer known as *o magrelo*. Even after Davi kills the thin man, however, Bras offers no happy ending. Estela convinces the protagonist to incinerate São Paulo before allowing herself to be immolated, leaving Davi fully alone once more. While Bras never discloses the cause of the novel's apocalypse, he does offer evidence that vegetal agency has rid the world of human and animal life in a rejoinder to the destruction of the Anthropocene.

This suggestion befits an author whose work is dedicated to pushing the aesthetic and thematic boundaries of Brazilian speculative literature. In fact, Luiz Bras is a nom de plume adopted in 2012 by author Nelson de Oliveira (b. 1968) for this purpose.⁶ Oliveira achieved significant prestige as a writer and organizer of literary anthologies yet adopted heteronyms for his fictional output in the 2010s.⁷ His interest in apocalyptic literature, though, predates the Bras name; in 2009, he coorganized the anthology *Cartas do fim do mundo*, whose fifteen texts share the premise that the world ended on July 31, 2013. Despite his efforts, Oliveira acknowledges the ongoing marginalization of Brazilian speculative literature in the introduction to *Fractais tropicais*, his 2018 anthology of national science fiction (15). *Sozinho*'s limited critical reception exemplifies this phenomenon. To date, the novel is the subject of one scholarly article and a single book chapter. *O quase fim*, on the other hand, has been analyzed across roughly a dozen scholarly articles, multiple chapters, and a master's thesis. Despite this

⁶ In the rest of the article, I refer to Oliveira only when discussing texts published under that name.

⁷ Oliveira won the Casa de las Americas Prize for Brazilian Literature in 1995 and 2011, among other awards.

divergence, however, the two works lend themselves to comparative investigation of the role of apocalypse and its aftermath in twenty-first-century Lusophone literature.

The next section of this article presents relevant apocalyptic theory, focusing on the functions of revelation, social criticism, and potential renewal. Analytical sections then consider these themes in both novels, arguing that the texts adopt similarly dubious postures about postapocalyptic revival. In the final section, the article redoubles focus on renewal by considering the concept of ontological realignment. This analysis draws from Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of epistemologies of the South, understood as knowledges based on "modes of being otherwise, those of the oppressed and silenced peoples, peoples that have been radically excluded from the dominant modes of being and knowing," to argue that Pepetela and Bras pair their apparent skepticism with an underlying vision of radical interpersonal and interspecies equality (2–3). Breaking from the teleological, salvific apocalypticism most associated with the Lusophone world, these novels thus outline a distinctive vision of the postapocalypse as a potential instrument of a decolonial turn.

Approaching Apocalypse

The respective apocalypses of *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* draw from multiple aspects of this concept: its etymological meaning of unveiling or revelation, its facilitation of social critique, and its tendency to spark hope for renewal. These ideas inform a millenary tradition of apocalyptic storytelling that bridges prophetic texts and contemporary fiction. In an influential study, Frank Kermode shows that religious and secular texts alike derive from humankind's desire for an otherwise unobtainable sense of historical finality (7). Born during the course of history and dying before its end, humans yearn for a sense of closure attained only in apocalyptic storytelling (Kermode 17). The "sense of an ending" provided by apocalyptic narration offers this sought-after sensation of orientation within history yet lends itself to social critique through its necessary reflection of the "irreducibly intermediary preoccupations" of a given society (7).

Indeed, *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* conform with Kermode's theory and Heather J. Hicks's similar contention that "From its earliest origins apocalyptic narrative has been a means of denouncing social and economic injustice in a given society"

(14). Set in the early twenty-first century and populated largely by secular characters, these Lusophone novels reflect the global concerns that Hicks highlights in her study of contemporaneous Anglophone postapocalypses:

These books reflect a set of historical and epistemological transformations—the globalized economy intensified by the end of the Cold War; the international recognition of the menace of anthropogenic global warming, the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror . . . and the international resurgence of the concept of “modernity.” (2)

Globalized capitalism, environmental destruction, and the threat of terror resonate in *O quase fim* and *Sozinho*, although the two novels foreground the concept of (post)colonialism rather than modernity *stricto sensu*. The novels’ critiques largely embody the pessimism that Teresa Heffernan and Krishan Kumar associate with secular apocalyptic literature, yet the prospect of epistemological decolonization represents an unexpected manifestation of the postapocalyptic hopefulness identified by critics like Claire P. Curtis and Annette M. Magid (Heffernan 5; Kumar 107; Curtis 4–7; Magid 226). This possibility of ontological revolution differentiates these novels from Hicks’s corpus and gestures toward an original approach to contemporary apocalypticism rooted in the Lusophone world.

The texts’ tenuous embrace of Amerindian and African cosmologies creates a point of contrast with the teleological, religious apocalypticism of the Lusophone literary canon. This legacy’s central figure is the Luso-Brazilian Jesuit priest António Vieira, whose seventeenth-century writings inspired by Jewish apocalypticism, Joachimite preaching, and nationalist messianism predict a Portuguese-led, Christian empire will rule humankind during the millennium before the Final Judgment (Manduco 252). The leader of Vieira’s Fifth Empire would be an avatar of King Sebastião I, the young Portuguese monarch who disappeared during the battle of Alcácer Quibir in 1578. Sebastianism, the belief that the young, “Hidden King” might return to guide humanity toward salvation, has since informed canonical Lusophone works like Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (1902), Fernando Pessoa’s *Mensagem* (1934), and Ariano Suassuna’s *O*

romance d'a pedra do reino (1971).⁸ The possibility of deliverance from the ills of modern life also resonates in the teachings of the evangelical Christian churches like the Angolan Tokoist Church and the Brazilian Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus that have grown rapidly since the twentieth century.⁹ While only Pepetela directly critiques contemporary religious messianism, the initially unexplained nature of both texts' mass disappearances invites contemplation of divine intervention and spurs readers to consider sacred explanations. Both novels ultimately reject religious apocalypticism, yet the desire for instructive revelation underpinning prior Lusophone apocalyptic literature continues to resound.

The didacticism of religious apocalypses can confirm the righteousness of adherents, as in Christian visions of the Fifth Empire, or offer a warning to nonbelievers. Such an admonition, delivered in the hopes of subsequent reform, closely resembles the constructive function of dystopian narratives. As Joe Trotta and Houman Sadri explain, dystopian and apocalyptic literature share "similar ways of engaging readers as they generally make use of problematic issues that are recognizable in our contemporary condition ... as a basis for their troubled and troubling conceptions of a future world that could arise from the present" (2). *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* occupy an ambiguous position between resigned pessimism and the hopefulness of critical dystopia as outlined by Tom Moylan: "[critical dystopia] negotiates the necessary pessimism of the generic dystopia with an open, militant utopian stance ... [and] self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account" (195). Although there is little hope for radical social improvement in either novel, allusions to ontological decolonization through the epistemologies of the South suggest hope that the extradiegetic world could avoid an apocalyptic fate.

⁸ *Os sertões* chronicles the military campaign against a millenarian, Sebastianist community led by Antônio Conselheiro. *Mensagem*'s third cycle, "O encoberto," considers the possibility of the Fifth Empire's belated consolidation. Suassuna's complex text references an apocalyptic, Sebastianist movement in nineteenth-century Pernambuco, Brazil, that ended with mass human sacrifice and suicide.

⁹ This Angolan movement was founded to disseminate Simão Gonçalves Toco's prophecies of African liberation from colonialism (Blanes 77–80). The church now operates in Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. Brazil's largest evangelical church, the Igreja Universal found considerable success in Angola before facing charges of corruption in 2020.

Didactic Apocalypticism and Unlikely Renewal in O quase fim

The cradle of *O quase fim*'s postapocalyptic humanity, Pepetela's Calpe is a recurrent presence in his oeuvre even as its symbolic associations and geographical location shift over time.¹⁰ According to Pepetela: "Calpe tem sido a cidade, que vai mudando conforme as épocas. Era a cidade do sonho em *Muana Puó* ... neutra e sem vida de *O Cão*, a cidade de todos os perigos de *Parábola* e finalmente uma cidade inventada do nada em *O Quase Fim do Mundo*" (in F. Castro 148). While these earlier novels situate the city in Angola and thus trace what Robson Dutra calls a dissipation of utopian energy and "diluição dos heróis nacionais ao longo da história do país," the Calpe of *O quase fim* is a "caótica cidade de cerca de dois milhões de habitantes" and the capital of an unspecified nation (*Pepetela* 19–20; *O quase fim* 54–55). The city's symbolically charged location at a point equidistant from the sources of the Nile, Congo, and Zambezi rivers places Calpe in the heart of sub-Saharan Africa and suggests its status as an ideal stage to consider the regional and global issues that Hicks associates with contemporary postapocalyptic fiction.

The identities of *O quase fim*'s survivors underpin an allegorical critique of twenty-first-century African society. Simba is a medical doctor and self-described member of the local emerging elite. His logocentric worldview largely mirrors that of the feminist historian Ísis, the American biologist Janet Kinsey, and the inscrutable Boer pilot Jan Dipenaar yet diverges from that of an unnamed fisherman, the religious zealot Dona Geny, and the Ethiopian shaman Riek. Despite the tensions arising from their differences, the group coheres in Calpe as they search for more survivors, ponder the causes of their isolation, and imagine restarting civilization.

The initially unexplained nature of the apocalypse deprives the characters of any "sense of an ending." However, humankind's disappearance estranges and historicizes the early twenty-first century for readers. Phillip Rothwell argues that this miraculous suspension of "the Law of capitalism" eliminates geographical and symbolic frontiers, including ideological hegemony and gender hierarchies, and creates an otherwise unlikely arena for dialogue between the various cultures and ideologies cohabitating in sub-Saharan Africa (131). Still, capitalism's residual impact molds most characters' postapocalyptic worldviews (Rothwell 139–40).

¹⁰ The name Calpe derives from Pepetela's legal name.

This continued resonance demonstrates that Pepetela's characters, like Bras's Davi, remain subject to what Mark Fisher terms "capitalist realism": "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Even on a depopulated planet, a postcapitalist future remains in doubt. Rothwell correctly asserts that this persistent influence limits Pepetela's ability to describe more fundamental ideological change, but the critic's contention that the female characters, including Dona Geny, exemplify an emancipatory alternative is misguided (139). The novel's social critique of a world saturated with capitalist realism does not suggest any viable ideological alternative but rather the need for a deeper process of ontological realignment.

The fiercely religious, working-class Dona Geny is *O quase fim*'s de facto antagonist. An adherent to the cryptic Paladins of the Sacred Crown faith, Geny's stubborn self-righteousness routinely stokes conflict. These simmering tensions boil over as the zealot accuses the other survivors of perpetuating the ethnic divisions that defined the unnamed African nation as "Infelizmente condenado a conflitos permanentes pela rivalidade entre grupos étnicos opostos, invenção astuciosa dos colonizadores" (31). In an extended section of the eleventh chapter, Geny details deep her resentment of intrasocietal ethnic hierarchies that recall the context of the Rwandan genocide (1994) and remind the reader of the novel's roots in recent African reality. The survivors agree to overcome such divisions in the postapocalypse, yet Simba notes that "As pessoas ao crescerem acabam por entrar no sistema" (225). Subsequent debate about the need for female survivors to bear large numbers of children reflects a similarly uncertain vision of feminist liberation in the postapocalypse (226). As this discussion illustrates, social forms rooted in colonialism continue to shape the survivors' identities and beliefs even after the end of the world.

The challenge of breaking with recent history counterbalances the effect of *O quase fim*'s revelation that far-right extremists caused the apocalypse. The survivors' initial theories about the mass disappearance split between the spiritual and the secular, with multiple survivors suggesting that climate change or futuristic weaponry may be to blame (22, 121–24, 227). In the end, the group that travels to Europe discovers that the FNE, allied with Dona Geny's Paladinos da Coroa Sagrada religion, utilized a device designed by the United States National Security Agency to "*purificar a Europa dos lixos árabes, judeus, ciganos e africanos que*

cada vez mais contaminam as populações brancas” (340). The travelers find a letter explaining this history near the site of Hitler’s bunker in Berlin, a geographical detail that underlines the continuity between Nazism and contemporary ethnocentrism while emphasizing the urgency of social and cultural renewal.

The lessons of this revelation are clear for the reader and the novel’s more rational characters. The letter exemplifies an intradiegetic critical dystopian text that warns against rampant militarization, racial division, and religious fanaticism. It likewise serves as an implicit call to engage with Moylan’s militant utopian imagination and shape a radically different future. If the new society originating in Calpe can heed this guidance, those born after the apocalypse may avoid repeating the viciously destructive cycle that culminated in movements like Nazism and the FNE. However, *O quase fim*’s epilogue indicates that the gravity of capitalist realism and the resilience of religious excess will undermine the didactic impact of the Berlin missive.

Upon their return to Africa, the travelers discover that Riek has directed a couple of rural, non-Swahili speakers to the new global capital (377). Swahili, fully African in origin and used throughout the continent’s central and eastern regions, united the original group and contributed to the text’s gesture toward a decolonial future (Dutra, “O quase fim” 80). The arrival of this unnamed pair, however, challenges this possibility by emphasizing differences within African society ignored in the initial aftermath of apocalypse. For Jan, these rural people will become the first members of a new underclass: “sempre foi assim, uns trabalham, outros mandam . . . Seremos a classe dominante” (378). Strict social hierarchy looms on the horizon, setting the stage for a return to capitalism as technological capacity improves. The Boer’s successful “purchase” of a wife during a visit to the rural interior represents a similarly bleak omen for the long-term future of gender equality (379–80). Further, Dona Geny’s faith does not waver after she learns that her religion catalyzed the apocalypse. Instead, she redoubles her commitment to inculcate future generations and construct a new religious majority, “Para a salvação do mundo” (381).¹¹ Despite the instinctual cooperation across class, gender, and racial lines that characterized the immediate postapocalypse, Pepetela

¹¹ The earlier declaration by the Maasai-descended mechanic Julius that “O racismo está no espírito criador de todas as religiões” leaves little doubt that this religious revival will catalyze the return to discriminatory forms of social and political organization (182).

foreshadows a rapid regression to the preapocalyptic status quo as the novel concludes.

Even after the Berlin letter specifies which aspects of society resulted in catastrophe, *O quase fim* appears to embody Kumar's contention that "apocalyptic thought today seems singularly unhopeful of, or indifferent to, a new beginning" (107). In the final chapter, Janet wonders whether society can begin anew: "Era o fim de uma civilização, claro. Mas seria este o primeiro e único fim?" (358). The epilogue answers in the negative yet confirms that Calpe is already reentering a vicious cycle of exploitation: "Estavam a construir uma nova humanidade com a gente que havia e todos os processos valiam. A anterior humanidade também não deve ter começado melhor, se atendermos à maneira como terminou" (380–81). This continuity confirms the pessimism of *O quase fim*'s postapocalyptic social critique. Despite the introduction of a secular apocalyptic revelation, the survivors continue to resist change. Only a deeper process of ontological revolution rooted in the epistemologies of the South offers any potential alternative.

No Revelation: Slouching toward Extinction in Sozinho

Davi's lasting solitude and the absence of any direct explanation for humankind's disappearance define *Sozinho* as a more esoteric, existentialist postapocalyptic text. In fact, the novel's conclusion approximates what W. Warren Wagar calls a "dead end" apocalypse wherein "the end is final and absolute" (186, 185). Despite the apparent impossibility of diegetic, postapocalyptic revival, however, Bras consistently draws the reader's attention to social ills through subtle critique. Whereas *O quase fim* uses dialogue to consider social concerns, *Sozinho* uses details of characterization and setting to indirectly criticize capitalist realism and highlight this worldview's devastating consequences for Brazilian society and ecology. For Petê Rissatti, the novel's protagonist exemplifies the stereotypical "pessoa de bem," whose veneer of cordiality obscures deep-seated misanthropy. Davi indeed first appears to be a successful family man, yet memories later reveal considerable hypocrisy including cheating on his wife with a secretary and participating in the political corruption he professes to despise. Wealthy and self-centered, Davi symbolizes a vacuous and avaricious national elite. Even in the fantastical tabula rasa of *Sozinho*'s postapocalypse, Davi remains an agent of destruction rather than constructive renewal.

Like Pepetela's more rational characters, Davi has fully internalized the logic and culture of contemporary capitalism. Devoid of any direct explanation for the apocalypse, the protagonist attempts to understand his newfound circumstances by remembering Brazilian and foreign narratives including José Padilha's film *Tropa de elite* (2007), Fernando Meirelles's cinematic adaptation (2008) of José Saramago's novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995), Monteiro Lobato's children's story *A chave do tamanho* (1942), Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World* (1932), and George Nolfi's 2011 film *The Adjustment Bureau* (100).¹² On the one hand, these recollections offer a logical starting point for interpreting the world's end. On the other, such extended references reveal Davi's psychological saturation by popular culture. Bras emphasizes the character's limitations through the narrator's admonishment that "a realidade não é um filme, Davi. Não estamos no cinema. No final não haverá uma grande revelação" (165). Without any reliable collaborators or alternative epistemologies on which to draw, Davi rapidly becomes psychologically unmoored.

The protagonist's belated interpersonal interactions confirm that Bras, like Pepetela, adopts the ambiguously pessimistic posture identified by Kumar. One secondary character of note is *o magrelo*, a sociopath embodying a fatalistic, Darwinian worldview: "O homem é o lobo do homem. Será a guerra de todos contra todos e o triunfo do estado natural: o mais forte caçará e sujeitará os mais fracos" (125). This malevolent character's arrival initially suggests that Davi may become an unexpected agent for good in a Manichean universe, yet the protagonist later affirms a similarly nihilistic perspective: "O magrelo estava certo. No final só há a morte. Para os vilões e os heróis" (264). Even after he overcomes this adversary, Davi absorbs his belief that existence is a zero-sum game. Without the guidance of apocalyptic revelation or the constructive influence of fellow survivors, Davi remains incapable of discerning any path forward for humanity.

Estela, the novel's other important secondary character, first conjures the possibility of a more hopeful future. While fleeing from *o magrelo* in northern São Paulo state, Davi discovers this ten-year-old girl alone in a small town. Suppressing any sexual temptation, the protagonist dedicates himself to protecting her as he embraces an irrational worldview he terms "poesia-vida" (172–75). After thwarting their murderous pursuer, the pair experience a brief, peaceful

¹² Lobato's children's book about humankind's shrinking instantaneously offers a possible explanation for Davi's isolation (235–36).

cohabitation in São Paulo that recalls Curtis's argument that "the blank slate ... of the postapocalypse can open myriad possibilities. Starting over can be the instigation for utopian imagining" (4). Nonetheless, this placid interlude quickly descends into madness. Estela's newfound belief in mysterious, extraterrestrial Others fuels an intense pyromania recalling Bras's description of Davi in the novel's first paragraph: "Ele é apenas um homem sem qualidades visíveis ... que já acreditou em muita bobagem ideológica—na civilização, na economia de mercado, na integridade moral—e agora só acredita no fogo" (11). The girl inspires Davi to set São Paulo ablaze yet allows herself to burn (308). The protagonist chooses permanent solitude and ignores the ringing of a nearby phone as he wanders away from the megacity (313–14). Davi remains alive, but human extinction appears imminent.

At the end of his first day alone, Davi finds himself "À espera de que ... algo ou alguém deste mundo ou de outro finalmente revele em bom português, sem hesitar, por que apenas ele, Davi, continua vivo, num planeta desabitado" (38). Without any such revelation, however, he belatedly accepts the apparent senselessness of existence. *Sozinho*'s conclusion thus approximates what Greg Garrard calls an antianthropocentric, "blank apocalypse: an *eschaton* without a utopia to follow" (93). Although selfless dedication and platonic love briefly prefigured a more egalitarian future, Davi's final choice of isolation and impending death seemingly lends credence to the *magrelo*'s nihilistic view of the postapocalypse.

Subtle aspects of the text's critique, however, outline a didactic explanation for the global hecatomb. Like Pepetela, Bras mentions the Iraq War and anthropogenic climate change as evidence of contemporary capitalism's violent excesses (101, 224). Weapons of mass destruction ultimately appear an unlikely cause of humanity's disappearance, but a violent reaction by a rapidly baking biosphere becomes increasingly probable. Although never explicitly confirmed, the persistence and fantastical transformation of vegetal life in the depopulated Earth suggest that nonhuman life triggered the apocalypse. While few animals and even fewer humans remain on Earth, Davi notes that only half of the vegetation in his neighborhood has vanished (18). Later, Bras describes mold, weeds, and moss spreading quickly and reclaiming territory conquered by human civilization (47, 120, 161, 309). By the novel's end, flowers have become unnaturally durable while dirt assumes a sweet flavor and produces hallucinogenic effects (273–78).

The chapter titled “Duzentos anos” suggests a possible motive for violent action by the vegetal world. In this section, Davi realizes the brevity of modernity: “Se você condensar os catorze bilhões de anos do universo em doze meses, que fatia corresponderá à trajetória dos seres humanos? Somente a última hora e meia do dia 31 de dezembro” (239). Through this lens, the Anthropocene represents the blink of an eye. One explanation for *Sozinho*’s apocalypse, then, is that nonhuman beings have reciprocated the environmental destruction of this period with similar velocity. Even São Paulo, paragon of Brazilian modernization, cannot resist entropy after the apocalypse: “[Davi] se pergunta quanto tempo mais a cidade conseguirá resistir à força da natureza. Nos últimos séculos os cidadãos de São Paulo lutaram bravamente para manter a selva longe das casas. Mas a luta acabou” (103). Having brought the Anthropocene to an instantaneous end through an inexplicable act of apocalyptic destruction, vegetation undertakes a renaissance impossible for the few remaining humans.

In this reading, Davi becomes a pawn for this nonhuman agency. Shortly after the protagonist proclaims himself Estela’s protector, the narrator invokes vegetal imagery in an ambiguous passage: “Aconteceu, Davi. Você foi enterrado vivo. Como uma semente fertilizada. ... Um vegetal-animal em busca de mais oxigênio. Teu ramo-braço atravessou a camada de barro e chegou à superfície.... Agora você é grande, Davi. Imenso. Renovado. O único dono de seu destino” (221). Although this passage first appears to parody the protagonist’s self-mythologization, it later seems likely that a fundamental transformation has indeed taken place. As Davi walks away from the inferno in *Sozinho*’s final pages, the narrator again addresses the protagonist: “Confusão terrível, Davi. Até parece que sua nobre e sublime missão—sua lenda pessoal—não é proteger e defender os poucos sobreviventes decentes. É eliminar um por um. Terminar a faxina” (311). If Davi assumed his personal myth during a subconscious moment of interspecies synthesis, the vegetal agency with which he fused would be responsible for this confusion. Davi was never the master of his own destiny, but rather the puppet of an entity beyond his comprehension. Steered by this being, Bras’s protagonist fulfills the mission of Pepetela’s FNE if they had survived the apocalypse: scouring the empty Earth and eliminating remaining humans.

Whereas *O quase fim* reveals the cause of the apocalypse to redouble its critique of the hierarchies of the globalized world, the indeterminate reasons for Bras’s apocalypse reflect profound uncertainty about humankind’s future.

Interweaving social and existential themes, the Brazilian author illustrates twenty-first-century capitalism as a totalizing phenomenon whose absence leaves contemporary human subjects unmoored. Isolated, disoriented, and denied any “sense of an ending,” Davi is a herald of an antianthropocentric future. Whereas Pepetela’s flawed survivors remain poised to forge a new society, Bras’s novel implies the eclipse of human history. Barring an unlikely ontological transformation, at least, extinction is the only alternative to the status quo.

Salvation from the South? Hints of Ontological Revolution

O quase fim and *Sozinho* largely align in their skeptical vision of postapocalyptic social renewal. Despite this common incredulity, however, both authors similarly allude to the possibility that engagement with Amerindian and traditional African ontologies could catalyze a transition to postcapitalism.¹³ These epistemologies marginalized since Brazil’s and Angola’s respective colonial periods remain at the periphery of the two novels, yet Bras and Pepetela establish their importance for any radical postapocalyptic renaissance. The novels’ characters appear unlikely to adopt these cosmologies, yet readers might still draw inspiration to reconsider their own epistemological prejudices.

Bras explicitly considers the ontological ramifications of his apocalypse. When a bee lands on Davi’s hand, the protagonist ponders a divine being beyond his comprehension: “Davi tenta delinear essa supercriatura não humana. Porém uma dúvida ontológica põe em risco sua meditação pouco articulada sobre os mistérios do sagrado. Será que os deuses, se existirem mesmo, sabem que são deuses? Serei um deus para essa abelha?” (92).¹⁴ Beyond hinting at an explanation for the mass vanishing, this passage underscores the limited utility of modern, Western knowledge in the novel’s postapocalypse. Pepetela does not address the question of ontology directly, yet he pairs his critique of Western logocentrism with a respectful portrayal of the shaman Riek’s traditional African cosmology. These two epistemologies will compete for influence in the future Calpe, with the

¹³ I subscribe to Lee M. Brown’s definition of “traditional African thought” as “Philosophical perspectives that were indigenous to sub-Saharan cultures prior to the infusion of Islamic, Judaic, and Christian ideologies” (158).

¹⁴ Bras includes a second reference to ontology when the narrator mocks Davi’s thought experiment about the possibility of microscopic worlds existing within the visible universe (121–22).

latter offering a better opportunity to break with the vicious cycles of Africa's colonial and postcolonial history.

These unrealized ontological metamorphoses recall Santos's epistemologies of the South. Defined by opposition to capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy rather than geography, these forms of knowledge "necessarily invoke other ontologies" derived from cultures on the "wrong side" of the "abyssal line" that dehumanized colonial subjects while denominating Western philosophy as the herald of universal truth (Santos 2, 6). Even in the postcolonial period, the abyssal line "persists as a colonialism of power, of knowledge, of being, and goes on distinguishing metropolitan sociability from colonial sociability" (Santos 22). The instantaneous end of modernity in *Sozinho* and *O quase fim* should erase this division, yet the veil of capitalist realism persists. Still, both authors hint that Amerindian and African knowledge suppressed by the Western epistemological paradigm could inform a decolonized future free of rigid hierarchies or unyielding anthropocentrism.

In *Sozinho*, Davi's decision to renounce reason for "poesia-vida" allows him to accept fantastical occurrences but does not offer any explanation for the global hecatomb. In fact, the narrator questions the validity of this transformation by calling Davi a postapocalyptic Don Quixote made insane by overindulgence of genre films (222). The limitations of contemporary Brazilian subjecthood, deeply marked by the hierarchies of Western ontology, render the protagonist unable to engage meaningfully with the epistemologies of the South even after he consciously embraces irrationality. The protagonist's continued attachment to his preapocalyptic worldview prevents ontological renewal within the novel despite Bras's suggestive references to the cultures on the wrong side of the abyssal line.

The most explicit such passage recalls a lone experience with Indigenous modes of being as Davi hiked in the Atlantic rainforest alongside a Guarani guide on a high school trip. During this rare moment of communion with the natural world, "A mente de Davi esvaziou de repente. Toda vaidade e presunção desapareceram. Algo parecido estava ocorrendo agora. O amor é uma região não-humana povoada de insetos e aracnídeos que às vezes pode ser visitada por um alienígena racionalista" (283). This passage emphasizes the limits of the protagonist's understanding, while Bras's description of modern Brazilians as rational aliens posits an alternate ontology not defined by logocentrism. This dynamic evokes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's descriptions of Amerindian

multinaturalist perspectivism, whereby humankind and nonhumans share a unified, human culture traceable to a mythological past (116–17). Whereas modern cosmologies are multicultural and “se apóiam [sic] na implicação mútua entre unicidade da natureza e multiplicidade das culturas . . . a concepção ameríndia suporia, ao contrário, uma unidade do espírito e uma diversidade dos corpos” (116). Even in the twenty-first century, shamans can access the fundamental humanity that persists despite the subsequent division into varied animal or vegetal species (117). Despite this glimpse of Amerindian epistemology, however, Davi cannot grasp interspecies unity. His anthropocentrism lingers after the apocalypse, leaving him unable to comprehend the possibility of willful nonhuman subjects.

Sozinho’s most substantive reference to Africa further underscores the entrenchment of Western ontology in the postapocalypse. The lone insight into *o magrelo*’s backstory highlights the separation between nature and culture and reaffirms the ongoing influence of colonialist logic among the Brazilian upper classes: “Quando existiam pessoas no mundo o magrelo ganhava a vida organizando excursões e safaris para a Etiópia e o Quênia. O ponto alto—perigoso e ilegal—das viagens eram as caçadas” (210–11). In a tragic echo of Brazil’s colonial and postindependence history of slavery, the national elite continue to view Africa as little more than a playground for their most violent fantasies. Africa’s diverse ontologies are irrelevant while Afro-Brazilian culture merits disregard or scorn.

Western epistemology initially appears similarly dominant in *O quase fim*, as Simba’s rise to medical doctor underscores the logocentrism of the unnamed country’s elite. When the physician belatedly visits his ancestral village and discovers his young nephew on the verge of starvation, the local teenager Jude describes how “A sua preocupação científica ultrapassou o cuidado com a família. Tinha que estar mesmo contrito, era de facto uma falha imperdoável, sobretudo atendendo à nossa cultura, que colocava a família à frente de tudo” (105). This passage suggests a connection with Ubuntu, defined by Bola Dauda as “the African ontology of humanness and the essence of African humanity” that precedes colonization yet continues to orient the everyday lives of Bantu people in Angola and throughout central and southern Africa (476). For Mozambican scholar Severino E. Ngoenha, Ubuntu “não [é] simplesmente a identificação do outro . . . mas também dar-lhe o respeito, admitir que a minha vida é igual a sua. Trata-se do reconhecimento do seu ser, da sua existência, da sua identidade, do seu lugar numa

cidade comum” (74). Edwin Etieyibo argues that this process of identification with the Other extends to the biosphere: “whatever I do to the environment affects you and whatever you do to the environment affects me. Thus, with Ubuntu there is no need to be greedy or to *out consume* your neighbor” (649). However, centuries of colonization have challenged the enactment of these principles (Dauda 477–78). Most of Pepetela’s characters including Simba have indeed internalized ontologies from the supposed “right side” of Santos’s abyssal line. Still, *O quase fim*’s apocalypse offers an otherwise improbable opportunity to revisit autochthonous knowledge in the twenty-first century.

The Angolan novel explores this possibility via a negotiation between Western science and indigenous African knowledge. Simba’s rational approach to the apocalypse aligns with that of the majority, yet the fertility shaman Riek embodies a divergent understanding rooted in ancestral tradition. Early glimpses into the Ethiopian’s worldview, like the belief that flying planes will disturb ancestral spirits, appear fantastical or even frivolous (172, 142–43). However, Pepetela lends increasing credence to this figure symbolizing the stubborn resistance of African epistemology. Riek’s ability to predict pregnancies and successful recruitment of rural survivors to Calpe sway even the paradigmatically logical Simba, who admits that “De facto, Riek tinha a sua arte ancestral, não dava para duvidar” (379). The two healers ultimately agree to consolidate all survivors in Calpe and construct an agricultural society. Even as Pepetela foreshadows a probable return to strict hierarchy and religious fanaticism, this instance of equilibrium between Western and African epistemologies suggests a degree of hope for human civilization.

The prospect of further harmony between modernity and tradition parallels Felwine Sarr’s vision of Afrotopia. For this Senegalese scholar, twenty-first-century Africa must undertake a material and epistemological transformation to overcome the persistent legacy of colonialism:

A capacidade de se reapropriar do próprio futuro e de reinventar as próprias teleologias, de ordenar os próprios valores, de encontrar um equilíbrio harmonioso entre as distintas dimensões da existência, dependerá da capacidade das culturas africanas de se conceberem como projetos que assumem o presente e o futuro,

tendo por meta promover a liberdade em todas as suas expressões.
(86)

A logocentric worldview prioritizing material progress must give way to a pluralism recognizing the value of traditional knowledges and modes of being. Simba's newfound respect for Riek alludes to a future Calpe grounded in what Santos calls an "ecology of knowledges" that cedes space to ancestral wisdom (32). If the new world indeed erases the abyssal line, perhaps humanity can avoid restarting the vicious cycle that culminated in worldwide destruction.

Even as Pepetela conjures a degree of optimism absent from Bras's novel, ontological revolution remains unlikely. Riek has assumed new importance, but he remains far from Calpe. Further, the shaman's earlier observations about human nature only reaffirm the pessimistic interpretation of *O quase fim*'s epilogue:

Conhecera muitos povos naquele canto do continente que [só] aspiravam a encontrar um inimigo para poderem descarregar as frustrações milenares se acumulando Se não houvesse outra razão, como a defesa do espaço vital ou o rapto de fêmeas, arranjavam uma religião conveniente para o efeito. Não foi sempre assim, desde o princípio dos tempos? (254)

If the impending society centered in Africa does not engage with ancestral knowledge and spirituality, reversion to the twenty-first-century status quo appears inevitable. The most likely outcome of the postapocalyptic future remains a rapid return to religious intolerance and social hierarchy. And yet, the unexpected invocation of epistemologies of the South in *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* could still serve as a didactic revelation that invites readers to interrogate their own ontological biases.

Conclusion

Comparative analysis of *O quase fim* and *Sozinho* confirms the multifaceted nature of apocalyptic narration in the twenty-first century. The Angolan and the Brazilian novels' initial dialogue with the idea of the Last Man on Earth establishes a primary connection later fortified by similar critiques of contemporary capitalism and

unexpected reference to non-Western ontologies. Despite their differing engagement with apocalyptic revelation and postapocalyptic renewal, the two texts ultimately establish a similar dynamic whereby tentative faith in the prospect of ontological decolonization counterbalances pessimism about social change. If humankind indeed creates a postapocalyptic civilization in either novel, it will likely repeat the mistakes of the twenty-first century. Still, allusions to epistemological change suggest a method that could lead to societal betterment either within or outside of these novels.

An embrace of multinaturalist perspectivism, Ubuntu, or other Amerindian or traditional African ontologies thus represents humanity's best chance to avoid the extinction predicted in *Sozinho*. Establishing less hierarchical relationships between epistemologies, cultures, and species could dissolve the mirage of capitalist realism and belatedly halt the excesses of the Anthropocene. This possibility reveals these novels' invocation of the apocalypse to offer a glimpse of a decolonial future for Brazil, Angola, and beyond. A multinatural or interspecies ecology of knowledges that values ontologies from both sides of the abyssal line and extends Ubuntu to animals and plants offers an escape from the continued hegemony of colonial logic that threatens the biosphere.

Although their texts dialogue, often explicitly, with other works of postapocalyptic or dystopian narratives, Bras and Pepetela break with the tradition of Portuguese-language apocalypticism. This legacy, based foremost on prospects of human empire and divine salvation, recalls the colonialism that these contemporary novels critique. Rather than incorporating a skeptical vision of religious apocalypse, as exemplified by Cunha's or Suassuna's canonical works, these novels exclude this legacy from their tentative portraits of a decolonial postapocalypse. Any unlikely salvation in the twenty-first century will not be divine but rather an intentional effort by humans to reengage with cosmologies denigrated by logocentrism. This common idea denotes these works as potential harbingers of a decolonial turn rooted in the contemporary Lusophone world that would counterbalance the ongoing imposition of epistemologies from the North and reveal fissures in the capitalist realist worldview.

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