

Toxic Crops and Eco-Zombies: An Ecocritical Reading of *Corpos secos* (2020)

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Abstract: This essay explores how the Brazilian novel *Corpos secos* (Geisler et al. 2020) employs the discourse of toxicity, condensed in the metaphor of zombification, to imagine what Jason Moore has called the Capitalocene. My analysis of *Corpos secos* shows how, in its current iteration, capitalism as an ecological regime is pushing against the limits of environmental sustainability, against the limits of what Moore calls Nature, as it seeks continuous growth. In the novel, the coproduction of nature, impelled by greed (a recurring allegory of capitalism), goes terribly wrong, generating toxic biomes and, ultimately, destroying humanity or humanness as zombies take over Brazil. Beyond ecological crisis, in *Corpos secos*, zombification also becomes a metaphor for the necropolitical dimension inherent in late capitalism.

Keywords: Capitalocene, environmental crisis, Brazilian literature, agribusiness

Palavras chaves: Capitaloceno, crise ambiental, literatura brasileira, agronegócio

Fires and floods in the Amazon, deforestation in Argentina's Gran Chaco, a decade of record drought in Chile, hurricanes in the Caribbean: though not unique in what Jason Moore has called the Capitalocene, Latin America's contemporary ecologies are dotted with stories of crises, many of them the result of human intervention. Natural crisis is not necessarily a novelty in Latin American landscapes. Nor is crisis new in the region's cultural imaginary (DeVries 3). Given the region's

historical reliance on ecological exploitation (Galeano 2; Deckard 3)— whether agricultural, mining, timber, or more recently hydrocarbon exploration and the harnessing of hydropower—it comes as no surprise that the trope of anthropogenic environmental crisis looms large in the Latin American imaginary.

In his introduction to the volume *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature* (2016), Mark Anderson states that contemporary representations of the environment in the region reactivate the trope of crisis and depletion. This trope captures Latin America's long history of both human and ecological exploitation, which have, according to Anderson, shaped the region's biospheres since the colonial encounter. He explains that

there is undeniably an environmental crisis occurring on a planetary scale that has manifested itself in Latin America in unprecedented habitat loss, deforestation, species extinctions, land cover change due to the expansion of industrialized monoculture and mineral and hydrocarbon extraction, erosion, melting glaciers, environmental toxicity, and pollution in cities. At the same time the current situation can only be seen as an intensification of processes and practices that have been developing over centuries. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Latin America, as a geopolitical region unified by the experience of Iberian colonialism, is itself the product of ecological crisis. (x)

Anderson's volume, which he coedited with Brazilian literary scholar Zélia Moreira Bora, is part of a growing corpus of critical works that deal with the intersection between cultural production and the environment and, more specifically, the negative, often disastrous, implication of human-wrought changes on Latin America's many biomes.

Ecocritical scholarship on the adverse consequences of human actions dialogues with a spate of canonical and contemporary cultural production that considers both the representation of nature and environmental crisis. From visual arts to cinema and television series and literary texts, environmental crisis has cast its shadow over recent Latin American cultural discourse.

Much like the nineteenth-century novels that dealt with the sugar industry or the rubber boom and bust cycle,¹ nowadays the expanded imaginary of disaster touches upon real-life environmental issues such as deforestation, drought, damming of waterways, or toxic spills. Sharae Deckard points to how export commodities—such as tobacco, sugar, and coffee—have a prominent place in Latin America’s literary imagination, which has personified export crops such as sugar, coffee, and rubber (15). Certain crops engendered specific tropes or narrative forms (as, for example, the *novela de la tierra*). The genetically modified, pesticide-doused crops of contemporary agribusiness are no exception in this narratological tradition. Examples include eco-horror, texts that broach fear of nature and disturbing encounters with the natural world (Tidwell and Soles), or the eco-gothic.²

Monstrous crops appear in various recent Latin American texts, such as Samanta Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate* (2014), Cristián Romero’s *Después de la ira* (2018), or, in a less overt manner, Fernanda Melchor’s *Temporada de huracanes* (2020). Monstrous nature in contemporary literature both evokes and resignifies established tropes of nature in Latin America. Thus, instead of denoting a (threatening) abundance, monstrous nature has come to connote, paradoxically, depleted, threatened biomes.

Cultural narratives frequently convey environmental issues through an affective lens that allows readers (or viewers) to become personally invested. Lawrence Buell remarks that environmental literary works can “connect readers vicariously with others’ experience, suffering, pain: that of humans as well as non-humans. They may reconnect readers with places that they have been and send them where they would otherwise never physically go. They may direct thought toward alternative futures. And they may affect one’s caring for the physical world: make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable” (*Writing* 2). Unlike much scientific data about environmental trouble, cultural narratives may thus

¹ See, for example, José Lins Rego’s novel *Menino de engenho* (1932), which tackles the declining sugar industry in Brazil’s Northeast; Jorge Amado’s cocoa cycle novels (*Cacau* [1933] and *Terras do sem fim* [1943]); and texts such as José Eustácio Rivera’s *La vorágine* (1924) and Ferreira de Castro’s *A selva* (1930) that broach the rubber industry in the Amazon region.

² According to David Del Principe, the eco-gothic “examines the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity” (1).

have a wider appeal, one that often relies on emotional entreaties that might promote both empathy and empathetic activism. Speaking about the role that emotions play in environmental narratives, Alexa Weik von Mossner explains that, given the power of narrative, even scientists rely on stories to reach a wider public:

Many of our current environmental problems, such as climate change, are too vast in their spatial and temporal dimensions and too abstract to be accessible to our senses. We cannot really see or smell or hear these problems, unless they manifest themselves in one specific event, such as a hurricane. One way to represent such vast ecological developments is through graphs and numbers. It is a language that scientists understand and that, in their communication with policy makers and the general public, they increasingly try to translate into accessible narratives. (138)

Connection comes about not only through plot and language, but often also through the tropes that specific ecologic concerns beget. Whether pictorial, cinematic, or fictional, narratives can translate the often-unfathomable dimension of environmental catastrophe into a story that, though pointing to the unaccountable, nonetheless binds it within a discernible perimeter, within an intelligible form (the covers of a book, the frame of an image).

Manipulation of nature in the form of biological systems engineering, artificial pesticides, among other forms of human intervention has prompted fictional narratives that centralize the uncanny or that draw on the conventions of the horror genre to convey a sense of unease about human meddling with the natural world. Take, for example, Felipe de Ávila Franco's series of seven digitally processed photographs *Tropical Delusion*. Saturated greens, ochers, and pinks relay a noxious ecology, a world drenched in poison. *Tropical Delusion* contemplates the environmental disaster of Mariana. In 2015 a dam containing the iron ore tailings of the Brazilian/Australian joint venture Sarmarco burst and buried the neighboring town of Bento Rodrigues, in the state of Minas Gerais, under a thick blanket of poisonous mud. Toxic sludge poured into the Santarém river, contaminating 700 kilometers of waterways and the water supplies of several of the region's cities. Eventually the iron waste reached the Atlantic coast, leaking into the ocean with foreseeable consequences for humans and nonhumans alike.

Besides loss of lives (human and nonhuman animals and plant life), the toxic spill also resulted in the destruction of terrestrial and aquatic environments.

Several of Franco's images feature an unnaturally pink sky, with contrasting neon-green shrubs and bushes. Buildings in various states of ruination and a surrounding, luxuriant, almost hyperbolic nature visually complement the vibrantly pigmented tableau. As suggested by the series' title, Franco's photographs depict a lush vegetation that is gradually taking over humanmade structures, uncovering humans' patently fragile dominion over the natural world. And while the riotous greenery hints at nature's resiliency, it also contains a threat: one that though it emanates from the natural world nonetheless points to human action. The images' color scheme combined with the exuberant flora denote a mutant landscape, one that both reinforces the power of nature and, paradoxically, also suggests the end of nature, its transformation into something else. This monstrous nature might be deadly to human existence. Franco's aberrant nature summons and centralizes the idea of disaster since "disaster represents the inversion of the normalized relationship between humans and their environments, both 'natural' and human made. Disaster unmakes landscapes, estranging nature from the human" (Anderson, *Disaster* 5).

According to Franco's website, *Tropical Delusion* uses the "structure of the ruin to question the concept of nature as something separated and disconnected from human society." Franco explains that, by and large, his work contemplates how human action shapes environments:

The residues produced by industrial activity become increasingly permanent and capable of shaping landscapes, affecting perception, human behavior, and social relations. My work invites reflections on these issues by evaluating the tensions and meanings found in the residues and in the contamination produced by ourselves as a society, highlighting the human and the environment as interdependent entities.

Taken together, the contrast between ruined buildings and exaggerated, and therefore uncanny, surrounding nature in Franco's *Tropical Delusion* intimates an environmental toxicity that suffuses the whole image and imparts a sense of dread, of asphyxiation.

Ávila's images of a contaminated landscape evoke Buell's concept of "toxic discourse." Buell uses the designation "toxic discourse" to describe a certain mode of narrating a defiled environment. Tracing this narrative to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Buell explains that in toxic discourse the "disenchantment from the illusion of the green oasis is accompanied or precipitated by totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration" ("Toxic" 648). Toxic discourse deploys the trope of a poisonous nature to uncover the connection between environmental health, or disease, with human well-being (or malady). One is contingent on the other. Humans befoul biomes and polluted nature leaks in human bodies, in turn contaminating them.

Toxic discourse connects to questions of environmental justice. As the 1987 report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* laid bare, frequently low-income and racialized minorities bear the disproportionate burden of toxic environments. Robert Bullard explains that "People of color are more likely than their white counterparts to live near freeways, sewage treatment plants, municipal and hazardous waste landfills, incinerators, and other noxious facilities" (23). Rob Nixon, looking at the extended outcomes of environmental damage, coined the phrase "slow violence" to designate the long-term repercussions of said damage to marginalized communities. Though not all the examples cited here reference Latin America (Nixon's explicitly does), a combination of the concepts of toxic discourse and environmental violence provides a helpful framework to examine how Latin American cultural production imagines toxic landscapes.

One could come up with an extensive list of fictional (or semifictional) works, as well as poems and essays, that centralize toxic discourse in Latin America and its social and racial imbrications.³ I examine one specific text that deals with the

³ Some of the fictional texts that centralize toxic discourse in Brazil are Ana Paula Maia's *De gados e homens* (2013), Daniel Galera's *Meia-noite e vinte* (2016) and more recent *O deus das avencas* (2021), which contains two narratives that imagine toxic landscapes ("Tóquio" and "Bugônia"). Natália Borges Polesso's *A extinção das abelhas* (2019) also touches upon environmental destruction. Daniela Arbex's *Arrastados* (2022) chronicles the environmental disaster of Brumadinho. Prisca Agustoni's forthcoming poetry collection *O gosto amargo dos metais* (7Letras, forthcoming) also deals with the Brumadinho and Mariana catastrophes. These two events also inspired the children's book *Sagatrissuinorana* (winner of the 2021 Jabuti Prize in children's literature). Patrícia Aniceto's poem "Vale da Morte" (from her book *Corpos em movimento*, 2019) also broaches the tragedy of Mariana. Indigenous writers such as Ailton Krenak, Julie Dorrico, and Márcia Kambeba, among others, also have written extensively about the effects of environmental destruction. To cite but a (very) few examples, Krenak's collection of essays *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (2019), *A vida não é útil* (2020), and *O amanhã não está à venda* (2020) all discuss the

topic: the Brazilian novel *Corpos secos* (*Dried Bodies* 2020). Winner of the 2021 Jabuti Prize for “entertainment fiction,” the novel was written by a group of young Brazilian authors and enlists the trope of toxicity to confront environmental and attendant social disaster. Significantly, the book does not fall back upon a pristine landscape as a counterpoint to the discourse of toxicity, therefore departing somewhat from Buell’s definition of toxic discourse. Rather, *Corpos secos* describes a tainted landscape that came about via human intervention. The novel depicts agricultural zones that human actions have made monstrous and whose monstrosity leaks into the human.

Gisela Heffes explains that Latin American literature no longer thinks of rural spaces as locales of unsullied nature, as retreats from urban chaos and violence. Instead, the countryside “has become domesticated by the unfettered use of monocultures, be they soy or wheat, and by the use of pampean soil as an artificial laboratory where the global economy and an increasingly unregulated state intervene, thereby objectifying it. This reversal ... marks the emergence of a new rurality, one in which the countryside is anthropogenically intervened, trimmed, exploited, and domesticated” (56). Heffes’s words hint at the role that neoliberalism has played in the exploitation, and attendant damage, of biomes throughout Latin America. In many such narratives, the by-product of neoliberal environmental manipulation is toxicity: toxic landscapes that, in turn, poison the humans who are at the cause of toxicity.

I explore how *Corpos secos* employs the discourse of toxicity, condensed in the metaphor of zombification, to imagine the Capitalocene. Moore proposes to understand capitalism as a “world ecology” that joins the “accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity” (3). “World ecology” describes capitalist modes of production that involve exploitation of natural resources. For him, humans shape nature as much as nature shapes humanity. We should understand capitalism as a mode of production and as a social organization from this vantage point.⁴ Moore explains that

implications of extractive practices on nature, and its humans and nonhuman inhabitants. Dorrico’s poem “Vô Madeira” reflects on riverine pollution and Kambeba’s “O tempo do clima” approaches climate changes and its consequences.

⁴ As one of this article’s reviewers correctly pointed out, the intensive, often harmful exploration and manipulation of nature is inherent to Modernity. Capitalism is entwined with the project of modernity. Moore explicitly links the Capitalocene with a project of modernity that began in the sixteenth century with Europe’s ultramarine expansion. Here I focus on the Capitalocene since this

Capitalism's governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development, or some other higher good. The reality—the historical process—is radically different... Nature with a capital "N"— external, controllable, reducible—the web of life is busy shuffling about the biological and geological conditions of capitalism's process.
(2–3)

In its current iteration, capitalism as an ecological regime is pushing against the limits of environmental sustainability, against the limits of Nature, as it seeks continuous growth. In the novel that I propose to analyze, the coproduction of nature, impelled by greed (a recurring allegory of capitalism), goes terribly wrong, generating toxic biomes and, ultimately, destroying humanity or humanness as zombies take over Brazil.

In undead narratology, zombification signals the breakdown of sociability, the imploding of a communitarian ethos and the stripping of humanity as a consequence of capitalist exploitation. The walking dead are devoid of will, filled solely with an insatiable hunger that only continuous and abject consumption can sate. Its hunger propels it into mindless action, to the satisfaction of its individual desires. *Corpos secos* reflects on how capitalist exploitation of nature, propelled by the imperative of endless accumulation, transforms not only the environment but also its human inhabitants. Nonetheless, as it reaches a point of saturation, capitalist exploitation produces a toxic nature that contaminates humanity.

While the world was experiencing the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 and Brazil became one of the pandemic's hotspots, Alfaguara published *Corpos secos*. Written by four authors from Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul—Natália Borges Polesso, Luisa Geisler, Samir Machado de Machado, and Marcelo Ferroni (who was born in São Paulo but lives in Rio)—the text combines different literary genres, such as speculative fiction, suspense, apocalyptic fiction, terror, gore, travel narrative, and was conceived before the outbreak of the

concept better illustrates the type of human manipulation of the environment that happens in the novel than a broader idea of modernity. Of course, one concept is contingent on the other.

pandemic. Nonetheless, the imaginary of contagion and ensuing social chaos seems prophetic in retrospect.

Corpos secos conceives a not-so-distant future in which cannibalistic zombies have taken over Brazil. The country has become a doomsday landscape populated by roving bands of the undead, ruined cities, and a few remaining humans seeking safe haven from the zombie apocalypse. While clearly fictional, the uncanny landscape of *Corpos secos* bears remarkable resemblances to contemporary Brazil. Beyond the obvious parallels to the COVID pandemic, the novel also contains references to Brazil's current president and to the agricultural cities in Brazil's central-western states of Goiás, Mato Grosso, and Mato Grosso do Sul ("Cruzaram as cidades-fantasma de Britânia, Jacilândia, Jussara" [62]).⁵ These towns stand for the inexorable expansion of Brazil's agribusiness into various biomes, specifically the *cerrado*, which covers parts of the states in which the cited cities are located. Mechanized agriculture and cattle ranching are critically endangering this biome.⁶ The *cerrado*'s transformation into pasture and farmland represents what Moore has identified as capitalism's continual expansion toward new frontiers, toward "Natures whose wealth can be mapped, reshaped, and appropriated cheaply" (297).

In another example of real-life meeting fiction, as one of the novel's protagonists drives into the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, she observes that "A paisagem da cidade é de pontes inacabadas, lixo em terrenos baldios, casebres pela metade, outdoors rasgados. Ela não sabe se é efeito da catástrofe ou se o Rio de Janeiro sempre foi assim" (158). Instead of resorting to fabulation, the narrative plays with the possibility of mimesis as it describes a dystopic, trash-strewn landscape on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro (scenery that could be that of many other Brazilian metropolises). Fiction and reality merge in a compelling doomsday scenario, as the latter proves sufficiently dreary to feature in an apocalyptic novel.

Survivors of the undead infestation flee across the country toward Brazil's two island capitals (the zombies cannot swim, so islands are the only safe spaces in Brazil's vast geography): São Luis, in the northeastern state of Maranhão, and

⁵ All three cities are in Goiás, which is the leader in crop raising and among the top Brazilian states in cattle farming as well.

⁶ According to *Mongabay*, the *cerrado*, the world's largest and most biodiverse savannah, "is disappearing twice as fast as the Amazon rainforest with 21,000 square kilometers (over 2 million hectares) of savannah destroyed annually between 2002 and 2008" (Hance).

Florianópolis, in the southern state of Santa Catarina. The novel follows its four protagonists as they converge toward the latter city from different places in Brazil.

Corpos secos expands the imagery of the undead in contemporary Brazilian literature by introducing environmental issues in the nation's zombie narratology, even if the word "zombie" almost does not appear in the book.⁷ The novel's title references a figure from Brazilian folklore of the south and southeast, the Corpo Seco. Legend has it that this character committed so many evil deeds that he was cast out not only by god but also by the devil. Indeed, the very earth refused to shelter his deceased body. As a result, the Corpo Seco is condemned to wander about, scaring the living.

Though not an ecological parable per se (such as those featuring the *curupira* or the *boitatá*, mythical beings that protect forests and grasslands respectively), the theme of a sentient, agentic earth that rejects an abject humanity is an interesting facet of the myth, one that reverberates in *Corpos secos*. In both the legend and the novel, humanity is toxic. And in both instances, the environment strikes back, turning the toxicity back against humankind, and, in the case of *Corpos secos*, wreaking havoc. True to the trope of disaster that permeates the novel, the undead *corpos secos* suggest how natural elements "appear to rise up against human civilization, rending violently ideology, institutions, and identity" (Anderson, *Disaster* 1).

Even as the zombie has its origins in the Caribbean plantation system, it has become a malleable allegory that responds to changing contexts and anxieties (Rath), including environmental disaster and accompanying doomsday scenarios (Geiser). Kerstin Oloff suggests that the zombie as an ecological figure "encodes the rift between humans and their natural environment perpetrated by capitalism" (31). Oloff explains that the zombie becomes a cipher for the "radical transformations and subsequent degradations or exhaustions of extra-human environments and human labour" (42). *Corpos secos* pinpoints intensive agriculture as the cause of both environmental and human degradation. Much as monocropping and its reliance on chemical agents drains the land of nutrients and biodiversity, in the novel intensive agriculture also hollows humans of their

⁷ Some other texts that have undead characters are *Morgan o único* (2012) by Douglas Eraldo, *Cidade de Deus Z* (2013) by Júlio Peçly, and *Areia nos dentes* (2010) by Antonio Xerxenesky. Xerxenesky in fact appears in *Corpos secos*, playing himself—an author who went to Paraty to participate in a literary festival. He is trapped there by the zombie pandemic and eventually joins the ranks for the undead.

humanity, transforming them into nothing more than dried-out shells. Accordingly, the novel describes the living dead using terms that invoke animality: they are “feral” and form “packs” that alternate between periods of ruminative paralysis (“estão parados ... como um rebanho de ovelhas” [11]) and hunting for the surviving humans. Besides the prospect of live human meat, the only other thing that rouses the *sequinhos* is a mysterious religious figure, the Pastor dos Mortos who plays passages from the Book of Revelation from an armored car. Again, the reference to contemporary Brazil, in this case, its evangelical movement, seems suggestive. *Corpos secos* ironizes the evangelical fascination with judgment day and transforms prophecy into a (fictional) reality. The quoted passage is also significant if one considers the collision between the evangelical and the agribusiness lobbies that have come to dominate the country’s political landscape.⁸ Many evangelical churches embrace a neoliberal logic in the guise of a gospel of prosperity.

Agribusiness, which espouses the capitalization of nature, has been one of the key factors in Brazil’s deforestation. According to sociologist Fabiana Scoleso, Brazilian agribusiness operates according to an “antisocial metabolism”: “arrasa a natureza, entra em conflito com os territórios, como no caso dos povos indígenas, causa desemprego e insegurança alimentar” (Silva).

We learn that the body-drying referenced in the novel’s title (“corpos secos”) is the result of contamination by pesticides that were not adequately tested before being distributed (“*Como se previne a corpo-secagem? O vírus pode ser transmitido pelo contato direto com os agrotóxicos da marca AgroTechBrazil, como Gliforan, Tricosato e Temerctina*” [*Corpos secos* 31; emphasis in the original]). The pesticides in question produce a mutant version of the baculovirus *anticarsia*, a real biological agent used in combatting a type of caterpillar that affects soy plants, one of Brazil’s top export crops.

Corpos secos brings up chemical agents such as glyphosate, the pesticide produced by Bayer that is widely used in Brazil, as the cause for the zombie pandemic. Glyphosate has come under increasing scrutiny for its adverse effects on human health and the environment. Glyphosate-based herbicides can, for

⁸ The evangelical and agribusiness and the pro-gun lobby form the “Bancada BBB” (Bíblia, Boi e Bala), a conservative faction of Brazilian politics that has gained significant power in recent years. Though *Corpos secos* does not allude to the third “B” (bullets) of the political faction, it does imagine a Brazil under military control. As such, the novel touches upon the relation between crisis and democratic erosion that has become a staple of Brazil’s current government and its allies.

example, reduce the fertility rate of wild plants (Cortez). Studies have shown that the chemical affects infant health and increases infant mortality in areas where it is used. In 2015 the World Health Organization declared that glyphosate can be carcinogenic. A growing number of countries, cities, and states, from Argentina to Slovenia and Vietnam, have banned products containing glyphosate, including the popular weed killer Roundup. Although a federal judge in Brasília forbade the registration of products containing glyphosate in August 2018, in September of the same year, the proscription was lifted. Currently, glyphosate is the most widely commercialized herbicide in Brazil, with over 217.6 thousand metric tons of the chemical sold in 2019.

Corpos secos establishes a direct link between toxicity, unfettered agrobusiness, and dehumanization. Such a correlation evokes Moore's assessment that capitalism has reached its limits. Continuous pursuit of profit has resulted in an "accumulation of waste and toxification [that] now threatens the unpaid work that is being done: this is the transition from surplus-value to negative value" (Moore 305). The dried bodies of *Corpos secos*, a result of the "accumulation of waste and toxification," are a manifestation of what Sarah Juliet Lauro has termed the eco-zombie, "an undead that results from some gross mistreatment of nature—usually by a corporation, or by someone seeking to make a profit, who thinks little of protecting the natural environment" (62). Lauro explains that the eco-zombie allegorizes not only humans' destructive potential over the environment, but, conversely, our species' inability to fundamentally control the environment. The eco-zombie, though a product of capitalist exploitation, ultimately undermines this (eco)economic cycle. No wonder then that many zombie-centered cultural narratives occur against a doomsday backdrop. And *Corpos secos* is no exception.

Corpos secos explains how the pesticides used to control agricultural pests activate the "syndrome de Matheson-França, o popular 'corpo seco'" (8)⁹ that leads to mutations in humans. Human bodies become filled with fungi, while rationality, memory, emotion, and all other traits commonly associated with the human species disappear. Women, men, and children turn into zombies who, much like the caterpillars that are treated with the real baculovirus, burst after a few days, releasing their infectious spores into the air. As contemporary zombie lore has it,

⁹ As observed by André Cárceres, the name of the disease hints at the horror, fantasy, and sci-fi author Richard Burton Matheson (1926–2013).

these “dry bodies” in turn infect healthy humans by either eating them or contaminating the air healthy people breathe.

Cross-pollination between humanity and other life forms destabilizes the species boundaries, evoking the trope of monstrosity. Leakage here encapsulates the idea of a dangerous transgression of species boundaries wrought by biological manipulation—in this case, the transformation of humans into eukaryotic organisms and, subsequently, into monstrous beings that challenge taxonomic categories.

Both the plot of *Corpos secos* and its structure centralize the idea of contamination, of mixed taxonomies. At the plot level, environmental manipulation, and ensuing defilement, produces zombies, who in turn infect humans. Metafictionally, we can observe other contagion processes. For example, invention and reality seem to bleed into one another. Beyond the airborne mode of zombie contagion,¹⁰ various scenes in the novel conjure situations from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as quarantines and food shortages: “os mercados pareciam como na greve dos caminhoneiros, anos antes, que estavam sem fruta, sem papel higiênico, em enlatados” (52).¹¹

Collaboration was at the heart of the novel’s writing process. After agreeing on a script, the authors exchanged their texts and adapted their narratives to integrate with the stories by the other contributors, “um método colaborativo semelhante ao processo criativo no teatro, onde um ator pode influenciar a *performance* do outro no palco” (Olímpia). Collaboration veers into “contagion.” Not only do the different authorial voices cross-pollinate, but we never learn who wrote what part, leading the reader to identify multiple possible authors for each of the novel’s segments.

Finally, *Corpos secos* also mingles multiple genres, such as action cinema, for instance. Many passages in the novel reproduce the blood-spattered, action-packed scenes common to horror or apocalyptic feature films, bringing to mind cinematic classics such as the *Mad Max* franchise. In one such scene, one of the main characters, Regina, engages in a high-speed escape from the living dead: “Ela engata o 4X4 e os pneus ganham aderência, giram e transformam os corpos em

¹⁰ At the end of their life cycle, the zombies explode “em bolsas de esporos de vida curta em contato com o ar, mas que eram um risco a qualquer um que as aspirasse num raio de vinte metros” (*Corpos secos* 11).

¹¹ The citation also references the 2018 truckers’ strike against the increase of the price of diesel.

purê.... O motor ruge, fumaça preta vaza entre os corpos, o carro fura a arrebentação, salta e quica no asfalto. Alguns corpos secos se agarram às grades, outros são retalhados” (161). The chase, which goes on for several pages, mixes suspense and gore, with its vivid descriptions of disintegrating bodies intent on attacking the fleeing protagonist and coming close to doing so (“O corpo seco usa uma cabeça avulsa para arrebentar o vidro. A cada batida, partes do miolo vazam. Quando a cabeça atravessa o para-brisa, Regina se protege dos estilhaços, e o corpo seco cai para dentro” [162]). The grotesque details in the passage, which conjure TV shows such as AMC’s popular series *Walking Dead*, convey the urgency of Regina’s panic as she attempts to flee the living dead. Much as spectators become enthralled by the dramatic tension inherent in television horror shows, in the novel pictorial, fast-paced language pulls the reader into the thick of the plot.

Corpos secos focuses on five different characters, each written by a different author: Mateus, the sole asymptomatic survivor of the *corpo secagem*; his half-brother Murilo, a young boy of about ten; Regina, a typical upper-middle-class Brazilian who was married to a land owner in Mato Grosso (the husband falls prey to the zombies early in the novel); and finally, Constância, a food engineer, and her brother, Conrado, a vegan drag queen who goes by VeganeX.

All five characters, though hailing from different parts of Brazil, are traveling toward Florianópolis, a zombie-free zone that the Brazilian military has taken over. Here they hope to find a safe haven from the undead pandemic, though it is unclear what this safe haven really entails, especially given that the novel’s open ending hints toward other types of violence.¹² The plot of *Corpos secos* focuses on the characters’ adventures during their journey through the devastated Brazilian landscape.

Throughout the text, narrative perspectives alternate from first-person narration to third person. Each character has a unique voice that communicates a different viewpoint about the events that unfold in the novel. Take the character of Murilo, a child of about ten, who must mature abruptly as he deals with the catastrophe unfolding around him. Murilo’s voice changes gradually over the narrative, as he repeatedly deals with tragedy. While at the beginning Murilo relies on the wisdom of adults to orient him (at least partially)—“a mãe também diz pra ouvir os adultos.... E o Mateus é adulto. Então eu não sei quem ganha. O Mateus

¹² In particular, the novel’s conclusion evokes the idea of a state of exception in which state-sponsored violence becomes sanctioned, ostensibly to protect the population.

é maior que minha mãe, não que ela seja grande. Mas o Mateus é mais forte” (13)—at the end of the novel, he concludes that “Adultos são imbecis” (175). The short, simple sentences in the passage convey a child’s unsophisticated viewpoint as he tries to process the world around him. In contrast, the briefness of the second sentence, combined with the forceful vocabulary (“imbecis”) express the character’s disenchantment, his maturation into cynicism. Murilo’s voice markedly diverges from the other protagonists, all of them adults, even if these characters also retain their own narrative timbre.

As the quote above indicates, readers frequently have access to the main characters’ subjectivity. In particular, the sections written in the first person provide insights into certain characters’ motivations, thoughts, and emotions and, in some cases, their bodily sensations. We share their fears and horror. When Conrado becomes infected by the *corpo secagem*, we partake in his physical transformation: “Parece que minhas veias vão estourar, que minha cabeça vai explodir, meus olhos ardem, minha garganta arde. A ânsia não passa” (130). The inventory of uncomfortable corporeal sensations, communicated via verbs such as “ardor” and “estourar,” stirs readers’ own embodied memories, allowing them to approximate themselves to Conrado’s predicament. Even as he notices the changes, he wants to deny them. As in many zombie narratives, we too hope (spoiler alert: against all hope, in this case) that he will not become one of the *corpos secos*. The gradual process (a whole chapter chronicles Conrado’s metamorphosis) allows for a seesawing of emotions that go from horror, hope, denial to desperation.

Tellingly, beyond humans, the *corpo secagem* does not affect any other animals. Nonetheless, this being a novel about human manipulation of the environment gone bad, the text does have some passages that imagine the second-hand effects of the infection on other creatures (I return to this point shortly). Notably, *Corpos secos*, deviating somewhat from Buell’s definition of toxic discourse, does not envision a pristine nature against which to think contamination and the ensuing zombie pandemic. Rather, evoking the notion of the Capitalocene, the narrative rethinks the environment as inherently human-created or tainted by human presence, specifically by capitalist production.

The notion of nature entwined with human endeavor, as polluted by and in turn manipulating human existence—present in both Felipe de Ávila Franco’s pictures and in Moore’s understanding of the Capitalocene—also becomes manifest in

Corpos secos. Much the way Franco's photographs intimate how human meddling creates a poisonous, mutant nature, the landscapes that appear in *Corpos secos* all bear the mark of human intervention: fields of deadened crops ("corremos pelo mato, barranco abaixo, galho de árvore na cara... Corremos até chegar numa plantação de banana. Sem banana. Tudo seco" [33]). These landscapes are empty of life, dotted with dead bodies, abandoned cars, and shattered buildings, signs of a cataclysm that transforms nature (in this case a biological agent) into something deadly to humans.

Similar to *Tropical Delusion*, ruins also feature prominently in *Corpos secos*: "A torre da TV Gazeta tombou, metade dela ainda está sob o edifício da Cásper Líbero, e a ponta bloqueia a pista do outro lado" (49). As in Franco's images, the depiction of ruins heightens the novel's doomsday ambiance, a crisis not only of nature but of human "civilization," especially in its capitalist iteration. And, comparable to Franco's photographs, ruins in *Corpos secos* generally convey a threat: "as farmácias haviam sido incendiadas, havia corpos estourados ou perfurados de balas por toda parte, e muitas moscas mortas" (157). In this passage, ruins are juxtaposed to death and decay.

Tellingly, wrecked and ransacked supermarkets feature prominently in the novel, serving as allegories of sorts for both the logic and the crisis of capitalism. Dozens of *corpos secos* litter a looted supermarket: "dezenas de corpos secos espalhados pelo chão, deitados e imóveis feito um grande grupo de campistas desabrigados... —Que merda vieram fazer aqui dentro? — Reflexo condicionado, talvez" (83). The scene suggests a correlation between consumption ("Reflexo condicionado") and dehumanization, an association that is also intimated in the linkage between biological manipulation in the service of agribusiness and zombification.

Moore observes that while in the past, nature was harnessed to accommodate human needs and resolve social, economic, or political crisis, we have now reached a point when "it is increasingly difficult to get nature—including human nature—to yield its 'free gifts' on the cheap. This indicates we may be experiencing not merely a transition from one phase of capitalism to another, but something more epochal: the breakdown of the strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over the past five centuries" (1). To counteract phenomena such as soil degradation and erosion due to intensive farming, agricultural enterprises rely increasingly on pesticides and fertilizers to produce crops, leading in turn to

environmental calamities, such as, for example, the creation of what scientists call marine dead zones. Dead zones are the result of fertilizer runoff (mainly phosphorus and nitrate) that deplete oxygen in certain aquatic environments. Though algae thrive, usually no other animal life can flourish in these dead zones.

In *Corpos secos*, the dead zones are terrestrial: areas infested by roving bands of zombies that kill noncontaminated humans. Additionally, the novel suggests that beyond biomes, human bodies also become the equivalent of dead zones that spread uncontrollably via the release of spores that transforms human life into an aberration.

Significantly, one of the few zombie-free areas (besides the two island capitals of Florianópolis and São Luis) is the compound where Dona Carmen, Constância and Conrado's mother, lives. Flourishing vegetation covers the small holding, from fruit trees to "canteiros que estavam cheios de tudo: frutas, verduras, ervas, hortaliças, milho, tomate, morango, mirtilo, pitanga, tudo" (74). The garden's variety and fertility contrasts with the landscapes devastated by monoculture and the outbreak of the zombie epidemic. Dona Carmen relies on her garden to nourish her and to ward off zombies since the latter find her plants, particularly garlic, repugnant.

Although the novel does not further develop the idea of organic, familial agriculture as an antidote to human and environmental zombification, the chapter in question hints at alternate modes of cultivation and relationship to nature that promote both human and biological welfare. Especially relevant in the passage is the diversity and small scale of the crops, which offers a counterpoint to the extensive monoculture that depletes soils and relies heavily on pesticides for sustained yield. A 2016 report from the International Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES) states that in contrast to industrial agriculture, smaller-scale, sustainable farming modes "keep carbon in the ground, support biodiversity, rebuild soil fertility and sustain yields over time" (3).

Corpos secos is, at one level, an indictment of Brazil's agricultural practices, which increasingly rely on large-scale, industrial production for export as well as a widespread use of pesticides. Brazil's agribusiness is responsible for more than four percent of the annual value added to the country's gross domestic product (it injects over 360 billion reais into the national economy) and is accountable for nine percent of the country's employment. Beyond being one of the leading causes of illegal deforestation, Brazilian agribusiness relies heavily on pesticides, making

the country the third largest consumer of agrochemicals in the world and the largest annual buyer of Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs). HHPs contain active ingredients with extremely acute toxicity that have chronic negative impacts on human health and the environment. According to a recent report, one person dies of pesticide poisoning in Brazil every two days (Medeiros Filho). *Corpos secos* conjures this toxic collusion between economy and necropolitics, a social organization that condemns vast segments of the population to an existence akin to that of living dead (Mbembe).

Beyond ecological crisis, in *Corpos secos*, zombification also becomes a metaphor for the necropolitical dimension inherent in late capitalism. Not only is the zombification a result of unchecked biological experimentation in the name of profit, “aquelas porras daquelas lagartas que o pessoal da AgroTechBrazil nos enfiou para reduzir o imposto” (37), but the novel also exposes how necropolitical capital survives even in catastrophic conditions. Indeed, necropolitical capital thrives in the doomsday scenario.

Among the few purportedly “safe” places that remain in the apocalyptic geography that *Corpos secos* constructs is a large landholding, a *fazenda*. Here, the zombies become feed for monstrous cattle. Pointing to a bunker with a billowing smokestack, the owner of the holding explains to Regina, who seeks refuge at the *fazenda*, that “Ali é onde a gente torra e mói os sequinhos.... Ele aponta para uma casamata de cimento e tijolos.... No fundo da casamata há uma chaminé de alumínio recoberta de fuligem, de onde Regina vê fumaça preta saindo.... —O que eles estão comendo? —Carne de sequinho” (107–8). Of course, the allusion to the necropolitical operations of the concentration camp, with its gas ovens, is obvious in the passage. Achille Mbembe identifies necropolitics as the dominant paradigm of our times, suggesting that today’s central project of sovereignty is the “generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (14). As has been argued, the zombie is a fitting metaphor of this instrumentalization, even if in the last instance, the undead also signify a revolt against this exploitation.

Like many zombie narratives, the undead of *Corpos secos* also evoke an imaginary of social abjection. Dressed in rags and literally falling to pieces, the *sequinhos* can also be read as the *lumpen*, the dispossessed that haunt both Brazil’s countryside and its urban centers. As such, the wounded, decaying undead bodies bespeak long-term oppression and brutalization. Descriptions such as “Uma velha

corria pelo gramado ... Pernas magras com varizes e brotamentos amarronzados, pés imundos” (59) and “Um peão de rosto carcomido” (59) summon stereotypical images of beaten-down landless peasants or urban *favelados*. Oloff observes that the figure of the zombie comes about in the context of the Caribbean plantation economy while also evoking the dehumanizing effects of capitalism on industrial workers. The history of capitalism is entwined with slavocrat regimes, which in turn beget the zombie.

It can be said that *Corpos secos* suggests that zombification is latent to the human condition in late capitalist regimes and that the indiscriminate use of pesticides to augment agricultural production merely fertilizes it (pun intended). In other words, the trope of agrochemical poisoning and the monstrosity that it engenders expose the dehumanizing logic inherent in exploitative modes of productions. Not coincidentally, in *Corpos secos* the *fazendeiro* refers to the *corpos secos* that are about to become cattle feed: “Tudo aqui era pasto pros bois. Agora a gente coloca os sequinhos aqui e eles fica quieto. Quinhentas cabeças” (106). The synecdoche (“cabeças” to reference the *corpos secos*) operates a double dehumanization. First, the allusion transforms humans into cattle (*cabeças* is a common term used to designate livestock). Second, physical fragmentation prefigures the conversion of the formerly human into foodstuff. The undead bodies are literally dismembered as they become fodder. Lexical dehumanization sanctions the abject commodification at play in the scene cited above.

One of the consequences of feeding zombies to the bulls is that the latter also become monstrously large and, akin to the undead that they consume, have an enormous appetite. The gargantuan, ravenous cattle invoke Franco’s profuse, hyperbolically pigmented nature that “devours” humanmade structures. Nature, in *Corpos secos*, as in Franco’s photos, remains the same and yet is also fundamentally altered, made unrecognizable. Upon seeing the oxen, Regina “não diria que são bois. Parecem elefantes num desenho infantil, sem perspectiva, coloridos com canetinha marrom” (108). The comparison between the animals and the awkward drawings of a child highlights the preposterousness of the scene, its irreality. Both Franco’s photographs and the novel push the limits of the imaginable, prodding us to think about the consequences of environmental toxification, the product of a Capitalocene gone wrong.

In *Corpos secos*, zombies, because of their compound abjection (disease, cannibalism, lack of rationality), literally represent life not worth living (what

Agamben has termed “homo sacer”). At the farm where the character of Regina seeks refuge, the zombies are confined in fenced enclosures from whence they are led to slaughter. Their extermination and subsequent transformation into feed provides an apt metaphor of the sacrificial relation between men and capitalist economy that transforms humans, environments, and even the no-longer-human into “economic resources.” Notwithstanding the national catastrophe, the *fazendeiro* explains to Regina that “alguma coisa a gente ganha por aqui. Agora a gente precisa de mais cerca, de mais gerador, mais forno ... mais caminhão ... esses boizão dá umas trinta arroba só de carne” (109). The quote lays bare the primacy of a sordid economy based on an abject cycle of consumption that pushes the limits not only of the ecological—the “boizões” are mutant, monstrously oversized cattle—but also of the ethical. If we follow the cycle to its logical end, it is not only the zombies and, by extension, the monstrous cattle that are ingesting human meat. In other words, accumulation (“mais”) is synonymous with monstrosity.

Corpos secos proposes that the cycle of consumption and, therefore, contamination exceeds the limits of representation. Hence the recourse to the horror genre, to a narrative that often pushes our imaginative boundaries and gives shape to the slow violence of environmental pollution and its accompanying necropolitics.

In this context, the eco-zombie denotes not only a “cultural fixation on fictionalizing our own death, very specifically mass-scale destruction” (Geiser) that comes about as we face an increasingly acute ecological crisis, but also a narrative of resistance. The eco-zombie signifies a “‘revolt’ of extra-human nature” (Deckard 16). Construed in this manner, the eco-zombie becomes a catalyst for reflection on current economic practices as well as the social relations that accompany these practices. *Corpos secos* confronts us with the limits of capitalism as a world system that is imbricated with nature. Zombification—the result of intensive agriculture, of toxification of biomes and, consequently, of human and nonhuman lives—is a metaphor for an extreme form of capitalism, which, as Moore suggests, now presses against its own limits.

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