Everyday Consumption in Twenty-First-Century Brazilian Fiction

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Chapter One

A Consumer’s Dystopia

“They are biting off more than they can chew.” The “they” in question are Brazilian low-income consumers. The person who expressed this opinion was one of the middle-class participants of an ethnography on working-class consumption of luxury goods conducted by anthropologists Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Mury Scalco in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. At Pinheiro-Machado’s presentation during the 2016 Brazilian Studies Association Conference, when she provided the example above, the audience could not help but gasp at some of the opinions expressed by some of the research subjects about children’s requests for Christmas gifts during the National Mail Service’s Christmas charity action. For the middle-class participants of the ethnography in question, anything considered luxury goods (expensive branded items, primarily) was deemed inappropriate, whereas requests that evoked merit and humbleness were seen as adequate.

Branded items, cell phones, air travel, housing that reproduces certain comforts of luxury dwellings, bank accounts, and financing were some of the items that came within reach of the so-called “new middle class” in Brazil during the Lula administration (Oliven and Pinheiro-Machado 53). With the growth in consumption among what some would actually call “the new working class”1 came much push back from those who saw (and likely still see) themselves as the “legitimate” middle class, adequate consumers of certain products, as the comments by Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco’s subjects mentioned above indicate.

These socioeconomic shifts in Brazilian society are the focus of Bonassi’s 2015 novel Luxúria and Sant’Anna’s short story collection O Brasil é bom (2014), which I analyze in this chapter. Both authors harshly criticize Brazil’s policies of social inclusion via
consumption during the Worker’s Party’s tenure. Both of them depict a dystopic nation, where one can identify echoes of a familiar, long-standing discourse on development that masks the brutality of an everyday life mediated by consumer goods. As the authors in question peel the layers of Brazil’s social reality, a country of violence, prejudice, instability, debt, and tense social relations emerges. This dystopia, the narratives under analysis suggest, stems from a culture of consumption, represented as highly problematic for its shaping of self-centered individuals and its pervasive presence in multiple spheres of social life, such as work, leisure, sex, and religion. The narratives link this presence to the spread of a neoliberal rationality. As theorized by Brown, this rationality advances onto every sphere of life, on a path toward the catastrophic obliteration of democracy, as relations of solidarity disintegrate, and society loses even its forms of speaking about them (17). It is this disintegration, and therefore the abyss of total destruction of democratic societies, that Bonassi and Sant’Anna contemplate in their narratives. Read together, these literary works paint a radically negative image of Brazil, leaving little hope for any kind of positive change. In this way, based on the view of consumption in everyday life conveyed by the works in question, I call them narratives of totalizing dystopia.

I will first discuss Bonassi’s portrayal of his protagonist’s downfall as an omen of Brazil’s future demise due to a culture of voracious and conspicuous consumption, fueled by social policies that promote the inclusion of low-income sectors of society by increasing their consumer power. Second, I will look into Sant’Anna’s representation of Brazil as a similarly dystopic nation. I will discuss Sant’Anna’s criticism of President Lula’s social policies, of middle- and upper-class prejudice manifested via consumption, and of the rise of neoconservatism in the 2010s.

As a product of the contradictions of the context in which they were written—that is, of the strengthening of a neoliberal mentality that curtails the freedom that it promises—Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s works under study highlight serious problems in Brazil’s socioeconomic and political landscape in recent years, while reproducing some of the same neoliberal ideas at the heart of middle-class prejudice about working-class consumption. While Bonassi essentially blames working-class consumers’ “irrational” consumption for Brazil’s demise, Sant’Anna’s stories,
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despite presenting a broader view of how consumer culture affects Brazilian society by pointing fingers at different sectors, also condemn the pleasures of working-class consumption without acknowledging the social dynamics and the contradictions of consumer capitalism that affect this segment of society. In Sant’Anna’s case, the presence of an implicit narrator, who unifies the snapshots of various characters’ daily lives presented as if objectively captured by a camera, underscores a point of view that does not merely reproduce but rather intervenes as a commentator of this reality, at times positioning him/herself rather conservatively. In this way, the narratives analyzed in this chapter portray the working class ambiguously as victims and perpetrators of their own downfall and of Brazil’s ultimate demise, thus surrendering to an extent to neoliberal narratives of responsibilization, that is, of expecting individuals to be entrepreneurs of their selves (Brown 84).

Bonassi’s *Luxúria*: Brazil, Country of the Future! Are We There Yet?

*Luxúria* tells the story of a working-class Brazilian family that indulges in the consumption of goods that they cannot afford. The family is comprised of three members who do not have names and are simply referred to as the man, the woman, and the boy. Their voracious consumption ends up destroying them once the man, overwhelmed by his accumulating debt and the loss of his job, kills his wife and child, subsequently committing suicide.

As the title suggests, *Luxúria* is about lust and desire. The Portuguese word, which refers to one of the seven deadly sins, comes from the Latin word *luxūria*/*luxuria*, which means “extravagance, profusion, luxury, excess.” In Portuguese, *luxúria* is connected to *luxo*, which derives from the Latin word *luxus*. The latter also means excess, indulgence, and luxury (Lewis and Short). The title, thus, suggests a particular view of the consumption it portrays as excessive and conspicuous, motivated by extreme and irrational desires. Ultimately, consumption appears in the novel as a sin that eventually causes the characters’ downfall, which in turn stands for the country’s inability to prosper.

The story, classified by the narrator as a *relato* (report), and filled with meta-references such as “conforme descrito no capítulo quatro” (“as described in chapter four”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 335),
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presents itself as the real account of the life of a working-class family that, through consumption, has now supposedly ascended into the middle class. A sentence that prefaces the narrative frames the novel’s mimicry of real life from the beginning as it alerts readers that what they are about to read is “[b]aseado em pessoas e acontecimentos reais, lamentavelmente” (“based on real people and real events, unfortunately”; 8). The opening scene stresses the dystopic tone of the narrative. Tropical heat, pollution, and heavy traffic trap the protagonist in an inferno; a concrete jungle of pointless routine and apathy, as the real owners of capital fly over in their helicopters, avoiding the miserable conditions experienced by those driving down below. While the government claims that “[é] um momento histórico” (“it’s a historical moment”), the narrator translates this moment into “[n]unca tantos tiveram tão pouco” (“never before have so many had so little”; 9).

The reality to which the novel alludes is the period of about thirteen years of the Workers’ Party’s tenure in the presidency, roughly up until the novel’s publication. One of the settings of Luxúria is a neighborhood called Bairro Novo (New Neighborhood), comprised of subsidized houses, in a reference to the program Minha Casa, Minha Vida (My House, My Life), which offered subsidies not only for buying houses but also for remodeling them (Mattoso 115). It is through the government’s credit program that the protagonist is able to start the project of building a pool in his backyard. Luxúria is, in a sense, the story of this pool, the protagonists’ main object of lust. It is the story of what the pool represents: a family’s blind desire to consume that ignores their financial inability to do so, which drives them into debt and, ultimately, self-destruction.

Failure is also embedded in Bairro Novo as a whole. While its name suggests that the neighborhood represents a new era of progress, it soon becomes clear that this progress is mere promise. As the narrator comments, Bairro Novo “[n]ão se encontra, nem nunca se encontrou no centro de algo importante, muito menos numa periferia em torno de qualquer coisa que valesse a pena orbitar” (“is not and never has been at the center of anything important, much less in a periferia around anything worth orbiting”; Bonassi, Luxúria 22). Bairro Novo’s failure to be the thriving neighborhood that the government promised it would be becomes evident when a truck fails to deliver construction materials because it does not
fit into the poorly designed or rather unplanned narrow streets (157). The scene suggests how unsuitable it seems, from a middle-class perspective at least, to build a “lavish” pool in a low-income neighborhood and, by extension, to expect a country to prosper when a good portion of its “progress” is based on the acquisition of material goods that are beyond one’s actual means and that are prioritized over basic infrastructure.

The wider availability of credit mentioned above is at the center of *Luxúria*. The chapter “Crédito fácil” (“Easy credit”), as the title suggests, touches directly on this issue. At a place symbolically called “Paraíso das piscinas” (“Pool paradise”), the husband and his wife acquire the goods with which they hope to attract the attention of their neighbors and friends. Motivated by the salesman’s pitch, they come to see the pool as compensation for working hard and as a matter of “public health”; mental health, to be more precise. Capitalizing on the unhappiness produced by mass society as a way to sell goods—the rationale that would have propelled mass consumption in the first place (Ewen 45)—the salesman states that the protagonist deserves the pool, for it will provide him with relaxation moments much needed in order to continue to be productive. However, instead of providing the protagonist and his family with the paradise promised by the store, the purchase of the pool only makes their lives more difficult, affecting their mental health in quite the opposite way. The negative aftermath of purchasing the pool, thus, confirms the manipulative force of the commodification of leisure in consumer society, in which “we work to get our leisure and leisure only has one meaning: to get away from work. A vicious circle” (Lefebvre, *Critique* 40).

If initially the husband feels powerful, experiencing the “sabor de senhor” (“taste of [being] a [slave] master”), his power dwindles as the narrative progresses and infrastructural problems derail construction (Bonassi, *Luxúria* 181). The pool becomes a symbol of obliteration, which suggests that the ideology of consumption that sweeps the country will eventually be responsible for ending this moment of prosperity that is only liquid, fragile.

The pool embodies a sense of decay, fall, and dismantling from the very beginning of its construction. Work starts with two men digging themselves into a hole amidst buried trash made up of disposable containers and old credit card statements that seem to miraculously resist deterioration (Bonassi, *Luxúria* 223). This
resistance is symbolic, for it represents not only previous critical moments of the country’s economic life, such as the 1980s economic crisis, when foreign debt skyrocketed, but also a lasting economic stress that, the novel predicts, would be set in motion in the country once all those acquiring debt like the protagonist eventually failed to pay their dues.

The construction of the pool moves slowly, like the traffic in the city shown in the novel’s opening scene, reinforcing the sense that the country is stuck, or at the very least, on the brink of stalling. Boxes of tiles, packs of cement, and cans of paint acquire everyday uses around the protagonist’s house, serving as chairs, coffee tables, couches, and footrests, evoking a sense of precariousness, improvisation, and delay (Bonassi, *Luxúria* 255–56). Meanwhile, the dirt dug out by the construction workers, which makes up the foundation of the houses in the neighborhood, emits the smell of excrements. The narrator calls this dirt “o solo da pátria” (“the nation’s soil”), thus suggesting that the economic growth that the country experiences at the time when the pool is constructed has its foundations on a dirty political and economic past that seems to be repeating itself. The pool continues to bring more burden than joy to the man and to his family, as the protagonist is forced to leave work in order to deal with an accident that damages part of the plumbing during construction. As a consequence of the damage, the hole where the pool is expected to be placed is filled with sewage, spreading a bad smell through the neighborhood (259–60). Later on, heavy rain causes the concrete box of the pool to detach from the ground, making it float in sewage, eventually damaging the man’s house as well as his neighbors’ houses. Further emphasizing the idea of decay, the narrator compares the pool to a wound in the neighborhood, suggesting that this so-called “progress” is an open sore on the body of a sick nation, infected by the virus of consumption (254).

Not only the pool, but virtually everything that the family “owns” is not really theirs, as the narrator notes several times throughout the novel. Everyday life initially blinds the family to the fact that their car, their appliances, and the pool itself, belong to the banks from which they borrowed money, for they are merely another one of the neighborhood’s “famílias financiadas” (“financed families”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 205). Toward the end of the novel, the narrator highlights the protagonist’s deteriorating
status by no longer referring to him as “o homem de que trata esse relato” (“the man whom this report is about”), but rather as “o devedor de que trata esse relato” (“the debtor whom this report is about”). At this moment, the narrative reaches a turning point, when the everyday life of spending money the family does not actually have is interrupted. The protagonist states “Eu dormia muito bem antigamente, esquecia tudo no dia seguinte, mas agora tudo me carrega para um certo ponto, este ponto morto em que me encontro agora …” (I used to sleep well before, having forgotten everything by the following day, but now everything pushes me to a certain end, the dead end in which I find myself now; 316). This interruption, however, rather than the utopic idea of the Festival envisioned by Lefebvre (Everyday Life 191), that is, rather than the restoration of the human potential suppressed by modernity, will bring only doom to the protagonist.

Chapter 54, titled “No fundo do poço” (“Rock bottom”), further stresses the man’s downfall. He questions whether he still is, as he believed initially, “o melhor do mundo” (“the best one in the world”), and realizes that credit cards and loans are not the same as actual physical money, that they are just “promessa de plástico” (“a promise in plastic”; Bonassi, Luxúria 302). A deeper sense of awareness comes soon after this moment, when the man, depressed and abandoned to his own luck, concludes:

Meu dinheiro não dá para o que eu desejo. Meu desejo não dá para a oferta do mundo. Eu nem sei o que eu desejo. Este é o meu motor contínuo. Eu sei, eu creio que este é “o” momento histórico de oportunidades, que elas são novas, fáceis, disponíveis, mas em meio a tudo isso o meu fôlego está decaindo, falindo, parando, e eu estou afundando como um tubarão que quer morrer afogado. (343)

I don’t have money to fulfill my desires. My desires are not compatible with what the world offers me. I don’t even know what I desire. This is my continuous drive. I know, I believe that this is “the” historical moment of opportunities, that they are new, easy, available, but amidst all this my breath is weakening, fading, stopping, and I am sinking like a shark that wants to drown.

The protagonist’s thoughts capture his realization of the incompatibility between what consumer capitalism demands from him and what his socioeconomic condition allows him to achieve. The protagonist’s psychological state, as well as that of the society
around him, unveils the failure of the early twentieth-century project of controlling the psyche of the “irrational masses” in order to secure the future of democracy. As shown in Adam Curtis’ 2002 documentary *The Century of the Self*, between the 1920s and the 1950s, public relations and advertising executive Edward Bernays, together with psychologist Ernest Dichter, applied Freud’s theory of the unconscious to advertising. Their goal was to manage consumers’ emotions, manipulating their desires by rationalizing associations between products and people’s innermost wants. The justification for said manipulation of the unconscious, which was also used in politics, was that, in their view, the irrational masses had to be controlled in order to guarantee a democratic future, which depended on the existence of a stable society. It was believed that, left to their own devices, the masses would be led by primitive irrational forces (*Century* 01:50:48–01:54, 01:37:29–01:38:36). Bonassi’s *Luxúria* shows this project turned onto its head: the control of consumer desires here is what actually leads to irrationality. Anger and other strong emotions lie just beneath the surface, ready to erupt any minute in a society sickened by brutal competition and individualism manifested through consumption. Melting into a mass of indistinguishable consumers, characters without names are “seduced” by the possibilities of Brazil’s new socioeconomic conditions. All spheres of the characters’ everyday lives have been colonized by capital, as they have been sucked into the modernity that Lefebvre cautions against, in which individuality and leisure have been erased. They carry out lives “deprived of reality, of links with the world—a life for which everything human is alien” (*Lefebvre, Critique* 149).

The loss of control that the novel represents is exacerbated by the fact that the protagonist is fired from his job due to his many absences to deal with the aforementioned construction problems. This event pushes the protagonist over the edge, culminating later on with him killing his whole family and committing suicide at the end of the novel. The cycle of destruction is then complete: the desired pool, as a symbol of ascension into middle-class status, only brings spiraling debt, emotional distress, job loss, and ultimately, death. In this way, the novel suggests that the level of consumption that it portrays can only be sustained for so long. It is an illusion that only leads to destruction. The utopia of a democratic society of individuals with managed emotions is radically negated, as is the possibility of overcoming the constraints of everyday life under capitalism.
Everyday Violence

One of the main ways in which Bonassi expresses the fallacy of the idea of a society of controlled emotions through consumption is by portraying violence, which abounds in the novel. Underlying this violence is greed, competition, and the consequent stress of living in a world that seduces individuals with consumer goods while making it ever more challenging for the majority of the population to acquire them. Violence contaminates social relations through microaggressions in several spheres of life, including spaces such as the home, the school, work, and the medical office.

At the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist points out this everyday violence in Brazilian society, which ranges from mumbled insults to murder, by characterizing the traffic in which he is stuck as “Guerra com ‘g’ maiúsculo!” (“War with a capital ‘w!’”; Bonassi, Luxúria 10). To emphasize the everyday nature of these aggressions, the narrator places several of them in the background of the main actions of the plot, often when highlighting the protagonist’s behavior as a consumer. This strategy creates a connection between consumption and violence, suggesting that the quest for the first often leads to or is backed by the latter.

One example of this connection between consumption and violence lies in the novel’s representation of sex, which functions as an index of the protagonist’s consumer power or lack thereof. The title of the novel itself, in its reference to lust, implies this index, which appears for the first time when the protagonist uses the word “luxúria” as an adjective to describe the materials that had been delivered for the construction of the pool (Bonassi, Luxúria 183).

The very decision to purchase the pool is born out of the protagonist’s envy when he meets his wife’s dentist at the latter’s office and feels intimidated by all the diplomas displayed on the wall. To the dentist’s display of his education, the factory worker responds with a comment that he has bought a pool. The narrator notes that the man “sente que dá o troco, e que suplanta o outro de alguma maneira, já que agora pode até mesmo realizar seus sonhos” (“feels that he retaliates, and defeats the other man in some way, since now he can even make his dreams come true”; Bonassi, Luxúria 18). For the protagonist, his purchasing power, albeit stemming from loans, has leveled the playing field. This battle for goods is also a battle for sexual prowess in a chauvinistic environment. As
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suggested by the narrator, the protagonist’s behavior is motivated by feeling threatened by the dentist as a male, when the latter talks to the woman as if she were his wife (15). The protagonist, thus, utilizes goods to mark his territory, so to speak. His resentment comes across in a dialog in which he insults the dentist only to take it back when asked to repeat:

*Filho da puta.*
*Como disse?*
*Bom dia, doutor* (14)

*Son of a bitch.*
*Pardon me?*
*Good morning, Doctor*

Dialogues such as the one above abound in the novel. We also encounter these exchanges, for instance, at the factory where the protagonist works, between the man and his boss; or at home, between the housekeeper and the man’s wife. These exchanges highlight the underlying tensions in daily interactions in current Brazil, when one finds cordiality only at the surface, beneath which lies the violence of a profoundly hierarchical society of evermore deteriorating relations. The protagonist is constantly “put in his place” by those socially above him. From this perspective, consumer power is not enough to provide him with the prestige that comes with belonging to certain social echelons. The contrast between the dentist, with his diploma on display, and the factory worker, holding little formal education, also emphasizes the devaluing of manual labor in relation to intellectual activities of “higher” realms (Gardiner 75).

In addition to using goods as a way to mark his territory as a male, the protagonist sees his wife as an object that he owns. Specifically, he expresses this ownership through an aggressiveness toward her as a sexual object. This relation of possession is evidenced, for example, after they leave the dentist’s office and are stuck in traffic. In this instance, the couple discusses the idea of purchasing the pool. The woman questions her husband about whether they can afford it. Upon arguing that they have credit, he grabs her genitals. According to the narrator, he does so as if saying “*você sabe de quem é, não sabe?*” (“you know who you belong [it belongs] to, don’t you?”, Bonassi, *Luxúria* 21). In this context,
grabbing the woman represents the man’s affirmation of his masculinity as the breadwinner, both sexually and financially capable and strong, the real owner of their assets, his wife included.

The novel connects sex with consumption and violence again in two other moments, which indicate the protagonist’s ascension and his decline, respectively. In the former instance, the man, in a kind of delirium, first imagines his backyard as larger and his pool as more lavish than what they are in reality. Following this moment, he begins to act violently, kicking the family’s dog and aggressively having sex with his wife, after opening a bottle of (cheap) champagne, a symbol of his new found “opulence” (Bonassi, *Luxúria* 92–95). His reaction suggests both his sense of superiority for being able to consume and his underlying despair to prove his (male) power in an attempt to negate his economic decline.

In the second instance when sex, consumption, and power intertwine, there is a symbolic confrontation between the protagonist and another man, as they run into each other walking their respective dogs. This confrontation, which is also about social status, is signaled by the contrast between the protagonist’s dog, a “vira-lata” (“street dog”), and the stranger’s dog, a Doberman pinscher. The protagonist feels diminished by the other man’s dog breed due to the high social status that “owning” such a dog conveys in Brazilian society. Distracted, he stumbles on his dog’s leash and falls as he fails to control the animal. His lack of control contrasts with the attitude of the other man, who commands his dog with confidence. The encounter, in addition to conveying social competition, functions as a foreshadowing of the man’s downfall, as indicated by the protagonist’s realization that “… o outro cachorro, o dobermann, e o homem, o rapaz, … ao contrário dele próprio e do vira-lata, eles estão plenamente aptos e capazes, cheios de perspectivas e possibilidades de vitória sobre a caça e a perpetuação das espécies” (“the other dog, the Doberman pinscher, the man, the young man, … in contrast with himself and his street dog, are fully apt and capable, they have plenty of chances to win the hunt and to perpetuate the species”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 267). The strength that the stranger and his dog exude, as beings capable of perpetuating their lineage, stands for the perpetuation of middle- and upper-class privilege. The contrast between the protagonist and the stranger highlights the socioeconomic differences between
the two, which are masked by the protagonist’s mere illusion of wealth. His stumbling wakes him up, albeit only for a moment, from his consumer’s dream, as he is forced to confront what real wealth looks like in Brazilian society.

In the Darwinian battle between the two, it is the wealthy stranger who is likely to survive after the period of only apparent economic growth is over. The protagonist’s defeat also suggests his defeated masculinity, for the intersection between being male and being poor does not grant one with the same privileges as being male and rich. The protagonist’s defeat, and that of the social class that he represents, is communicated by his dog’s reaction, as the animal, intimidated by the Doberman pinscher,

pôe o rabo entre as pernas e, se arrastando, deita de costas no asfalto, abrindo as pernas para o dobermann, exibindo-lhe a barriga rosa-pálido com um princípio de sarna, e os órgãos genitais, murchos—num gesto de total submissão na linguagem dos cães e dos homens. (Bonassi, Luxúria 268)

puts his tail between his legs and, dragging himself, lies on his back on the asphalt, opening his legs to the Doberman pinscher, exposing his pale-pink belly that shows signs of scabies, the genitalia wilted—in a gesture of total submission in the language of dogs and men.

In other words, the dog’s emasculation mirrors that of his human’s, whose (consumer) power is in reality inferior to that of the stranger with his pedigree dog.

As foreshadowed by this encounter, the protagonist’s sexual prowess deteriorates as the construction of the pool faces several obstacles. One particular instance of the narrative represents this deterioration. One night, faced with sexual impotence, the man behaves violently toward his wife, in an ambiguous scene that suggests rape. However, he ends up “vencido, castrado” (“defeated, castrated”; Bonassi, Luxúria 294). He lies in bed feeling the “enorme vazio, o permanente sentimento de desconfiança e a frustração generalizada, envenenando progressivamente as demais áreas da vida” (“the enormous emptiness, the permanent feeling of mistrust and the generalized frustration that progressively poisons the other areas of [his] life”; 294). These feelings stem from the failure to perform not just sexually, but also as a consumer, given that his plans to build the pool are not coming to fruition in the way that he imagined.
Violence also manifests itself in everyday micro aggressions that permeate racial relations in Brazilian society, conveyed in the novel through consumption, as interactions between the wife and the housekeeper illustrate. As the narrator points out, the housekeeper is expected to do far more than what she is paid to do, her labor thus consisting of a cheap commodity. The following passage conveys this exploitation, as it shows the woman’s multiple requests to the housekeeper for doing tasks beyond her duties:

*Traga um copo de água, tenho sede. Fez comida? Tenho fome de qualquer coisa, fora de hora. Já limpou o quarto do menino? Não encontrou nada? Faça direito que embaixo da cama dele tem coisa … Não está fazendo nada, põe o pano de prato no sol, por favor … Dar banho no cachorro, sim. (Bonassi, Luxúria 75-76)*

*Bring me a glass of water, I'm thirsty. Did you cook? I'm hungry for something, anything, between meals. Have you cleaned the boy’s room? Haven't you found anything? Pay close attention because there has to be something under his bed … If you've run out of things to do, hang the kitchen towel to dry, please … Yes, give the dog a bath.*

Interactions such as these are common in Brazilian middle-class households, in which the boss “administrando, constrangendo, e cobrando e premiando às vezes, faz valer cada centavo daquilo que paga à diarista” (“managing, embarrassing, demanding, and sometimes awarding, gets every penny’s worth of the money she pays the housekeeper”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 76). The woman not only exploits the housekeeper, but also makes sure to segregate her, for example, prohibiting her from showering in their bathroom or by watching her every move so as to avoid potential theft. As Maria Helena Machado, professor at the Department of History at Universidade de São Paulo and specialist in slavery and post-abolitionism social movements in Brazil, points out in an interview to the Brazilian newspaper *Zero Hora*, the dynamic between today’s housekeepers and their bosses dates back to a time when enslaved women were charged with taking care of their masters’ white babies. These women were, according to Machado, often separated from their own children while forced to breastfeed and raise their masters’ offspring. As pointed out by Lourdes García Navarro in a National Public Radio (NPR) piece titled “Brazil Enslaved,” the link between this past and today can be seen in statistics that reveal
that at least 600,000 people, 96% of which are women, more than half of which are Afro-Brazilians, work in the service sector.

Victims of exploitation exploiting others is a common theme in Bonassi’s Luxúria. While the woman bosses the housekeeper around in a similar way to the man’s bossing around the construction workers, the housekeeper is a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence just like her boss is (129). Bonassi thus highlights the compounded oppression on individuals who are oppressed for their race, gender, and socioeconomic status all at once. The housekeeper stands as an example of one of the most oppressed segments of Brazilian society: working-class black women.

Violence is also present in schools, where bars on windows and high walls with barbed wire and pieces of sharp glass on top isolate children who are told to “shut the fuck up” (Bonassi, Luxúria 295). They learn the ABCs according to an exercise in which, instead of the usual positive words with which children associate letters of the alphabet in school activities, has an alphabet of violence that includes words like knife, grenade, lynching, Nazi, and gun (96). The lesson is presented by the narrator as an ordinary one, so as to suggest the banality of violence, as it is normalized for citizens from a young age.

It is also with violence that debts are collected in a country where a kind of private justice system prevails, guaranteeing that those with capital continue to stay in power. The novel suggests this status quo when heavily armed debt collectors without uniforms, wearing black attire that covers their whole body, including their faces and hands, arrive at the protagonist’s house and force him to sign papers that will roll his debt to another company, accruing even more interest. This scene equates financial capitalism with organized crime, which may count on extra-official forces, such as the “oficiais de justiça terceirizados” (“private justice officials”), to make sure it remains hegemonic. The novel further highlights the prevalence of this system in chapter 53, which transcribes, in a parodic tone, a letter that the protagonist would have received communicating that his application for more credit has been declined. The letter is signed by “o seu Poder Judiciário” (“Your Judicial Power”), sarcastically reminding its addressee that nothing in the country is really his, including structures meant in principle to protect his interests as a citizen (Bonassi, Luxúria 270).
Violence is thus everywhere you turn in the Brazil that Bonassi portrays in *Luxúria*. It is present even in the subtler form of long lines in public and private establishments, which subject citizens/customers to unpleasant waits and cause much frustration. Furthermore, it is embedded in the city’s architecture, characterized by the presence of enclosed spaces where walls and windows can only keep the aggressive smells and sounds of the city away for so long (87).

**Everyday Numbness**

In *Luxúria*, the power of consumer society’s alienating forces also results in the characters becoming numb to the violence that surrounds them. Television reports road accidents ignored by the “indiferentes que têm pressa” (“indifferent ones in a hurry”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 174). People’s indifference, the narrator suggests, stems from the rhythm of capitalist life, in which one is always in a hurry, for “time is money,” as the saying goes. The swelling of cities that lack adequate public transportation and where owning a car is a status symbol aggravates this sense of hurry and indifference toward others.

In this environment, characters operate like automatons, as in the case of the protagonist, who lives in a “sistema estruturado: na repetição mecânica, mas estudada e detalhada, ele ocupa a mente o dia inteiro, a semana inteira, o ano inteiro. Encontra um porto seguro para aqueles pensamentos desesperados que todos temos, e não enlouquece” (“structured system: in the mechanical, however calculated and detailed, repetition, he keeps his mind busy all day long, all week long, all year long. He finds a safe haven in those desperate thoughts that we all have, and [in this way] does not lose his mind”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 57). Everyday repetition appears as an alienating but necessary condition for the man’s existence. In their despair, characters end up resorting to antidepressants, which further numb them, reducing their conscience to practically nothing, as they become zombie-like. The protagonist’s wife, in particular, becomes addicted to these drugs, needing ever-higher doses in order to be able to deal with the emptiness of her daily routine of sitting around the house all day, and the uncertainties regarding their financial situation. The medication is offered at public health centers, creating a rumor that the government wants to manipulate
citizens by medically numbing them (363). The state thus appears as a totalizing power, capable of controlling citizens not only through propaganda, but even through subtle chemical intervention.

These rumors of government manipulation and this heightened sense of an impending catastrophe associated, ultimately, with the result of social policies implemented by left-wing administrations, create a parallel between the narrator’s stance and the problematic way in which Brazilian mainstream media has historically treated counter-hegemonic efforts. The monopoly of a handful of corporations, run by a small number of rich families, over Brazilian telecommunications is a well-documented fact (Lima 103), as well as the influence of giant Rede Globo on the result of elections and, more recently, on the success of the 2016 ousting of President Rousseff. Taking a close look at Globo’s political influence since the 1980s, Luis Felipe Miguel (2016) documents the network’s strategies in support for right-wing candidates. According to Miguel, Globo was part of a fraudulent scheme in the 1982 election for Rio de Janeiro’s governor. In the 1989 presidential election, the television network, after rather openly campaigning for the right-wing candidate, edited the last debate between candidates Fernando Collor de Melo and Luís Inácio Lula da Silva so as to make Melo appear stronger, significantly impacting public opinion. In the 1998 electoral campaign, Globo strategically aired news that favored the election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso—again over Lula—by emphasizing the success of the Plano Real (Real Plan) and making it seem like there was simply no other safe option for Brazil’s political and economic future. In 2002, the strategy was to emphasize the economic danger of Lula’s election over right-wing candidate José Serra. Every electoral year since then, Globo has progressively engaged more openly in the electoral process, attacking the Lula and Rousseff administrations consistently while strategically omitting the abuses of the judicial system in the process (Miguel 110).

Meanwhile, headlines in major newspapers emphasized the protests that supported Rousseff’s impeachment, while diminishing the importance of those protests that opposed it (Moretzsohn 134). More recently, Globo contributed significantly to the spread of fear in the city of Rio de Janeiro without addressing the social inequality and historical causes of the violence that it reported (Astrolábio 186–87). The media coverage of the violence in Rio paved the way for Rousseff’s successor Michel Temer to justify a military intervention in the city (Rossi).
In this way, while proposing an important critique of the deterioration of leftist ideals—a deterioration that includes the fact that the Workers’ Party’s administration did little to change the previously mentioned media monopoly—Luxúria reads as a rather reductive portrayal of the complexities of the socioeconomic and political context that it addresses.

In the face of such a catastrophic situation, whether or not taking antidepressants, the entire family in Luxúria surrenders to a state of ennui as the narrative progresses. The dialogue below encapsulates this state while showing the connection between the characters’ mental health and their material possessions and desires to consume:

_Eu ainda sou o melhor do mundo?
A felicidade?
É uma dúvida que eu tenho
A infelicidade?
É uma certeza, pelo menos
O dinheiro. Acabou. Faz tempo._ (302)

_Am I still the best one in the world?
Happiness?
This is a doubt I have
Unhappiness?
This is certain, at least
The money. It ran out. A while ago._

A linguistic indicator of the characters’ surrender to numbness is the recurring answer that they provide when asked about bruises and marks of violence on their bodies. Instead of explaining what happened, they repeat an excuse conjugating the verb in the present, as if using drills to memorize content for a school test. The first instance in which this happens is when the couple’s child arrives home after being beaten up by his classmates, who constantly bully him. When asked about what happened, he replies: _eu caí na rua, tu caíste na rua, ele caiu na rua; nós caímos na rua, vós caíste na rua, eles caíram na rua_ (“I fell on the street, you fell on the street, he/it fell on the street, we fell on the street, you [pl.] fell on the street, they fell on the street”; 173). His strategy invokes a traditional pedagogical approach to content in Brazilian schools, by which students are expected to demonstrate empty memorization of, for instance, the conjugation of verb forms that have extremely limited use in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese, such as the form of “vós”
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(“you” [pl.]) conjugated in the passage above. This memorization, Bonassi’s novel suggests, functions as a kind of drug, in a sense, maintaining characters disconnected from their reality and incapable of acting on the injustices of which they are victims.

The boy’s father repeats the same mindless behavior when his co-workers beat him up in revenge for him siding with their boss against them. The man’s explanation to his child about the bruises on his body is simply the following: “Eu escorreguei no óleo e caí na fábrica, tu escorregaste no óleo e caíste na fábrica, ele escorregou no óleo e caiu na fábrica, nós escorregamos no óleo e caímos na fábrica, vós escorregastes no óleo e caísteis na fábrica, eles escorregaram no óleo e caíram na fábrica, compreende?” (“I slipped on oil and fell at the factory, you slipped on oil and fell at the factory, he/it slipped on oil and fell at the factory, we slipped on oil and fell at the factory, you [pl.] slipped on oil and fell at the factory, they slipped on oil and fell at the factory, do you understand?”; Bonassi, Luxúria 285). Yet in another instance, it is the man’s wife’s turn to respond in the same fashion. Days after having been abused by her husband, her pastor asks her about all the bruises on her neck, chest, and legs, to which she responds that she tripped and fell at home (294). If these repetitive answers might sound strange in real life, the responses provided by the characters’ interlocutors (“Ah, bom” [“Oh, okay”], “Deus seja louvado” [“Praise to God”], and “Claro, boa noite” [“Of course, good night”]) convey a sense of normalcy that renders the characters’ lines even more disturbing for the reader. The responses, like the statements they address, are uttered in a seemingly mindless fashion, implying a sense of acceptance of or similar numbness to the everyday violence of which others are victims. These responses ultimately represent the characters’ inability to break away from the violence produced by consumer capitalism, whether in the form of labor exploitation, unattainable consumption expectations, or the profound unhappiness that follows the realization that one no longer has money, as the novel’s protagonist states.

The Factory and the Country: The Right Turn?

While the novel highlights the transformation of humans into machines that operate automatically, it also deals with the replacement of humans by machines in capitalism, by portraying the conflict between the protagonist and his fellow factory workers over
his support for the use of new, more “efficient” equipment. The conflict alludes to Lula’s perceived betrayal of the working class, as suggested by the transformation of his image in the 2002 election, thanks to carefully planned marketing strategies. In other words, the protagonist’s support for changes in the factory that would negatively impact his co-workers but benefit him mirrors Lula’s perceived abandonment of leftist values in order to ascend to power.

Although Bonassi states, in a 2015 interview with Simone Magno, that he used his own experience as a factory worker as inspiration for the construction of the protagonist (Bonassi, “Luxúria, de Fernando Bonassi”), the parallel between the protagonist and President Lula unquestionably stands out. Like Lula in his early adulthood, the protagonist works in the metallurgical industry as a lathe operator. He betrays his “companheiros” (comrades, as they refer to each other in the novel, evoking language used by Lula and the Left) in exchange for temporary and illusory power, which he acquires when his boss asks him to compile a list of fifty co-workers to be fired. The sacking happens because the company purchases a new machine, capable of doing the work performed by several workers at a time, thus increasing production, lowering costs, and raising profits. The machine represents the fast technological advancement that has at least partly contributed to cuts in manufacturing jobs at the company, a process that the man’s boss describes as follows:

Éramos quase seis mil em mil novecentos e setenta. Depois éramos dois mil e quatrocentos no final dos anos mil novecentos e oitenta … Em noventa e poucos já não passávamos de oitocentos e tantos e ao dobrarmos o milênio … Acho que tínhamos nos reduzido a quinhentos … Duzentos a mais do que somos hoje, não é mesmo? (Bonassi, Luxúria 308)

We were almost six thousand nine hundred seventy. After that, we were two thousand four hundred at the end of the nineteen eighties … In ninety something we weren’t more than eight hundred and some and at the turn of the millennium … I think we had been reduced to five hundred … two hundred more than we are today, isn’t it?

The power that the protagonist feels when deciding who is going to lose their jobs, an opportunity that he uses to get rid of people
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he does not like, blinds him to the fact that his own employment might also be in jeopardy. An omen of his unfortunate destiny, as well as that of his co-workers, is his choking when toasting with his boss to the new machine: “Um brind … De ao fut … Uro!” (“A toa … st to the fu … ture!”; Bonassi, Luxúria 244). This future, as we have seen, brings nothing but destruction to the protagonist. The only one to prosper in this case is the boss, who increases his profits. The toast also invokes the well-known phrase coined by the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, “Brasil, país do futuro” (“Brazil, country of the future”) in his highly optimistic book Brasilien: Ein Land der Zukunft (Brazil, Land of the Future; 2014), thus ironically suggesting that this future will never come.

The protagonist’s toast and its meanings resonate with post-2003 Brazil, when the country seems to have finally achieved this future of prosperity, which, however, starts to fade away in less than a decade, as an economic and political crisis sweeps the country in the 2010s. Specialists have noted that this crisis has many factors, including the dependence on China’s own economic boom; the absence of countercyclical policies; the complex tax system and labor laws that are unfavorable to business growth; and, perhaps the most visible factor of all, widespread corruption (“What went wrong” 00:25:32). The latter, along with questionable political alliances and concessions to neoliberalism that prevented the radical reform seen by some members of the Brazilian left as necessary, has damaged the Workers’ Party’s reputation, casting doubts on its integrity.

The protagonist’s father embodies this sense of deterioration of the country, linking past to present and announcing a future of collapse. His decaying body attests to the unfulfilled promises of prosperity from his past. He lives in a nursing home, where we meet him for the first time during one of his son’s visits. The narrator depicts him as more dead than alive, clutching to the bars of the gate as he is shooed like an animal by one of the nurses (Bonassi, Luxúria 164–65). He and his fellow co-residents, former factory workers like himself, are described as being trapped or imprisoned within the confines of the bars that surround the property. Like the decaying building where he currently lives, the father’s mental state seems to have deteriorated. The old man summarizes the old days in the factory as days of relative “permanência
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e previsibilidade” (‘‘permanence and predictability’’), which are now almost entirely gone, as the current lay-offs at the factory indicate (34).

Another indication of current instability is the protagonist’s ever more elusive retirement, as the clock at the factory seems to run backwards, taking away weekends, shortening boundaries between work time and leisure. This sense of increasing precariousness is also conveyed by the narrator’s description of the nursing home as filled with “fedor de pele morta, de calçado gasto, de partes baixas e dobr as úmidas que não são lavadas com frequência, de fraldas usadas, de meias suadas e de cobertores que não veem a luz do sol há muito tempo” (“the stench of dead skin, overworn shoes, body parts, and humid skin folds that haven’t been washed very often, used diapers, sweaty socks, and blankets that haven’t been exposed to the sun in a long while”; Bonassi, Luxúria 166). From the past, the only thing left is the assembly line efficiency with which the nurses take care of the retired workers, now symbolically treated as the products that they once assembled: “um velho desdentado é deixado nu, limpo com um pano úmido e vestido com o pijama padrão em trinta e sete segundos” (“a toothless old man is stripped of his clothes, cleaned with a wet cloth, and dressed in the [asylum’s] standard pajamas in thirty-seven seconds”; 166). The asylum residents are subjected to capitalist time yet again: they are discarded as they are no longer capable of producing capital. As David Harvey states, in his analysis of Marx’s 1867 Capital, “… asylums, prisons and clinics … [can] be read as continuations of … a disciplinary capitalism, in which workers have to be socialized and disciplined to accept the spatiotemporal logic of the capitalist labor process” (A Companion 149).

Time, indeed, is an important aspect of the novel not only in terms of what the future holds or of what is left behind in the past, but also with respect to the present management of the daily routine at the factory. In order to increase productivity, the company implements several time control strategies, such as having the bathroom light on a timer in order to prevent workers from staying away from their stations for too long. This measure, which actually does not allow enough time for the protagonist to urinate, as we find out in a scene, reduces time in the bathroom by 30%, thus increasing productivity and profits (Bonassi, Luxúria 59). The clock, according to the narrator, is a “ladrão do tempo e do
espaço de sossego” (“thief of time and space for rest”) within the factory, requiring persistence and youth from the workers in order to survive, in a Darwinian manner (237).

Bonassi’s references to time in capitalism allude to Marx’s Capital, which the Brazilian writer cites in the novel’s epigraphs:

Quanto maior a força produtiva do trabalho, tanto menor é o tempo de trabalho exigido para a fabricação de determinado artigo, tanto menor também a quantidade de trabalho nele cristalizada e tanto menor seu valor. Ao contrário, quanto menor a força produtiva do trabalho, tanto maior é o tempo de trabalho necessário para a fabricação de determinado artigo, e tanto maior seu valor. (Bonassi, Luxúria 5)

[In general,] the greater the productiveness of labour, the less is the labor required for the production of an article, the less is the amount of labour crystallized in that article, and the less is its value; and vice versa, the less the productiveness of labour, the greater is the labour time required for the production of an article, and the greater is its value. (Marx and Engels 15)

The epigraph frames the reading of the novel as a critique to capitalist labor exploitation. Read in this context, the factory’s control of its workers’ time points precisely to the use of discipline to maximize profits, as the example of the bathroom light time illustrates. Bonassi’s novel shows that, as Marx asserts, “capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body” (qtd. in Harvey, A Companion 144). To this control, Bonassi contrasts a kind of freedom, expressed by Jimmi Hendrix’s song “Drifting” (1971), quoted along with the above-cited epigraph: “Drifting on a sea of forgotten teardrops / On a life-boat / Sailing for your love / Sailing home. / Jimmi Hendrix” (Bonassi, Luxúria 5). This freedom, however, is immersed in sorrow in the novel, for it means above all mere survival. It is a search for home in a world of despair, deteriorated by capitalist interests and the illusions of consumer culture.

While the factory, the nursing home, and the school appear in the novel as spaces of capitalist discipline, institutions that would provide some kind of protection for citizens and that would defend their interests appear to sell out to the new geopolitical and economic order in Bonassi’s Brazil:
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O que foi feito do sindicato?

Está ocupado com as comissões do governo e dos empresários.
(Bonassi, Luxúria 79)

Whatever happened to the union?

It is busy with the government and businessmen’s commissions
[committees and dividends]

Passages such as the one above allude once again to the Brazilian Left’s perceived betrayal of the constituency that it is meant to represent. Bonassi’s novel refers to this betrayal once more in chapter 66, titled “Provérbios 6:16–19” (“Proverbs 6:16–19”). This chapter cites the very passage of the Bible referenced in the title, followed by a direct accusation of the protagonist of being a traitor:

Seis são as coisas que o Senhor abomina, e a sua alma detesta uma sétima: olhos altivos, língua mentirosa, mãos que derramam sangue inocente, coração que maquina perversos projetos, pés velozes para correr ao mal, testemunha falsa, e o que semeia discordia entre irmãos. E por tudo isso eu te acuso, Judas traidor de sua classe!
(Bonassi, Luxúria 324)

These six things the Lord hates, yes, seven are an abomination to him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in to running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies and one who sows discord among brethren. And for all this I accuse you, Judas, traitor of your class!

By the time this reference to the Bible appears in the narrative, the protagonist has committed almost all of the deadly sins referenced in the passage: he has envied the dentist for what the latter possesses, he has lied to his boss, plotted against his co-workers, and started conflict in the factory. Furthermore, his association with evil is emphasized by the smell of sulfur that the metals in storage exhale when the protagonist and his co-worker have a confrontation about the protagonist’s betrayal (Bonassi, Luxúria 328). In this chapter, the word “companheiro” (“comrade”) appears yet again, reinforcing the link between the protagonist’s actions and those of Lula’s Left, steering the reader’s attention to what some would consider the neoliberalization of Lula and his party.
These allusions to the Bible also suggest the intertwining of neoliberal ideas and religious beliefs in Brazilian society today. These references appear when the couple’s pastor is preaching at the church. His speech defends the accumulation of material goods as individuals’ main goals in life and as a sign of having been blessed by God:

as riquezas e as bênçãos estão vinculadas. O dinheiro também é uma forma pela qual o Senhor nos abençoa, e quem aqui se dedica a vencer e progredir sabe muito bem que ser abençoado com o dom de ter e fazer mais dinheiro não torna tudo mais fácil, e sim o contrário: cria uma responsabilidade ainda maior para cada um de nós …

Quem aqui quer ser rico? Rico de coração, de espírito?

…

E ter casa, carro do ano, televisão e telefone e computador de último tipo, tudo o que o Senhor de Deus nos deu o dom de descobrir? Alguém aqui é contra estar bem? (Bonassi, Luxúria 48)

Riches and blessings are connected. Money is also a way by which the Lord blesses us, and those here who dedicate themselves to win and to improve [their financial situation] know very well that being blessed with the gift of having and making more money does not make everything easy, but quite the opposite: it creates an even bigger responsibility for each of us …

Who here wants to be rich? Rich in your heart, in your spirit?

…

And to have a house, a brand-new car every year, a television and a phone and the latest computer, everything that the Lord, God, has given us the gift of discovering? Who here is against being well?

As the passage above illustrates, neoliberal values of individualism and entrepreneurship permeate the preacher’s speech in the form of self-improvement in economic terms. The church itself is run like a business, as the pastor’s testimonial published in the fictitious Jornal Nacional das Igrejas (National Church News)—an allusion to the manipulative power of Rede Globo’s long-standing prime time news program Jornal Nacional—indicates. According to the pastor, for as long as he was preaching a simple life of compassion and contained material desires, he was not successful:
The most I got was a weak commitment, an agreement with the principles, a vague promise—and, unfortunately, extremely low tithing collection. The Temple’s expenses were accumulating: pastors’ and outsourced employees’ meals; rent, water, electricity, gas, sound equipment, cleaning products, décor pieces. The pressure from the ministry’s central office was also increasing; they wanted to know how things could be going so bad [for the church] amidst so much suffering.

From then on, his discourse is filled with vocabulary that refers to profit and accumulation, such as “conferir ganhos” (“to make a profit”), “multiplicar” (“to multiply”), and “agregar valor” (“to add value”). As a result of this change, his church becomes one of the ten most lucrative churches of the year (153).

The pastor’s case points to the recent growth of prosperity theology in Brazil, with its capitalist approach to faith, in which church members are expected to invest money into their relationship with God in exchange for blessings in this life in the form of commodities. In Brazil, prosperity theology has found fertile terrain since the late 1970s, when it became evident that the economic growth achieved during the dictatorship had fallen short of bringing about social equality. Abandoning the ideology of poverty preached by the Christian faith, Brazilian neo-Pentecostal churches imported North American prosperity theology, creating later on an entire gospel industry that includes music, fashion, television channels, among other products and services targeting its followers (B. Sousa 229). These churches have proven to be appealing to various segments of Brazilian society, with some catering predominantly to the middle and upper classes, such as the Igreja Bola de Neve (Snowball Church) in São Paulo, founded in 1999.

If the protagonist can be read as a portrayal of the fall of the Workers’ Party and Lula into sin, the wife, as a woman, can be
seen as a representation of the nation, cursed into eternal suffering for her lust and greed for consumer goods. The novel suggests this parallel by referencing Genesis 3:16, in chapter 60, as well as by quoting the positivist motto printed onto the Brazilian flag “ordem e progresso” (“order and progress”), two things that she is responsible for providing in the household, according to the narrator (Bonassi, Luxúria 299). The passage of the Bible in question, which refers to the curse of childbearing and labor pains bestowed upon women as a consequence of their lust, suggests that Brazil can be seen as the mother who will always suffer under the rule of her “husband,” the (apparent) owner of capital. Read from this perspective, it is very symbolic that this mother (the nation) is murdered by her husband (the one which has betrayed his origins), along with their child (a potential future of prosperity).

Sant’Anna’s *O Brasil é bom*: Federal Republic of Consumption

The cover of *O Brasil é bom* features the image of a rotten banana on a plate with a fork stuck to it. The rotten banana on the cover evokes the *tropicalidade* of a certain national identity, the one incorporated by icons such as Carmen Miranda dancing among giant plastic bananas and banana trees and singing “The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat” in Busby Berkeley’s film *The Gang Is All Here* (1943). Carmen Miranda and her exuberant bananas made up—and still do—an imagined geography south of the U.S. border, a Banana Republic, so to speak, an exotic and primitive land just waiting to be explored—and exploited—by foreign political and economic interests or simply by tourists in search of adventure. For President Getúlio Vargas (1930–45; 1951–54),

Carmen Miranda was part of strategic efforts to paint a picture of Brazil as an attractive country for foreign powers, namely, the United States. In the meantime, internally, the Vargas administration spread ideas of development, a discourse that crosses Brazilian history through the twentieth century and stretches into the twenty-first century, albeit taking various forms: President Juscelino Kubitscheck’s 50 years in 5 platform during the 1950s,

the dictatorial governments’ promises of “dividing the cake once it has risen” in the 1970s,

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s (1995–2003) neoliberalism in the 1990s, and the Workers’

The image of a rotten banana on the cover of *O Brasil é bom*, therefore, signals the irony of the title, questioning the idea of development and pointing to the dystopic view of the country that the short stories in the book reveal. From this perspective, the 2010s would have been characterized by an only limited and temporary socioeconomic advancement, which would have been accompanied by the exacerbation of violence in interpersonal relations. These relations, as shown in the stories of *O Brasil é bom*, are fed by prejudice and hatred, sentiments largely expressed by an elite that is very much unhappy with any betterment achieved by the bottom of the social pyramid. The twenty-four narratives of the book, which are mostly snapshots of current daily life in Brazil in two to four pages, suggest that these relations derive from a socioeconomic development that has its roots in public policies only made possible by a perverse deal with neoliberalism. In this way, *O Brasil é bom* deals with some of the same issues addressed in Bonassi’s *Luxúria*. Similarly, it presents a rather dystopic view of Brazil, which is perceived as having experienced a fragile socioeconomic growth starting in 2003 under the Workers’ Party’s leadership.

The first short story of *O Brasil é bom*, “Deus é bom nº 8” (“God is Good no. 8”), signals the sarcasm that permeates the entire book. The narrative tells the story of Jesus Cristinho’s life, a character that is constructed so as to resemble Lula and his trajectory as a politician, referencing his political alliances in order to ascend to the highest office of the nation. Contrary to the Jesus Christ of the Bible, who combats the merchants of the temple, Jesus Cristinho allies himself with them. From the biblical Jesus’s biography, the narrator borrows the humble origins, describing the place where his character would have been born as “um lugar bem pobrinho, cercado por vaquinhas, estrelinhas, uma lua sensacional” (“a poor little place, surrounded by little cows, little stars, and a spectacular moon”; Sant’Anna 7). Like Sant’Anna’s Jesus, Lula also has humble origins in the backlands of the Brazilian Northeast. To the initial description of the protagonist, the narrator adds that Jesus would have been baptized by Brazilian soap opera star Glória Pires, who plays Lula’s mother in the 2009 film *Lula, o filho do Brasil* (*Lula, the Son of Brazil*), which tells Lula’s life story. These media references allude to the construction of
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Lula’s new image during the 2002 election, which became known as “Lulinha paz e amor” (“Peace-and-love little Lula”), a future president who would not “privatizar nada, … nos bancos, ó, na boa, paz e amor” (“privatize anything, … in the banks, look, cool, peace and love”; Sant’Anna 8). Later on, when another character of the story, Judas, talks to Jesus Cristinho in the name of international capital and the local elites, the narrator once again references Lula’s renewed image:

… pô, Jesus, em vez de eu acabar com a tua vida—tu vai ser crucificado e vai doer e o mundo vai continuar injusto—, a gente faz uns acordos, aceita um pecadinho ou outro da rapaziada, mantém a parada fluindo pros bancos, transforma esses paraíbas tudo aí em consumidor, resolve as parada toda com o mercado internacional de dinheiro, que é a coisa mais importante que existe, e, depois, até melhora a vida dos que mais precisam; na política não dá pra não fazer alianças estratégicas, arte do possível, etc. (Sant’Anna 8)

C’mon, Jesus, instead of me ending your life—you will be crucified and it will hurt and the world will continue to be unfair—, we can negotiate, accept a little sin or so from the crowd, keep the stuff flowing into the banks, change these paraíbas into consumers, solve all this stuff with the international currency market, which is the most important thing there is, and, after that, we even improve the lives of those who need the most; in politics you can’t avoid making strategic alliances, the art of the possible, etc.

Judas’s speech suggests the articulation of a scheme to manipulate “paraíbas,” a pejorative term used to refer to those native of the impoverished Brazilian backlands, the main beneficiaries of the programs of income distribution initiated in President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration and expanded during President Lula’s years. Lula thus appears as a traitor of his own social class, ascending to power by appeasing the elite and by developing a program of social inclusion to keep up appearances. In another pejorative comment, the narrator suggests that Jesus/Lula would have maintained the “classe baixa-alta … sob controle comprando iogurte e batata chips” (“the upper-lower class … under control, purchasing yogurt and potato chips”; Sant’Anna 9). This perspective echoes the Brazilian elite’s expectations with respect to the
morality of working-class consumption. From this elite’s point of view, industrialized products such as the ones mentioned in the quote above, yogurt and potato chips, are considered luxury items for the beneficiaries of the social programs in question. Purchasing them would, therefore, be considered inappropriate use of public money.

In this process of inclusion via consumption, the “classe baixa-alta” (“upper-lower class”) or the so-called new middle class, now seeing itself wishfully as part of the elite and, therefore, reproducing its ideals, would eventually be responsible for the downfall of a Jesus/Lula that by any chance would come to have “alguma crise de compaixão, ou de esquerdismo” (“a crisis of compassion or leftism”; Sant’Anna 9). “Deus é bom nº 8” thus condemns the centrality of consumption in twenty-first century Brazilian society, alluding to the “Carta ao povo brasileiro” (“Letter to the Brazilian People”) that Lula read during his campaign, in which he mentions the need for creating “um amplo mercado interno de consumo de massas” (“an ample internal market of mass consumption”; “Leia íntegra”). The short story in question suggests that driving consumption this way is a path of no return toward a socioeconomic and political abyss.

This opening story sets the tone for Sant’Anna’s exploration of the impacts of consumption on current Brazilian society. For the sake of space, the following two sections will focus on a total of six of the most representative stories of O Brasil é bom. These stories address two major themes: the rise of a neoconservative subjectivity and the spread of daily microaggressions in today’s Brazil. The third section presents some general conclusions about O Brasil é bom, drawing specific examples from other short stories in the book.

**The Growth of Neoconservatism**

Harvey contends that the rise of neoconservative forces in the United States in the early 2000s can be understood as a moralist reaction to the social instability caused by neoliberalism. In Harvey’s view, the elite’s desire to regain the power that they have lost generates this conservatism, whose growth reveals neoliberalism’s authoritarian roots (A Brief History ch. 3). These roots can be seen in various narratives of O Brasil é bom, particularly in
three short stories: “Nós somos bons” (“We Are Good”), “Pra ser sincero” (“To Be Honest”), and “Comentário na rede sobre tudo o que está acontecendo por aí” (“Online Comment on All That Is Happening Out There”).

In “Nós somos bons,” a first-person narrator, who includes him/herself in a collective “nós” (“we”), seems to speak for a segment of the Brazilian population that would have been responsible for a series of political decisions in the country’s recent history. These decisions should have resulted in development for all, however, they have only yielded the maintenance of certain privileges held by a conservative elite who benefits from neoliberal practices. The “nós” of story claims, for instance, that “bom era no tempo da ditadura” (“good were the times of the dictatorship”), when the economy grew and, supposedly, there was no corruption (Sant’Anna 27). It states, furthermore, that although torture “não tem nada a ver” (“is not good”), it was a reasonable price to pay in exchange for a government that “pelo menos governava bem,” (“at least governed well”), guaranteeing a strong economy and a country free of corruption (27).

Expressing the elitist opinion of many Brazilian voters who rejected Lula in the 1980s and 1990s, this “nós” states that Lula is “um nordestino ignorante que não sabia falar inglês, que se vestia mal” (“an ignorant Northeasterner who could not speak English, who dressed poorly”), and therefore not well suited for the presidency (Sant’Anna 27). Afraid of losing consumer power due to the implementation of a communist regime in Brazil that would supposedly take place if Lula were elected, the “nós” evidences their hatred of those it holds responsible for Lula’s election, calling them “pobres pretos vagabundos [que] não querem trabalhar o suficiente para comprar um Audi cheio de air bags, para comprar um iPhone para ligar para a esposa já meio passada da idade …” (“miserable lazy blacks [who] don’t want to work enough to buy an Audi full of airbags, to buy an iPhone to call their over-the-hill wife …”; 28). This perspective reflects a belief in the myth of meritocracy, according to which those who succeed in life, which in consumer capitalism equals being able to accumulate material goods, do so because they deserve it. Conversely, those who are poor are believed to be responsible for their own demise, following the neoliberal logic. “Nós somos bons” conveys a fear of communism that echoes that of many who participated in protests against
then-President Rousseff and ex-President Lula starting in 2014, shouting a motto such as “a nossa bandeira jamais será vermelha” (“our flag will never be red”), in reference to the Workers’ Party’s flag color, which is commonly associated with communism.

The neoliberal conservatism evoked by “Nós somos bons” only accepts Lula when he is perceived to have surrendered to neoliberal capital, an attitude expressed, for instance, by protecting the economic status of the “nós” of the short story, allowing it to spend vacation time in Europe and at Disney World (Sant’Anna 28), like many upper-middle-class Brazilians at the beginning of the 2010s. In other words, the preservation of an elite’s consumer power dispels this elite’s fears of a communist future. With these anxieties put to rest, even the elite’s linguistic prejudice against Lula diminishes, as the “nós” affirms that Lula’s Portuguese seems to have “improved” (29). This change of mind is due perhaps to the fact that Lula now, from the perspective of the short story, speaks a language that this elite can understand: the language of consumer capitalism. The short story ends with an assertion that “[n]ós ainda vamos desenvolver o país, gerando empregos, gerando renda” (“we still are going to develop the country, generating employment, generating income”; 29). This assertion, when contrasted with the series of conservative political choices made by the “nós,” renders the short story rather sarcastic, as it expresses a profound disillusionment with Brazilian society. After all, as the examples that the “nós” highlights indicate, only a small portion of the population—the one who can buy their own “Audi full of airbags”—has actually benefited from the development that has been promised so much to Brazilians.

“Pra ser sincero” is the transcription, so to speak, of a man’s complaints about telemarketing. The short story portrays the contradictions of a self-proclaimed communist whose actions indicate that he has been engulfed by capitalism much more than he seems to realize. The story opens with the protagonist claiming that he received a phone call he initially assumed to be from a credit card company. Ready to fight, he was going to express his contempt for bankers, banks, and telemarketing, revealing to the woman on the other side of the line that he “only buys what he can pay for up front” and that he is “a communist” (Sant’Anna 17). However, he soon learns that that was a different kind of call. The person he was talking to was calling about donations for children with cancer. When she asks him about his Christmas and New Year’s,
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canacter rants about the “classe baixa-alta” (“upper-lower class”), which according to him, is tacky, ugly, and desperate to consume all sorts of low-quality products (19). The classist view he conveys in this comment is further emphasized when he reveals his fear of the socioeconomic ascension of those whom he considers inferior to him. In a nostalgic remark about a past when the poor “knew their place,” he confesses:

I liked that lower class that was really low, those poor but clean people who, on any beach of the Brazilian coast[,] which was pretty, would be there, frying fish for us, travelers through these wonderful beaches of Brazil; [they] would even tell stories about the sea and this was in the old days, this stuff.

Uncomfortable with having to share public spaces with those he considers beneath him, he blames them for the perpetuation of capitalism and transfers to them the responsibility to start “a communist revolution” (Sant’Anna 20). He complains about his fragile position as a member of the “middle-middle class,” revealing again his fear of “falling into” the “lower-middle class.” His comment suggests not only the highly unstable nature of current capitalism, but also his desire for the perpetuation of a class system, which is incompatible with his communist claims. Capitalism, the story indicates, has the power to become so entrenched in daily life that it produces contradictions such as the protagonist: a self-proclaimed communist who seems to have little interest in truly building an egalitarian society. Conservatism out of fear of losing one’s social status engulfs even those who seem to have revolutionary intentions.

The narrator of “Comentário na rede sobre tudo o que está acontecendo por aí,” in turn, is radically against advocates for human rights who, in his view, defend criminals who deserve the death penalty for the crimes they have committed against “cidadãos de bem” (“good citizens”; Sant’Anna 22). According to him, these “criminals” are living the good life in prison with free
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food paid for by taxpayers and it is people like the narrator himself who lack human rights.

He also blames human rights advocates for the increase of crime in the country, in part because they defend gun control laws, taking away the citizens’ right to defend themselves (Sant’Anna 22). His opinion echoes the support of many Brazilians for taking the law into their own hands; support that in turn sounds familiar to those who follow the debate on gun safety in the United States. According to Universidade de São Paulo Emeritus Professor of Sociology José de Souza Martins, since World War II, the number of cases of lynching in Brazil has increased considerably, reaching an average of one case per day. He adds that periods of political instability have contributed to the rise in those numbers and cites three main peaks in the time in question: World War II, the military dictatorship, and the protests in 2013, just a year before the publication of Sant’Anna’s *O Brasil é bom*. The most recent rise generated growing support not only for reducing the legal age for criminal responsibility from 18 to 16 (“Após Cunha”), but also for relaxing or altogether ending the Estatuto do Desarmamento (Disarmament Statute), approved during the Lula administration, which restricts possession of firearms. Per a proposal put forth by the so-called “Bancada da Bala” in Congress, the Estatuto would be eliminated, allowing any citizen older than twenty-one to carry a gun, provided that they pass a psychiatric test and that they have not committed a crime (J. Carvalho).

The proposal, whose opponents denounced as benefiting firearms companies that have financed the electoral campaign of those who support it, was not approved (“Comissão rejeita”). However, it signaled the growing political prominence of extreme conservatism in Brazil, as represented in Sant’Anna’s short stories under analysis, also evidenced by a reference to another bancada, the “Bancada da Bíblia.” The narrator of “Comentário na rede” uses the Bible to justify his rant against human rights groups, affirming that the situation should be handled in terms of “an eye for an eye.”

In line with his ultra-conservative views, the narrator also blames sexual assault on the victims, suggesting that rape is a consequence of women’s “devious” behavior when they imitate what they see on “degrading” soap operas (Sant’Anna 22). Lastly, recalling the slogan used by the dictatorial regime in the 1970s,
“Brasil, ame-o ou deixe-o” (“Brazil, love it or leave it”), the narrator suggests that those who are not “green and yellow”—an allusion to the colors of the Brazilian flag, which were appropriated by predominantly middle-class protesters who supported President Rousseff’s ousting—should leave the country instead of criticizing the measures that he supports. He therefore demonstrates little openness to dialogue on controversial issues. His statements, which can be summarized as a series of repetitive and rather simplistic comments on the complex issue of violence in Brazil—an issue that has to do with socioeconomic, racial, and political factors—reflect a far-right discourse that one can encounter on social media in Brazil today. In this way, as the title suggests, the short story reads like online comments about the issues in question.

As these stories indicate, and as we would see a few years later with President Jair Bolsonaro’s ascension to power, a neoconservative subjectivity has been on the rise in Brazilian society, dangerously questioning human rights, propagating nationalism and ideals of morality, and attempting to control the advancement of social equality. This neoconservatism that expresses neoliberalism’s authoritarian roots, while certainly present among the Brazilian elite, has not, however, been restricted to them, as Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco demonstrate (“Da esperança”). According to these authors, this conservative subjectivity reveals itself among low-income segments of the Brazilian male youth, who see in Bolsonaro a symbol of power and the promise of reestablishment of morality in the face of so much corruption and violence. This explanation sheds light onto the spread of neoconservatism across social class in Brazilian society that we see in some of the short stories by Sant’Anna addressed in the section that follows.

**Brazil, a Country of “Nice” People**

In *O Brasil é bom*, one of the consequences of Brazil’s pursuit of consumer dreams is the deterioration of social relations within and across socioeconomic boundaries, as portrayed in “Amando uns aos outros” (“Loving one another”), “Só” (“Alone”), and “Lodaçal” (“Swamp”). Similar to Bonassi’s representation of everyday life as alienated and domesticated by capital, these stories propose that social relations are either rendered artificial or altogether eliminated by capitalist interests.
In “Amando uns aos outros,” the reader goes into the thoughts of two characters, a man and a woman, who appear to be talking to themselves about whether or not they should go on a vacation to an unspecified location. Evidence that what we read corresponds to what the characters are thinking is a shift in the linguistic register when the focus of the story changes from the man to the woman. In the first case, the voice uses the second person pronoun “tu” to refer to his interlocutor, whereas the second voice uses “você.” The shift in gender is indicated by adjectives in the masculine in the first part of the narrative and adjectives in the feminine in the second part, which are used by the characters, through free indirect speech, for self-description. Additionally, while the first voice uses words such as “cara” and “mané,” the second voice uses a more “sophisticated” register, expressed by words such as “palidez” (“paleness”), “tom” (“tone”), and “espírito” (“spirit”; Sant’Anna 45). This distinction suggests a difference in social class, which is further emphasized by the experiences that each character would have during this vacation time: while he would be sharing a house with twenty people who would be getting drunk and “entupindo a única privada da casa” (“clogging up the only toilet in the house”; 44), she would rather enjoy a trip to Indonesia, away from people like him, “essa gente se esfregando pelas ruas, suada, feia, sem dente, vendendo coisa barata, comprando coisa que não devia ser vendida, bebendo pinga, berrando palavrão, …” (“these people rubbing against each other in the streets, sweaty, ugly, toothless, selling cheap things, buying things that should not be sold, drinking booze, yapping swear words”; 45). The woman’s high social status is further emphasized by her savoring of wine while listening to jazz at home. Different, modern, technological, with her skin exuding a “precise balance between tan and pale,” the woman sees herself as superior. The man’s lower social status, on the other hand, is indicated by his cheap tie and the fact that, unlike the woman, who seems to have plenty of free time, he has to work overtime during the weekend.

Separated by social status, the protagonists are, nevertheless, united in a world view informed by discourses on consumption. The man tries to convince himself that he, similar to Bonassi’s protagonist, deserves to enjoy free time, a free time that would ultimately allow him to be able to return to the grueling work routine later, after having made memories with the family. At the
same time, this voice reminds him of the challenges of traveling with the family and the things that he would not like about the experience. Nevertheless, according to that voice, the protagonist should go, for “todo mundo vai” (“everybody is going”), thus suggesting that he should conform to what everyone else is doing. Finally, the voice conveys a sense of social panic by pointing out to the protagonist that he must be careful with the violence that increases during that time of the year, for it would not be until they could get rid of “these human rights advocates” that this violence would come to an end. His attitude toward those who are socioeconomically below him mirrors the woman’s attitude toward someone like him, thus revealing his reproduction of social class boundaries in which one attempts to separate him/herself from an “inferior” other. The woman, in turn, has incorporated discourses that equate happiness with consumption. She tells herself that she has everything that it takes to be a happy person: a mind open to new experiences, disposition to constantly create new trends, access to the most modern technologies, and a smile always on her face. This smile, however, seems only fake, for, as the voice tells her, being happy is an obligation in today’s society (Sant’Anna 45). In this way, “Amando uns aos outros” reads almost as a commercial, in which we watch two characters on a split screen listen to their inner voices telling them what (not) to do as they confront the everyday problem of how to be happy in consumer society. The open ending of the short story suggests that, unlike in a commercial, there is no magical product that will solve the characters’ problems.

The short story “Só” presents a radically bleak view of social relations, proclaiming that in capitalism there is only solitude. The narrator speaks to an unidentified interlocutor, who could be the reader, saying that he/she is alone in life, for everyone—his/her coworkers, school teacher, family members—is running after money, in a race to try to beat the insecurity caused by the increasing economic instability that affects the majority living under capitalism. This race turns life into a meaningless “amontoado de dias” (“pile of days”), rather than a steady line of progression toward a future goal (Sant’Anna 56). The short story denounces the superficial relations into which one is forced to enter in consumer capitalism. The law of the survival of the fittest demands that each person protect him/herself by avoiding getting to know others too closely and having their livelihood potentially threatened by association
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(57). Everything in capitalist life is reduced to money, according to the narrator: you are money, education is seen as a means to find a job so that you can earn money, and the only goal of having a job is to earn money. There is, therefore, no space for personal fulfillment, collective projects, or the acquisition of knowledge beyond the mere goal of becoming rich. From the narrator’s perspective,

Vocês estão só porque a imagem de uma criança toda queimada, toda suja de lama numa maca suja, cheia de moscas voando ao redor, é apenas uma imagem na televisão, patrocinada por um banco que finge ser seu amigo, finge estar à sua disposição no momento que você mais precisar dele, aquele banco legal, aquele banco amigão.

Vocês estão só porque tem dinheiro.

Vocês estão só porque não tem dinheiro.

Vocês estão só por causa do dinheiro.

Só dinheiro.

Só. (Sant’Anna 58)

You are alone simply because the image on television of a child with burns all over her body, covered in mud, laying on a dirty stretcher, flies swirling around, is just an image on television, sponsored by a bank that pretends to be your friend, that pretends to be available to you any time you need it, that cool, buddy-like bank.

You are alone because you have money.

You are alone because you don’t have money.

You are alone because of money.

Only money.

Only [money] / Alone.22

In the quoted passage, the commercial’s effort to mobilize the viewer’s compassion fails due to the desensitization that the media creates by reproducing images of a reality that is elsewhere, far away from the viewer. The bank appears as a symbol of financial capitalism and the friendliness expressed in marketing campaigns hides the cruel reality of social inequality that the economic system in question promotes. The last lines of the passage denounce money as being the main problem of the world, whether for its presence (money does not necessarily bring happiness) or its absence (lack of money brings suffering). Repeating the word “só”
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("only, alone"), the narrator emphasizes the emptiness of life in consumer capitalism: your life is empty if all you care about is material goods, on one hand; and your life is empty if your economically poor condition transforms you into a mere image on television for others to simply ignore. The primacy of money over compassionate human relations is in fact conveyed in practically every story of Sant’Anna’s book, when characters or narrators repeatedly proclaim that money “is the most important thing there is.”

The violence of consumer capitalism is brutally apparent in the story “Lodaçal,” which follows the lives of two street kids, Chiquinho and Toninho. The protagonists live in Brejo da Cruz, described by the narrator as “uma aldeia, um lodaçal, é umas quatro/cinco casas, é nada …” (“a village, a swamp, [it] is four or five houses, it is nothing …”; Sant’Anna 69). The narrator emphasizes the idea of nothingness several times so as to point out the low capital value of the village, whose only “production” is a few children “ready for consumption,” that is, ready to be semi-enslaved by nearby farm owners (71).

Chiquinho and Toninho, like their village, are thus judged by their potential productivity and the extremely low value of their labor. In a country where consumption, especially consumption of technology, is equated with progress, Chiquinho and Toninho have never seen a television. Drug use becomes their escape from the brutal reality of poverty and hunger, almost in a kind of replacement of the entertainment that the mass media to which they do not have access would provide (Sant’Anna 73). As they embark on a hallucination while smoking marijuana, the reader joins them in different scenarios presented by the narrator, in which Toninho and Chiquinho seem to follow different paths in life. In each scenario, either Chiquinho or Toninho reproduces certain discourses about the other’s socioeconomic situation. For instance, in one of these scenarios, Toninho is a taxi driver. His opinion about street kids echoes that of characters from other short stories in O Brasil é bom. He states that Brazil’s problem is that it needs the death penalty for kids who do drugs, who rape, and even kill, since, in his view, they commit crimes because they are protected for being underage (76). Toninho makes this comment in response to Chiquinho having stolen a necklace from a girl. Toninho is in favor of lynching Chiquinho and even steps on his head. In another scenario, Toninho is the door attendant of a theater where
Chiquinho is an actor. Toninho treats Chiquinho with prejudice, referring to him as “bichinha nordestina,” (“little Northeastern faggot”) and “paraíba viadinho” (“little paraíba faggot”; 88).

As these examples illustrate, the future that the two kids see when they hallucinate while on drugs is mostly bleak. Even when one or both of them are imagined as having attained some level of success, their views perpetuate certain capitalist ideas and/or convey prejudice. For example, in the scenario in which Chiquinho is an actor, he hopes to become famous one day and he works toward this goal in part by reading *Pense e fique rico*, the Portuguese version of Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), a best-seller that claims to provide the secret to attain material and spiritual prosperity. In Sant’Anna’s story, the protagonist is meant to stand as an example that hard work leads to success. According to the narrator, Chiquinho dreams of the day when he will give an interview and his story will be revealed, for he

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tinha tudo para dar errado, uma criança que só tinha sapo para comer, que trabalhou honestamente como criança escrava cortando cana, sem reclamar, sem roubar, sem vender o próprio corpo, estudando muito, lendo muito, sempre disposto a aprender porque quem tem garra e força de vontade, quem trabalha com afinco, quem nunca se acomoda sempre alcança um lugar ao sol … (Sant’Anna 97–98)
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had everything against him, a child who only had frogs to eat, who worked honestly as a slave child harvesting sugar cane, without complaining, without stealing, without becoming a prostitute, studying a lot, reading a lot, and always willing to learn because those who have determination and will power, those who work hard, who never settle for less always find a place in the sun …

At first sight, Chiquinho’s story values the image of the docile poor, who “does not complain about anything,” while reinforcing the idea that one’s success or failure is their own responsibility (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 68). Nevertheless, the sarcasm in the narrator’s language, revealed by the uncomfortably awkward use of “honestly” to qualify slave work, points out not only the oppression of which Chiquinho is a victim, but also the absurdity of a neoliberal discourse of self-entrepreneurship that erases the impact of one’s socioeconomic background on one’s chances to succeed.
As “Lodaçal” progresses, the different scenarios and the back-and-forth between several Chiquinhos and Toninhos create confusion, hinting at the chaos that permeates the reality represented in the narrative. The Chiquinhos and Toninhos can be interpreted not just as possible versions of the protagonists’ future selves, but also as the many Chiquinhos and Toninhos that inhabit Brazil today, and the potential socioeconomic and ideological divides between them.

**Brazil Isn’t Too Bad. Or Is It?**

As the stories analyzed so far suggest, and another short story in the collection, “Use sempre camisinha” (“Always wear a condom”), corroborates, the aggressive competitiveness of consumer capitalism spreads as Brazilians are encouraged to be violent in their relationships, from sex to work, beating up others, and profiting as much as they can from every situation (Sant’Anna 24–25). In such a toxic environment, it seems that one of the few possible solutions according to *O Brasil é bom* is that people with attitudes like those of the protagonists of these stories simply do not reproduce, possibly leading to the extinction of Brazilians as a people altogether.

The short story that perhaps most radically questions Brazil is “O Brasil não é ruim,” (“Brazil is not bad”), in which a narrator strings a sequence of sentences in the negative form about Brazil, such as “Os deputados brasileiros não são vagabundos, não ganham quase vinte e cinco mil reais por mês mais uma série de ajudas de custo como passagens aéreas, casa, comida, roupa lavada, etc.” (“Brazilian congressmen/women are not lazy, they do not make almost twenty-five thousand reais a month, plus a number of bonuses for air travel, housing, food, clothing, etc.”; Sant’Anna 11). The narrator denounces corruption among politicians (financed campaigns, political alliances); claims that hosting the Olympics and the World Cup is evidence that Brazil is a rich country; comments on the number of street kids and on violence, ending the short story with the sentence, “Por isso que o Brasil é bom” (“That is why Brazil is good”; 13). The latter sentence, which is essentially a slightly modified version of the title of the short story in question, is the only affirmative sentence in the narrative. The “não” that is missing in it is exhaustingly repeated in every single sentence of the story. If we invert this syntactic structure, that is, if we remove all the “nãos” in the text and add a
Everything seems to be wrong with this Brazil. Such a country, the short story “O juízo final” (“Judgment Day”) indicates, perhaps can only be successful in the future if it can erase itself and its history and start from scratch. In this story, Jesus says to an interlocutor on the day when he descends upon Earth that he will reward those who have been good and punish those who have misbehaved. In his monologue, he condemns capitalism and consumer culture, denouncing the incredible distortion of his teachings by those in power. He complains about having been transformed into an instrument of banal oppression, a guardian of others’ masturbation and the controller of women’s skirt length (Sant’Anna 66). Moreover, he points out the transformation of God into the “God of Money,” highlighting the sinful behavior in which his “followers” incur by driving “aqueles automóveis com vidro preto para que os mendigos, os leprosos, as adúlteras, os filhos de Deus não possam olhar vocês nos olhos …” (“those cars with windows tinted so that beggars, lepers, and adulteresses, the children of God are not able to look you in the eye …”; 67). Finally, he declares that those “without a car or a credit card” will inherit the kingdom of God, for they are like Jesus: “cabeludo meio hippie, meio mendigo, meio comunista, com essa mania meio hippie, meio comunista, meio maluca de repartir o pão e compartilhar o amor” (“hairy, a bit hippie, a bit beggar, a bit communist, with these a bit hippie, a bit communist, a bit crazy habits of sharing bread and love”; 67). Jesus then denounces capitalism as non-Christian-like and, after declaring that only about half a dozen people will be saved—capitalism is so encompassing, after all!—detonates everything, as suggested by the last word of the short story, “Bum” (“Boom”; 68). This is, then, the destiny that Brazil and Brazilians—and by extension anyone who aligns themselves with capitalist values—deserve according to O Brasil é bom: annihilation. These short stories by Sant’Anna, like Bonassi’s Luxúria, declare that there is no way out of consumer capitalism, as one moves from total alienation to total destruction.
Policing Consumption

As my analysis has shown, *Luxúria* and *O Brasil é bom* make a harsh critique to post-2003 Brazil, portraying the country as sinful and delusional, as it witnesses the collapse of its unsustainable socioeconomic growth. While Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s critiques are in many ways valid and to some extent even prophetic, given the aggravation of the political and economic crisis that followed the publication of the books in question, their portrayal of working-class consumers’ role in Brazil’s doom deserves some careful consideration.

In the case of Bonassi, the narrator often quite explicitly describes working-class characters as irrational. This irrationality comes across, for instance, when the man and his wife approach Paraíso das Piscinas for the first time, “atraídos, incomodados, cegados, excitados e hipnotizados pelo barulho das cascatas, dos refletores e dos holofotes apontados diretamente para eles” (“attracted, bothered, blinded, excited, and hypnotized by the sound of the cascades, by the reflectors and the spotlights pointed directly at them”; Bonassi, *Luxúria* 64). The store is similarly described as a place conducive to irrationality, for it displays a

confusão de números, letras e slogans determinada por econo-mistas e publicitários, para que todos sejam levados a um único pensamento:

(...)

confusion of numbers, letters, and slogans devised by econo-mists and marketing agents so that everyone is taken over by one only thought:

(...)
lunch time, they “saltam desembestados uns sobre os outros para agarrar talheres e bandejas de metal, palitos de madeira e guardanapos de papel” (“jump haphazardly over one another in order to grab utensils and metal trays, toothpicks, and paper napkins”; 102). In another instance, the narrator uses the verb “to growl” to describe the way that the boy, the wife, the housekeeper, the contractor, and the construction workers speak (201–02). Lastly, characters’ attitudes toward their peers’ ability to acquire goods is described as one of jealousy and repulsion, with no sign of any kind of feelings of solidarity or happiness for others’ accomplishments (206).

In Sant’Anna’s case, although he does direct plenty of criticism to the middle and upper classes, the contrast between the different points of view of the stories suggests the reproduction of some the same prejudices against working-class consumption that we see in Bonassi’s novel. There is a moral judgment that attempts to negate the right to pleasure to this class and that blames their “excesses” as consumers for the downfall of the country. Meanwhile, middle- and upper-class consumption appears problematic insofar as it is seen as empty, elitist, or a vehicle of prejudice, but not so much as responsible for the socioeconomic crisis that the country faces. If the stories narrated in first person can be read as transcriptions or snapshots of certain social types, thus offering some critical distance from their points of view, the stories narrated in third person or in which the point of view seems rather ambiguous are open to a different type of interpretation. The latter stories leave the reader with the impression that a kind of master-narrator that sews the stories together—and that is characteristic of Sant’Anna’s work—reproduces, rather than questions the same elitist view mocked in other stories of O Brasil é bom.

While one can appreciate Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s use of caricature for the purpose of criticism, and their suggestion that in the end, working-class individuals are the ones most negatively affected by consumer capitalism, their representation of this segment’s behavior as consumers comes across at times as rather simplistic and even prejudiced. Anthropological research suggests that reality is much more complex. Although it is true that the Brazilian working class has incorporated certain values of neoliberalism, these values have not been necessarily incorporated as neoliberal per se, but rather as an understanding that one should
have the right to improve one’s social condition. According to William Nozaki (2017), the consumption of many goods and services that are perceived by the middle class as a luxury, are often solutions that working-class families find to replace the safety net that they lack. He cites the example of a woman he interviewed for his research, who used the money she received from the income distribution program Bolsa Família to pay for cable television so that her daughter can be left at home alone watching the Cartoon Network channel while she is out working. As Nozaki points out, for this woman, cable television is not a luxury, but rather a way to deal with the unavailability of daycare.

Furthermore, as Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco note, it is important to keep in mind that recent working-class consumption in Brazil is informed by a context in which capitalism tells individuals that goods are for all while controlling access to such goods and thus contradicting its claims to democratic access to commodities and rights. As the authors in question point out in their presentation “The Right to Pleasure: Poverty, Politics, and Consumption in Neoliberal Brazil”:

> Consumption enables imagination of a better life (Appadurai 1996), but in a highly segregated country this dream is experienced in a way that society makes several contrary efforts to put “the poor in their place,” making the oppression noticeable. Low-income groups face the contradiction of unequal neoliberal societies: while the market and policies say “buy things,” a discriminatory backlash culture delegitimises their autonomy.

While certainly emphasizing the pressures of consumer capitalism on their working-class characters, Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s negative portrayal of these consumers seems to suggest that the consumption by the “poor,” and the consumption by the poor only, needs to be controlled. While deeming any kind of consumption as simply irrational is problematic in itself, their choice of treating consumer habits among working-class members as such while leaving out, for instance, the middle-class’ shopping sprees in the U.S. that occurred during the same period, reinforces the prejudiced idea that the poor must, indeed, “be put in their place.”

To conclude, in both Bonassi’s and in Sant’Anna’s portrayals of Brazil, a dystopic nation emerges, where relations of solidarity
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disintegrate. The overall image of Brazilian society is one of temporary and illusory progress. The writers criticize the Workers’ Party’s administration for what they perceive as a problematic path to social equality. For them, stimulating consumption leads to stimulating greed, individualism, and irrationality and eventually brings self-destruction, as tension accumulates through everyday (micro)aggressions. Consumer culture appears as deeply embedded in Brazilian everyday life, informing several spheres, including religion, as prosperity gospel gains much ground in the country.

In these narratives, Brazilians as consumers simply reproduce a deeply ingrained social hierarchy that has roots in slavery and that was promoted by authoritarian regimes. Brazil comes across as a nation that still lacks a plan to develop values about equality and human rights (Pinheiro-Machado “A falência”), a project that the Workers’ Party had the opportunity to take up, but instead, appears to have sold out to neoliberalism and given in to corruption, having had its ethics questioned and its public image damaged. While Sant’Anna emphasizes the oppressive and prejudiced values of the middle and upper classes, Bonassi suggests that low-income sectors are bound to aspire to become oppressors one day, as they gain more access to consumer goods. Consumer culture is thus seen as highly corrosive of social relations. In this Brazil, therefore, there seems to be no way out. Everyday life has been conquered by consumer capitalism once and for all and there is no hope for the future.

Bonassi and Sant’Anna, therefore, paint a rather totalizing picture of consumer capitalism. In their narratives, homo oeconomicus seems to have, for the most part, prevailed over homo politicus, fulfilling Brown’s prophecy (39). Their protagonists are a kind of entrepreneurs of themselves. Consequently, their relationship with others is one of competition rather than solidarity. The vast majority of Sant’Anna’s characters seem to have been completely conquered by the neoliberal logic. Incapable of seeing the social structures that generate the socioeconomic imbalances around them—or perceiving some of them when it is too late, in the case of Bonassi’s protagonist—, they see those who have “failed” as deserving of their fate. The homo politicus, characterized by “deliberation, belonging, aspirational sovereignty, concern with the common and with one’s relation to justice in the common”
(Brown 94), has practically disappeared from the world portrayed by the authors in question. Even when some of this conscience seems to be there, there is total disillusionment and a sense that characters have simply given up.

In the next chapter, I will look into two novels by two other writers who, like Bonassi and Sant’Anna, speak of this dystopic environment. Their characters are equally entrepreneurs of themselves, who have been completely overtaken by neoliberal ideas that permeate all spheres of their daily lives. While there is clearly no hope for these characters in particular, the novels analyzed in Chapter 2, nevertheless, envision a possible way out of this consuming world, albeit a rather utopic one, from the perspective of the fictional environments that they create.