Everyday Consumption in Twenty-First-Century Brazilian Fiction

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On November 5, 2015, the Brazilian city of Mariana in the state of Minas Gerais was swallowed by mining waste after the collapse of a dam in the nearby sub-district of Bento Rodrigues. In the worst environmental disaster Brazil had ever seen, the waste left a death toll of at least nineteen people, destroyed the wildlife, displaced families, and polluted the Doce River for years to come. Hundreds of documents were submitted by prosecutors showing evidence that Samarco, the mining company that owns the dam, was aware of the potential failure of the structure. Nevertheless, more than three years later, the company continues to dodge its responsibility in courts, responding to the damage with either timid or rather questionable measures such as changing the course of a river (Phillips and Brasileiro).

While mainstream media certainly covered the collapse of the dam as the catastrophe that it was, the underlying neoliberal structure that sustains the power of companies such as Samarco goes largely uncontested by these news outlets. Little questioning is directed toward what leads up to disasters such as the one in Mariana and significantly less explosive coverage is given to their aftermath as time goes by. In other words, while much attention is paid to the immediacy of the disaster, the gradual and disperse destruction surrounding it tends to be much less visible. Rob Nixon calls the latter “slow violence,” which he defines as “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2). Nixon points out that there is a representational challenge here: how do we convey the drama of slow violence in a society that is used to engaging with spectacle? How do we make these narratives visible? 

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This chapter departs from these questions as it examines three narratives by Ana Paula Maia: *O trabalho sujo dos outros* (*The Dirty Work of Others*), *Carvão animal* (*Animal Charcoal*) and *De gados e homens* (*Of Cattle and Men*). In these narratives, which tell the stories of firefighters, coalminers, slaughter men, trash collectors, and crematory workers, Maia focuses on the consequences of the slow violence of consumer capitalism for the environment. This violence includes not only the pollution of air and rivers, and the killing of animals, but also the exploitation of individuals made invisible by society. In other words, she takes the reader into the world of those who suffer what Bauman calls the “collateral damages” of consumer capitalism, that is, the failed consumers, who he describes as people with no market value; they are the uncommoditized men and women, and their failure to obtain the status of proper commodity coincides with (indeed, stems from) their failure to engage in a fully fledged consumer activity. (*Consuming Life* 124)

In all three narratives addressed in this chapter, Maia unveils the slow violence behind consumption by taking the readers behind the scenes of the production of energy and meat, specifically, and of a culture of disposal more broadly. Maia’s work has been frequently described as pulp, brutal, and scatological; her pages filled with blood, violence, and destruction (Barbarena; Cruz; Garbero, “A brutalidade”; Martinho-Ferreira; Pietrani; Quandt; Valente Jr.). Indeed, these elements are present in the novels under analysis. However, these narratives also contain a kind of turning point, in which practices of consumer capitalism are either challenged, threatened, or interrupted. Particularly in *De gados e homens*, Maia evokes the possibility of a severe disturbance to the capitalist order, precipitated in the narrative by a mysterious fantastic event, which I will address in detail later. For this reason, I propose a reading of these works by Maia as narratives of temporary radical suspension, in the sense that they envision a halt to consumer capitalism that suspends production and/or consumption in the fictional universe that she creates. In this case, unlike in B. Carvalho’s and Lísias’s narratives, change is envisioned within rather than beyond the realm of everyday life. Maia’s confrontation of the sustainability of consumerism suggests the urge to rethink what we understand as
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human prosperity, as the latter has resulted in much decay caused by our over-consumption. Furthermore, her narratives bring to the fore the fact that the highest price of our consumerist culture has largely been paid by the invisible individuals that she portrays and that this cost is reaching other segments of society as cities become nearly uninhabitable, as *O trabalho sujo dos outros* suggests. Novels such as the ones analyzed in this chapter offer what Kate Soper would describe as a “dialectical insight into the displeasures of the consumer lifestyle and its possible transcendence [that] can help to keep alive that needed imagination [of alternative notions of progress and development]” (171).

**Invisible Lives**

Unlike the other novels analyzed so far in this book, Maia’s narratives feature characters who consume very little, often just enough to stay alive. Instead of focusing on conspicuous consumption, Maia turns her attention to the consequences of consumer society for the exploited workers who do “the dirty work of others,” that is, the kind of work that nobody wants to do, but that needs to be done in order for society to function the way that it does today. This work includes activities such as slaughtering animals, cremating bodies, collecting trash, and coal mining. In an interview by Christian Grünnagel, Maia notes the invisibility of this type of work in the face of the banality that the products and services provided by workers in these sectors acquire through our daily consumption rituals:

> O trabalho sujo é o desse sujeito que abate o boi para virar hambúrguer e ser comido. Você come ali, em cinco minutos, em pé, sem nem se dar conta. Você está ali falando no celular e comendo um hambúrguer. Aquele hambúrguer era um boi. Para matar um boi, você fica ensanguentado da cabeça aos pés. É um banho em sangue. Você não tem noção de quanto sangue sai de um boi, quantas vísceras são necessárias para você comer o hambúrguer ali em pé. Não me interessa contar a história do sujeito que come o hambúrguer, mas do sujeito que mata o boi … Eu quero ficar sempre nesse homem comum, quer dizer, nas atividades que, por sua vez, mantêm a ordem. A ordem da sociedade. Trabalho sujo dos outros. (‘Ir’ 364–65)
The dirty work is that of this guy who slaughters the cow that becomes the hamburger that gets eaten. You eat [the hamburger] there, in five minutes, standing up, without even realizing it. You’re there talking on the cell phone and eating a burger. That burger one day was cattle. In order to kill cattle, you get bloody from head to toe. It’s a blood shower. You have no idea how much blood drains from a cow, how much gut it takes for you to eat that burger there, standing. I’m not interested in telling the story of the man who eats the burger, but of the one who kills the cattle … I want to always focus on this ordinary man, that is, on these activities that, in turn, maintain order. Society’s order. The dirty work of others.

Maia explores the theme of the dirty work of others as early as 2006 in a narrative titled precisely O trabalho sujo dos outros, which was initially published online in seven installments. In 2009, the narrative in question appears in print in a volume that also includes her novel Entre rinhas de cachorros e porcos abatidos (Between Dogfights and Slaughtered Hogs). In O trabalho, Maia addresses consumption both as lack and as excess. On one hand, the novel unveils the excesses of consumer society by portraying the aftermath of our daily consumption: piles and piles of discarded items, from food to human bodies whose organs have been harvested for sale. On the other hand, Maia zooms into the daily life of garbage collectors, who consume very little while risking their lives to pick up the remainder of other people’s consumption, riding the back of trash trucks and handling all types of garbage without wearing much protective gear. These characters are dismembered in accidents involving trash compactors; they become contaminated by syringes they accidentally touch when collecting the trash; they lose their sense of smell; some of them die from falling off the trash truck. As the narrator points out, society does not even notice that, like cheap merchandise, they are easily replaced after they die. For society, they seem to have no recognizable value.

The value of the garbage collectors’ work only becomes visible when their strike turns the entire city into a giant dumpster. The strike also makes painfully visible how much the city consumes, as evidenced by the amount of trash that it produces, which accumulates in the streets at an astonishing rate. As the narrator notes about the protagonist’s job:

No itinerário de Erasmo Wagner são recolhidas mais de vinte toneladas de lixo por dia. A riqueza de uma sociedade pode ser
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medida pela sua produção de lixo. Vinte toneladas num itinerário consideravelmente pequeno o faz pensar no tanto que se gasta. No tanto que se transforma em lixo. Mas tudo vira lixo, inclusive ele é um lixo para muitas pessoas, até para os ratos e urubus que insistem em atacá-lo. (O trabalho ch. 1)

In Erasmo Wagner’s itinerary, more than twenty tons of trash are collected daily. A society’s wealth can be measured by its production of trash. Twenty tons in a considerably short itinerary makes [Wagner] think about how much is wasted. About how much becomes trash. But everything turns into trash, including himself, who is garbage for many people, even for the rats and vultures that insist on attacking him.

The trash collector’s strike, therefore, makes the aftermath of consumption visible. The impressive amount of waste produced by consumer society, and which, almost like magic, disappears into the night once it is collected, now confronts middle- and upper-class consumers. They are forced to face some of the negative consequences of their own consumption, which are usually transferred to low-income workers such as the garbage collectors themselves. In this way, the hidden violence of consumption becomes exposed: not the shocking violence of robbery or mugging showed by the media and feared by the upper classes, but the violence of decay, of the “state of putrefaction” of what is discarded and comes back to haunt consumers, polluting the environment, generating disease (O trabalho ch. 5).

Part of this waste, nevertheless, becomes commodity again as other consumers repurpose some of the discarded items. Such is the case of mattresses, box springs, doors, armoires, and chairs that one of the protagonists, Erasmo Wagner, collects in order to sell later (O trabalho ch. 1). This waste generates another level of commerce, the only one that seems possible for these “failed consumers,” who cannot afford to participate in more visible consumption. Some of them cannot even spare the price of food and have to search for it in a landfill; a precarious condition portrayed in the 1989 Brazilian film Ilha das Flores (Isle of Flowers) by director Jorge Furtado. Playing with the expression “our daily bread,” the narrator says that the people scavenging food in the trash waited for “our daily sewage,” evoking a feeling of repulsion and discomfort. Readers are thus forced to confront the social inequalities generated by the capitalist system in which they participate as consumers.
Differences in socioeconomic power manifest themselves even in scatological ways in *O trabalho*. Erasmo Wagner, continuing to force the reader to confront this abject reality, points out these social differences when he comments that “[d]inheiro sempre vira lixo. Lixo e bosta … Meu primo Edivardes trabalha desentupindo esgoto. Isso sim é um trabalho de merda. Você precisa ver o esgoto das áreas mais ricas. Ele diz que é uma bosta densa … Comida boa faz isso” (“money always turns into trash. Trash and shit … My cousin Edivardes works unclogging sewage systems. This is for sure a shitty job. You need to see the sewage of the wealthiest areas. He says the shit is dense there … Good food does that”; ch. 1). Erasmo Wagner further comments that he does not like the rich because they have a lot of money to spend and, consequently, they produce more trash (ch. 1). His comment inverts the social value of commodities. Instead of indicating a high social status, excessive consumption is portrayed as an abjection when the emphasis is placed not on the item as shiny and new, but on its state of putrefaction. The epitome of this abject state of consumer goods is embodied by a lake called *chorume*, from the verb “chorar” (“to cry”). This site, located by the nearby landfill, is “o fim de todas as coisas” (“the end of all things”), where anything from leftover food to human bodies is dumped (ch. 4). *Chorume* represents, by extension, the entire city, for the latter appears in the novel as an apocalyptic site when it is taken over by waste during the trash collectors’ strike. The city becomes an immense dumpster itself, exposing the waste and the social exclusion that is made invisible to its middle- and upper-class inhabitants (ch. 5). Maia’s novel recreates a universe that confronts us with the opposite of the dreams of consumer society. It operates in a similar way to Vik Muniz’s recreations of canonical paintings from garbage, which according to Lúcia Bettencourt prompt us to face the other side of our consumption, by taking us to a site where

*Quase que num simulacro (perverso) do paraíso consumista moderno, ali estamos rodeados por todos os (não)objetos e, ao invés dos corredores climatizados e dos cenários elaborados para um show de propaganda, temos a temperatura insuportável, o cheiro desagradável, o ruído das máquinas ao invés da harmonia da música, numa (sub)versão que revela como somos todos igualmente infelizes perante o lixo e, portanto, como a felicidade obtida com o consumo não passa de uma ilusão, se, em última análise, consumir é produzir cada vez mais lixo. (10–11)*
Almost as in a (perverse) simulacrum of a modern consumer paradise, there we are, surrounded by all the (non)objects and, instead of the air-conditioned hallways or the elaborate sets of an advertisement, we have the unbearable temperature and the unpleasant smell; the noise of the machines instead of the harmonic sound of music, in a (sub)version that reveals how we are all equally unhappy when confronted with garbage and, therefore, how the happiness that we obtain from consumption is no more than an illusion, if, ultimately, to consume is to produce ever more garbage.

This apocalyptic scene, however, represents positive change by forcing an interruption of daily life. This interruption, in turn, highlights socioeconomic tensions. Although trash collectors go back to their dangerous and exploited routines and to their state of invisibility after the strike is over, there is a very symbolic moment of confrontation between them and those who ignore them. This moment takes place in the last few pages of the narrative, in which Erasmo Wagner, soaking wet from being in the rain and smelling rotten due to his contact with the trash, taps on the window of a “pale and perfumed” middle-class woman’s car. She seems terrified of him and, hesitantly, asks him if they are collecting the trash again, to which he responds: “Sim. É esse o nosso trabalho: recolher a sua merda porque a senhora não pode recolher sozinha. É isso que fazemos aqui” (“Yes, this is our job: to collect your shit because you can’t collect it yourself. That’s what we do here”; Maia, O trabalho ch. 7). This is the only direct class confrontation that we see in the novel. This confrontation suggests that, although Erasmo Wagner “permanecerá recolhendo o lixo dos outros, como uma besta de fardo, estéril, híbrida, que não questiona” (“will continue to collect other people’s trash, like a domesticated beast, sterile, hybrid, who doesn’t question”; ch. 7), “successful consumers,” to play on Bauman’s term, have now seen his face. There has been a moment of disruption, if not suspension, of social order that leaves its mark on that woman, on the society that ignores the dirty work of others. This presence, this appearing before the society that rejects them, confers an identity to these workers, which is also conveyed by the names that Maia chose for them. Erasmo Wagner’s initials, E. W., which are the same initials of other characters in her novels (Elvis Wanderley, Ernesto Wesley, Edgar Wilson), are a reference to Edgar Allan Poe and his short story
“William Wilson” (1839). While their names remove them from an anonymous mass of “others,” they also connect them as some sort of alter egos of the same individual, much like Poe’s Wilson. Their names signal their shared background as inhabitants of the underworlds that Maia portrays, who emerge to disturb those who live on the surface.

**Everyday Death**

Also belonging to an underworld, many of the characters of *Carvão animal* literally spend most of their time below ground level, as is the case of the coalminers and the cremators—who work in the basement of the crematory—of the fictitious city of Abalurdes, where the story takes place. The novel explores the relationship between death and consumption—which also appears in *De gados e homens*, as we will see later in the analysis—by portraying (dead or dying) bodies as commodities. In the case of the workers, their bodies suffer the slow violence of their poor work conditions, which exposes them to toxic elements. The novel also highlights how socioeconomic differences extend beyond life, as evidenced by the differential treatment given in the crematory to the dead bodies of the rich versus the bodies of the poor. Yet, the novel makes the argument that, in spite of these differences in life and in the rituals surrounding our passing, death ultimately transforms us all into the same organic substance. Our bodies, commodified throughout our lives and the rituals surrounding death, will eventually end in dust. Opening with a quote from Genesis 3:19, “tu és pó e ao pó retornarás” (“for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”), the novel indirectly confronts the capitalist race to get ahead with the ephemeralness of life, thus rendering that race meaningless. In the novel, the fire is the ultimate “consumer,” for it consumes everyone in Abalurdes, either in sudden fires or by the slow consequences of pollution. Beyond that final consumption, all are equal, reaching an after-life state that transcends consumer capitalism.

In the city of Abalurdes, the commodification of dead bodies, which are called “mercadoria” (“merchandise”) several times throughout the novel, is made explicit from the very beginning, when we enter the local crematory with some of the main
characters. On the wall of the facility, families find a list of rules that alerts that “Os restos mortais só serão recebidos mediante o recibo de pagamento” (“The remains will only be received upon proof of payment”; 26). This alert takes Bauman’s notion of the commodification of the self described in Chapter 2 to yet another level, suggesting that, in consumer society, individuals are treated as commodities not only in life but also after death, through rituals. The commodification of the dead body becomes evident again when the workers of the crematory prepare for the visit of investors who want to transform Abalurdes into a “polo nacional de morte” (“national center of death”), according to the manager (Maia, Carvão 113). Following an accident with one of the crematory machines not too long before the investors’ visit, the workers are forced to illegally cremate over eighty bodies at the local coal mine in exchange for allowing its owner to sell charcoal in which plant and human remains are mixed together. Like mass-produced goods in a factory, the bodies become valuable commodities, generating profit for the city by providing energy that keeps the town running.

In contrast with the deceased whose families can afford a ceremony, unclaimed bodies are dumped in the polluted stream behind the crematory, like defective goods. For those whose families do not have the means, there is little ceremony in honor of their passing. Such is the case of Palmiro, an elderly man well beyond retirement age, who is forced to continue to work in the crematory due to his financial situation. Palmiro lives in rather precarious conditions. He shares a room in the back of the crematory with J. G., another employee of the establishment in question. The room, as the narrator describes,

é mínimo: uma cama de solteiro, um armário embutido de duas portas, um fogão de duas bocas, uma pia encardida e um velho criado-mudo com uma televisão de vinte polegadas sobre ele. A televisão é nova. Palmiro pagou quatrocentos reais em dez parcelas sem juros. (Carvão 62)

is minimal: a twin bed, a two-door armoire, a two-burner stove top, a dirty sink and an old nightstand with a twenty-inch television on top. The television is new. Palmiro paid four hundred reais in ten installments without interest.
Palmiro’s precarious financial state has consequences beyond his death. Due to his lack of means, his body is only transported in a coffin—rather than cremated in it, as is the case for deceased ones whose families can afford the cremation—and is subsequently transferred to a tray on which it is cremated clandestinely (Carvão 99). His co-workers take the coffin from the funeral home without permission and return it as quickly as possible. Palmiro’s only valuable possession is his gold teeth, which his co-workers remove after his death, as Palmiro had requested, and make sure that the teeth are delivered as inheritance to his daughter. Besides Palmiro, other characters living in precarious conditions emphasize the low value of their few possessions. For example, Dona Zema, a neighbor of one of the main characters, notes that her chickens are “o que tenho de mais valioso na vida. Nem essa casa aqui é minha, é do meu irmão. Só tenho as galinhas pra me valer” (“the most valuable things that I have in life. Not even this house is mine, it is my brother’s. The only thing I can rely on is the chickens”; 92). In an even more precarious position is J. G., whose sole material accumulation is said to be his body fat, which is “o reverso de todas as suas perdas, amarguras e sofrimentos” (“the reverse of all his losses, bitterness, and suffering”; 31–32).

Countering consumer capitalism’s false promise of expressing one’s individuality through ownership of commodities, the novel emphasizes that, after death, the only thing that actually sets us apart from one another and that allows our bodies to be recognized after they have decomposed is our teeth. The story opens with the narrator pointing out that, “sua profissão, dinheiro, documentos, memória, amores não servirão para nada” (“your profession, money, documents, memory, love stories, won’t make any difference”; Carvão 9). It closes in a similar way, reaffirming the value of one’s teeth over everything else that one may own, by stating that identifying one’s teeth is the only way to tell a human being apart from mere ashes if one dies in a fire (158). Both the opening and the closing of the novel feature firefighter Ernesto Wesley, whose body appears as fragile and invincible at the same time. Wesley, who lost his daughter in a car accident and later on also lost his wife, suffers from a congenital disease that prevents him from feeling any physical pain. On one hand, this condition allows him to deal with circumstances that his peers would likely be unable to face (50). On the other hand, the condition makes
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him highly vulnerable to dying without even realizing that anything is wrong with him. Throughout the novel, we see Wesley entering buildings on fire to rescue agonizing victims or cutting through metal and body parts in order to remove people from cars smashed in road accidents. Wesley, thus, represents strength and fragility, invincibility and ephemeralness at the same time. Read against the novel’s representation of consumer capitalism, he stands for both vulnerability and defiance of the slow violence that “the dirty work of others” impinges on his body.

The slow violence of which Wesley and the other characters of Carvão animal are victims runs deep into the environment that they inhabit. As in De gados e homens, in which the Rio das Moscas (River of the Flies) is contaminated by the blood and remains of the cattle, and as in O trabalho sujo dos outros, in which the chorro rume reeks of decomposing material, death contaminates the soil and the water of Abalurdes with toxic substances (Carvão 59). As a solution to the excess of dead bodies buried in its soil, the city turns their diseased into charcoal, an experiment that Maia affirms to have actually been carried out in a small town in Germany (“Ir” 366). For Abalurdes, however, this solution only brings more death, for it is anchored in capitalist exploitation and relies on yet another process that causes environmental destruction through water and air pollution. The narrator’s description of the city itself evokes death and decay:

O rio é morto e espelha a cor do sol. Não há peixes e as águas estão contaminadas. O céu, mesmo quando azul, torna-se carvoento nos fins de tarde. Uma região lamaçenta e gelada nos dias de inverno. Nas áreas mais afastadas, ainda existem casas de alvenaria que são simples e desbotadas, a pavimentação é precária em algumas partes isoladas da cidade, com resquícios de um antigo asfalto. A estrada principal é mal iluminada, sem sinalização e com curvas acentuadas que margeiam longos despenhadeiros. (Carvão 71)

The river is dead and reflects the color of the sun. There are no fish and the waters are contaminated. The sky, although blue, becomes coal-like at dusk. A muddy area, cold during the winter. In more remote areas, there are still simple faded brick houses; pavement is precarious in some isolated parts of the city, where there are traces of old asphalt. The main road is poorly lit, without signage and with sharp curves that border long cliffs.
Chapter Three

And later on in the narrative:

O aspecto carvoento do céu se intensificou. A impossibilidade de os raios de sol atravessarem tanto a camada de fuligem que cobre o teto da cidade quanto as nuvens carregadas transforma Abalurdes num lugar desolador. Uma espécie de deserto de cinzas; com o céu pesado, formado por blocos de nuvem que aparenta concreto. Um céu sem dimensões. (Carvão 94)

The coal-like look of the sky intensified. The impossibility for sunrays to go through both the layer of soot that covers the roof of the city and the dark clouds make Abalurdes a desolate place. It is a kind of desert of ashes; with heavy skies formed by blocks of clouds that look like concrete. A sky without dimensions.

With descriptions such as the ones above, among others that highlight the poor health of Abalurdes’s working class,5 the narrator unveils how that which is extraordinary has become ordinary for the town’s population. Read against the everydayness with which the coal miners, the firefighters, and the crematory employees go about their work, passages such as the ones above highlight how one, in the words of Phaedra Pezzullo and Stephen P. Depoe, can become accustomed to anything (103). Throughout the narrative, we see characters eating lunch while hoping for bodies to burn fast so that they can go home and rest after a long work day, approaching the challenge of cremating tens of bodies merely as a task that will allow them to keep their jobs and to get a raise, or yet not worrying about the thick dark mucus that they spit out as a consequence of breathing in the toxic air from where they work. The everydayness with which these actions are portrayed in the novel demonstrates not only that workers become conditioned to see death as business and tragedies as mundane, but also that they simply have to approach their reality in this manner. Only in this way can they survive their grueling invisible routines in dark and damp coal mines and crematory basements.

Of Meat Consumption

De gados e homens similarly brings to the fore other segments of society that, like the trash collectors of O trabalho sujo dos outros and the characters of Carvão animal, can be considered “failed consumers” for their extremely limited consumption and their
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consequent social invisibility. The novel highlights the everyday life of slaughter men, following the process of meat production and its environmental and socioeconomic costs. De gados denounced the slow violence of capitalism that results in the pollution of the local river, the impoverishment of the community that lives near the slaughterhouse, and the disposability of the slaughter men.

The main characters of De gados work for Seu Milo, the owner of the slaughterhouse, who is portrayed as a self-centered voracious capitalist who regards his employees as disposable merchandise. This aspect of Seu Milo’s character becomes evident when, upon learning about the death of Burunga, who is one of his employees, he promptly forces everyone else to work through the night in order to make up for the deceased worker’s hours. Burunga dies accidentally while trying to raise money to buy glasses for his daughter. His death is “collateral damage” of Seu Milo’s exploitation, given that the little amount that he earns as a slaughter man forces him to resort to another way of making money that ends up costing his life. The fact that two weeks after Burunga’s death, “it feels as if he had never been there,” conveys his low value for Seu Milo, which in turn stands for the low value of the many lives that are exploited at the slaughterhouse, as elsewhere in consumer society. Burunga and his coworkers work six days a week, slaughtering more than one hundred cows per day, making only a few cents per cow (Maia, De gados 13). They are hardly ever consumers of the meat that they produce simply because they cannot afford it. The indifference with which Seu Milo treats Burunga’s death represents capitalism’s systematic indifference toward those deemed redundant, that is, those with little to no consumer power, who are allowed to die for the sake of profit (Tyner 208).

De gados highlights that the exploitation that takes place at the slaughterhouse extends to the cows that are slaughtered there. As the title itself suggests, Maia traces a parallel between the slaughter men and the cattle in the novel, connecting the capitalist violence against animals to the violence committed against those considered “devalued humans” (Nibert 117). This parallel is conveyed, for instance, by the way in which the narrator describes characters’ actions using words like to growl, to howl, or to ruminate, thus portraying them as somewhat animalistic, much in the way of John Steinbeck’s characters in Of Mice and Men (1938), to which
the title of Maia’s novel alludes. The cows, on the other hand, are described as having human cognitive abilities, such as thinking and planning, a point to which I will return later. A similar parallel appears again in Maia’s most recent novel, *Enterre seus mortos* (*Bury Your Dead*; 2018), which features Edgar Wilson—one of the main characters of *De gados*—as a protagonist, and takes place after *De gados*. In *Enterre*, Wilson works picking up dead animals from highways. Along the way, he ends up collecting human bodies as well because the latter “[valem] tanto quanto um abutre e [merecem] ser recolhid[os] como o resto dos animais mortos” (“[are worth] as much as a vulture and [deserve] to be picked up as much as the remains of dead animals”; 48). On one hand, his comment implies that, for society, these human lives are perceived as being worth less than those of vultures, that is, than those of animals that humans consider the most repugnant. On the other hand, by affirming that all of these dead bodies, human or otherwise, deserve attention, he values both types of life equally, dissolving any hierarchy between human beings and other animals, no matter how devalued by humans these lives might be. Even in life, humans are treated like dead animals in the novels, as when Edgar gives a ride to the hospital to a couple with their dying daughter. The couple, who has no one else to turn to because of the state of total abandonment in which the population of the area finds itself—there is no ambulance that can take them—join the dead animals in the back of Wilson’s truck (28–29). The animalization of humans and humanization of animals that we see in Maia’s novels suggests their shared condition as victims of the same oppressive system in which the many are exploited in order to advance the goals of the few.

The connection between cattle and men established by Maia is also suggested by a comment made by one of the workers of the slaughterhouse, Helmuth, about the cattle, which could just as easily be applied to himself and his coworkers: that the animals live and die “under man’s power,” existing merely to serve them (*De gados* 94). The connection between men and cattle reinforced by this comment is also implied by a slip of the tongue by another character, a university professor who declares, in a visit to the slaughterhouse with his students, that they will visit “a fábrica de hamburger que processa a carne de vocês” (“the hamburger factory that processes your meat”; 67). In the professor’s statement, the word *meat* can be read as either the cow’s meat that the men
produce or their own flesh, suggesting that both men and cattle
are reduced to a product upon which Seu Milo builds his capital.
Besides the workers, prostitutes who exchange sex (their own flesh,
in a sense) for cuts of meat at the slaughterhouse are also portrayed
as “devalued humans,” becoming both commodities and consum-
ers of what is, metaphorically, the same.

Maia takes the parallel between the exploitation of humans and
other animals even further by using as one of the epigraphs of the
novel a quote that has been attributed to German philosopher
Theodor Adorno, although this authorship is open to debate.
The quote—“É apenas um animal … somente um animal” (“It’s
just an animal … only an animal”)—appears both in German
and in Portuguese in the novel and would have been extracted
from a longer sentence that compares animals to the victims of
the Holocaust: “Auschwitz begins whenever someone looks at
a slaughterhouse and thinks: they are only animals.”7 The com-
parison in question, which has been made by the organization for
animal rights PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals),
and which has caused much controversy, contributes to establish-
ing the link between the cattle and the men who slaughter it as
beings who are perceived as inferior and are, for this reason, con-
sidered disposable.

The epigraph that opens Maia’s novel appears along with
Leviticus 17:11—“Porque a vida da carne está no sangue” (“For
the life of the flesh [also meat, in Portuguese] is in the blood”)—,
which references sacrificial rituals as atonement. The idea of
sacrifice is central to the representation of change in De gados e
homens, for the novel depicts a sacrifice that, contrary to its mean-
ing in many societies, suspends rather than renews social order.
According to anthropologist Daniel Miller, the renewal of social
order is a common theme in rituals such as Vedic and some con-
temporary African sacrifices (Theory 80). He further notes that
sacrifice is tied to consumption in the sense that

… the defining feature of sacrifice is the moment in which the
object of sacrifice is literally consumed. Most commonly it is
livestock or plants that have been up to that point the focus
of labour and production. The act of sacrifice then takes the
moment at which production is transmuted into consumption
and appropriates it for the purpose of sanctification and receiv-
ing the powers of transcendent objects of devotion on behalf of
individuals and society. (83)
Chapter Three

On one hand, the daily killing of cows in the novel evokes the sacrifice of one hundred oxen to the gods in Ancient Greece. The word for the ritual, hecatomb, came to mean, both in Portuguese and in English, catastrophe. From this perspective, the literal slaughtering of the cows and the metaphorical slaughtering of the men would represent the hecatomb of consumer capitalism: the sacrifice of the many so that the few can prosper. On the other hand, a mysterious mass suicide committed by the cattle can be interpreted as a sacrificial ritual transmuted into transgression. In a final symbolic gesture, the cows’ (self-)sacrifice transfers the power from Seu Milo to a starving population that lives nearby, not only because the cows become meat for this population but also because their sacrifice interrupts the chain of exploitation at the slaughterhouse.

This sacrifice is foreshadowed by the cow’s unusual behavior throughout the novel, starting with a high number of miscarriages, followed by the cows no longer facing north when they graze, which Edgar Wilson, in a conversation with his coworkers, notes to be strange. Next, cows start to commit suicide individually by running into walls and trees. Then, the water of the river, which is polluted with the cows’ blood from the slaughtering, turns salty. This incident is followed by the heaviest rain ever seen in the area where the slaughterhouse is located. The rain pours over the characters as they search for twenty-two cows that disappeared overnight, only to find them dead at the bottom of a cliff, by the river. Looking for evidence that someone or an animal had pushed the cows down the cliff, the workers of the slaughterhouse watch, astonished, another group of thirty-five cows simply walk off the precipice on their own. The heavy rain represents a kind of cleansing of the dirty work that takes place at the slaughterhouse. Along with the actual rain, the narrator describes the cows’ suicides as a “rain of cows” or a “rain of meat” for the poor people who live at the bottom of the cliff. Previously in the narrative, we learn that there is a group of famished men, women, and children who come to the slaughterhouse periodically in the hopes of claiming meat from cows that fail to endure the conditions under which they are shipped—in crowded and unsanitary trucks that take them on long trips from the farms to the slaughterhouse. Seu Milo’s employees, following his orders, attempt to drive the starving population away. When the cows throw themselves down the cliff, about
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fifty men, women, and children rush onto the dead animals and cut pieces out for their own consumption. Interpreting the cows’ suicides as a divine intervention, one of the men says to Seu Milo’s employees: “As vacas se jogaram lá de cima. Nossas preces foram ouvidas” (“The cows jumped off the cliff. Our prayers have been answered”; Maia, De gados 118). By committing suicide, the cattle brings to the starving population the prosperity that The Charging Bull, the massive sculpture sitting on Wall Street, symbolizes and that capitalism has yet to deliver to these segments of society. As the novel’s reference to Leviticus suggests, the cows’ suicide is the “atonement for the souls” of the starving. As a transgressive act that destabilizes the capitalist order at the slaughterhouse, it represents the reparation that the starving population deserves as victims of consumer capitalism. According to what the narrator indicates, death in this case provides life to the famished population:

O suicídio das vacas jamais poderá ser explicado. Talvez tenha sido Providência Divina atendendo aos pedidos dos moradores da região que ansiavam por comida, especialmente carne. Assim como os peregrinos do deserto foram atendidos com uma chuva de codornas, os povos de outros desertos receberam uma chuva de vacas: a carne proveniente dos céus; a morte que dá vida. (De gados 123)

The cows’ suicide will never be explained. It might have been divine intervention, an answer to the prayers of the locals who longed for food, especially for meat. Like the pilgrims in the desert whose prayers were answered with a rain of quails, the people from other deserts received a rain of cows: the meat that came from the heavens; death that generates life.

The reference to Exodus 16 in the passage above evokes the idea of communal and equal share of food/goods, when the Israelites were sent the manna of quails from God while in the desert. On that day, the Israelites are said to have been likewise granted enough provisions to satisfy everyone’s hunger. Maia makes further reference to this biblical passage by introducing into the story cows that are supposedly from Israel, and seem to have initiated the cows’ rebellion against the slaughterhouse that culminated with the suicides and, consequently, with the feeding of the starving population.

After the cows’ suicide, order is apparently re-established at the slaughterhouse. However, the narrator’s use of verbs in the future,
rather than the past, to describe what happens next ("em poucos meses a produção aumentará" ["in a few months production will increase"; De gados 123]), Seu Milo’s fear regarding the future, and the equally mysterious disappearance of cows in a nearby farm that shuts down for good, hint at the possibility of an equally permanent interruption of the activities of the slaughterhouse. From this perspective, the cows’ suicide can be read as a metaphor for the possibility of interruption of capital exploitation via disrupting the consumption of products such as meat produced in such cruel conditions. The challenge that the cows’ unexplained behavior poses to the human characters can be interpreted as a representation of the unsustainability of consumer society. As Edgar Wilson comments when he learns that the cows have jumped off the cliff, quoting the Book of Psalms 42:7, “Um abismo chama outro abismo” (“Deep calleth unto deep”; 112). In other words, the perpetuation of atrocities such as the animal cruelty, the human exploitation, the greed, the environmental damage, and the social injustice that happen around the slaughterhouse can only result in self-destruction. As Seu Milo and his employees are challenged to understand the cows’ suicide, readers are prompted to think about the “immeasurable horror,” as Edgar Wilson characterizes it, behind the “delicious and delicate” things that daily consumption tends to obscure (21).

In this moment of interruption of the established order caused by the suicide of the cows, Edgar Wilson appears as a kind of mysterious and perceptive agent of change. From the beginning, it is clear that he has a special connection with the cattle. He demonstrates compassion for each cow that he stuns, producing a hissing sound that calms the animal down (De gados 11). An ambiguous character, Wilson is capable of brutally murdering as an expression of compassion. This is evident when he kills Zeca, a young man who takes pleasure in making the cattle suffer before slaughtering it (38), and subsequently makes the body disappear. Edgar Wilson, thus, echoes Edgar Allan Poe’s William Wilson, after whom he is named. Two opposing forces drive him. When the cows start to commit suicide, he is the only one who senses that there is no plausible explanation for the cows’ behavior. According to the narrator, he has a special connection with the animals: “Edgar sente-se tão afinado com os ruminantes, com seus olhares insondáveis e a vibração do sangue em suas correntes sanguíneas,
que às vezes se perde em sua consciência ao questionar quem é o homem e quem é o ruminante” (“Edgar feels so connected with the ruminants, with their unfathomable gaze and the vibration of their bloodstream, that sometimes he loses his conscience when questioning who is the man and who is the ruminant”; 68). In this description, Edgar becomes one of the cattle.

His identification with the cows is further suggested by his satisfaction when the students who visit the slaughterhouse demonstrate extreme discomfort as they become familiar with the process of slaughtering. When asked by a student about whether what he does is a crime and whether he is ashamed of doing his work, Edgar Wilson replies: “A senhora já comeu um hambúrguer? … E como a senhora acha que ele foi parar lá?” (“Ma’am, have you ever had a burger? … And how do you think it ended up there?”, De gados 71–72). Handing the student the hammer that he uses to “put the cows to sleep,” as he prefers to think of his task, he adds: “A senhora pode descobrir se quiser. Desde o início. Conhecer todo o processo, não foi isso que vocês vieram? Se quiser fazer seu próprio hambúrguer, o processo começa aqui” (“Ma’am, you can find out for yourself, if you want. From the beginning. You can learn about the whole process, isn’t this what you came here for? If you want to make your own burger, the process starts here”; 72). Edgar Wilson’s comment denounces consumers’ indirect responsibility for the killing of the cattle, making visible the death and cruelty behind the banal act of eating a hamburger and suggesting a relationship between consumption and crime. The woman ends up crying after that response while another student in the group vomits. During this visit, Edgar Wilson declares: “Eu sou o atordoador” (“I am the stunner”; 69), in a symbolic moment that suggests his connection with the cattle and their rebellion, so to speak, in the narrative. The word atordoador, which is used to refer to the person responsible for stunning the animals in the first phase of slaughtering, comes from the verb atordoar, which also means to disturb, to cause discomfort. Edgar, indeed, disturbs the students, as we have seen, by calling their attention to the fact that they partake in a crime when they consume meat. His close identification with the cows, who also atordoam, that is, disturb the order at the slaughterhouse, suggests his underlying role as an agent of change in the chain of exploitation that sustains the meat industry.
It is also by following Edgar in his visit to the hamburger factory to which Seu Milo sells meat that we are further exposed to the connection between death and consumption in the novel. By establishing this relationship, the novel reconstructs the path of killing and exploitation that is mostly erased in the process of meat production. Along this path, there is a sort of “cleansing” of this process, which becomes evident in a contrast between the dirty space of the slaughterhouse and the cleanliness and whiteness of the hamburger factory. When Edgar Wilson visits the factory to run an errand, the narrator notes how the office to which the receptionist takes the protagonist is “limpo, arejado e iluminado” (“clean, airy, and bright”; De gados 18). As Edgar walks through the factory, he passes by men wearing perfectly white overalls, which contrast with the filth at the slaughterhouse, where one can find “uma quantidade excesiva de sangue e pedaços de crânio esfacelado” (“an excessive amount of blood and pieces of destroyed skulls”; 20). The slaughterhouse is further described as a space where one can witness the exsanguination and slaughter of the cattle. Further descriptions of the slaughterhouse provide a rather vivid and gruesome picture of the activities that take place there: “Depois da sangria e da remoção da pele, o gado, suspenso por correntes, é empurrado por uma carretilha até chegar a Helmuth, o desmembrador, que usa uma motosserra para remover a cabeça e partir a carcaça ao meio” (“After the exsanguination and the removal of the skin, the cattle, hanging from chains, is pushed along a roulette until it gets to Helmuth, the employee responsible for dismembering the cows, who uses a chainsaw to remove the head and to cut the carcass in half”; 24). Later in the narrative, the narrator explicitly notes the effacement of the dirty work required to produce meat once the latter reaches the factory: “Lá na fábrica de hambúrguer a brancura reflete uma paz que não existe, um clarão que cega a morte. Todos são matadores, cada um de uma espécie, executando sua função na linha de abate” (“Over at the hamburger factory, the whiteness of the place reflects a peace that does not exist, brightness that blinds death. Everyone is a killer, each one of a different kind, executing a task in the slaughtering line”; 45). Maia sarcastically points out this effacement when the narrator subtly notes Seu Milo’s hypocrisy in closing the slaughterhouse on Sundays in order to go to church, as a good Catholic should do in his view. For Seu Milo, this is a sacred day, a day to consume, so to
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speak, Christ’s flesh and blood, after exploiting the flesh and shedding blood of hundreds of cows—and of the men that slaughter them—during the week.

During Edgar’s visit to the factory, the man with whom he talks interrupts their conversation upon learning that Edgar is one of the workers responsible for killing the cows. The explanation as to why the conversation is interrupted comes later, when the narrator remarks that the factory employee “imagina o trabalho que o homem diante dele faz e não gosta de pensar nisso. Olha para o resto do seu almoço sobre a mesa: um hambúrguer com molho de mostarda escura levemente apimentada e picles” (“imagines the work of the man standing in front of him and prefers not to think about it. He looks at his lunch on the table: a hamburger with a mildly spicy dark mustard sauce, and pickles.”; *De gados* 19). Juxtaposing the image of Edgar killing the cows with the image of the hamburger on the table, the narrator links the beginning to the end of the process, reminding readers of the ethical implications of their meat consumption and, more broadly, of the atrocities that may pile up along the production process of any commodity.

*De gados e homens* is thus a reflection about the effacement of the exploitation involved in and the socioeconomic imbalances caused by acts as simple as consuming a hamburger in today’s capitalist society. The novel questions the morality of consumption, interrogating to what extent the banal act of eating meat transforms the consumer into a murderer, albeit indirectly. The narrative seeks to undo the effacement of the connection between social and environmental atrocities and everyday consumption. It traces the line of direct and indirect participants in killing and exploitation, from the producer to the consumer. As the narrator points out when he gives us access to Wilson’s thoughts: “São todos homens de sangue, os que matam e os que comem. Ninguém está impune” (“They all have blood in their hands, those who kill and those who eat. No one is innocent”; *De gados* 126).

**Conclusion**

In all three narratives addressed in this chapter, Maia challenges some of the practices of consumer capitalism that lie beneath activities such as the mass production of meat, the commodification of death, and the disposability of many of the articles that
we consume. She highlights the slow violence of capitalism by suggesting that spaces such as the slaughterhouse, the coal mine, the landfill, and the crematory are neither static nor isolated. They are rather connected to other spaces and times that are not immediately apparent to us, “for the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post: industrial particulates and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries” (Nixon 8). In other words, what happens in the spaces depicted by Maia flows into rivers, into the soil, runs through the body, travels through the air, and produces long-lasting consequences.

It is important to note, however, that although Maia portrays a variety of characters—firefighters, coal miners, cattlemen, trash collectors, and cremators—her narratives at times make sweeping naturalistic claims regarding the characters’ personalities that are as problematic as Bonassi’s. These men are frequently called “homens brutos” ("rude men"), “ruminantes” ("ruminant"), and “bestiais” ("bestial"), being reduced at times to a psychological state that simply reflects the perceived nature of their occupations. In O trabalho, for instance, the narrator states: “Quando se quebra asfalto, se recolhe lixo ou se desentope esgotos diariamente, seu cérebro passa a ser um órgão sub-nutrido. É difícil entender um detalhe a mais. Se interessar por alguma coisa fica um pouco mais difícil” (“When you work drilling asphalt, collecting trash, or unclogging sewers daily, your brain becomes a malnourished organ. It is difficult to understand detailed information. Getting interested in something becomes a little more difficult”; 102). In turn, the narrator of Carvão argues that

[é] impossível controlar a todos. É difícil tratar com peões. São homens brutos, de índole primária e arredios à obediência. Lidar com peões é como apasentar jumentos no deserto … A imensidão das extensas proporções de terras ao redor pode esmagar a condição humana que existe até no mais bruto dos homens. Os jumentos são animais difíceis de dominar. Arredios, tentam derrubar quem neles monta; e, quando derrubam, eles pisam em cima e ainda tentam morder. São bestiais em muitos sentidos, esses homens e os jumentos. (74)

[i]t’s impossible to control all of them. It’s hard to deal with peons. They are brute men, of primitive nature, and resistant
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to obedience. Dealing with peons is like taming donkeys in the desert … The immensity of the vast lands around [them] is capable of smashing the human nature that even the most brute man has. Donkeys are difficult animals to dominate. Indomitable, they try to knock down those that attempt to mount them; and, when they do so, they stomp [on those trying to mount them] and try to bite. They are bestial in many ways, these men and donkeys.

As the passages above show, Maia’s characters are often stereotyped into savages. Even though there seems to be an attempt to praise the men for not being submissive, or the intention to point out that human beings are not superior to animals, it seems rather problematic to limit this comparison to certain segments of society and to portray such segments as incapable of having complex thoughts and feelings. This is especially the case in stories told by a third-person narrator that clearly distances himself/herself from the universe that he/she portrays, as is the case of the novels discussed in this chapter. In this sense, the narratives become somewhat voyeuristic, offering the opportunity to peek into the “exotic” world of these men.

On one hand, Maia paints a bleak picture of our current experiences with consumption and hints at the serious challenges of breaking away from the world of commodities as we know it. For example, while Edgar Wilson tries to be as humane as possible when killing the cows and acknowledges the horrific nature of meat production, he does not, however, hesitate to eat the hamburger he is given at the factory. Carvão, in turn, repeatedly states that fire consumes everything one owns in a split second, leveling everyone’s socioeconomic status to nothing, and that the only thing that really defines our identities when no possessions are left is our teeth. Yet, pieces of burned human bones are commodified by the coal industry. Nevertheless, Maia also indicates the possibility to confront and even transcend consumer capitalism, albeit through means that would lead to partial or total annihilation. If in O trabalho this confrontation is rather timid, represented by a moment in which the successful consumers are forced to see the faces of the failed ones that they insist on ignoring, in De gados and in Carvão, death and sacrifice, paradoxically, announce the possibility of change. Through death, eventually, everyone is leveled to dust, or through sacrifice—which also results in (redemptive)
death—the social order can be disturbed, and exploitation can be put to an end, as evidenced by the shutting down of the farm near the slaughterhouse. More than denouncing the brutalization of consumer society, Maia gives an equally brutal response to it, in which its destruction meets the possibility of transcendence into a new state, one of equality and abundance for those who are made invisible today.

Maia’s portrayal of our existence in consumer capitalism thus conveys a certain hope that is absent in Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s and that is less detached from everyday life than Lísias’s and B. Carvalho’s, in the sense that, within the fictional universe that she creates, the possibility of change concretely takes place and has real, albeit temporary, consequences. In the next chapter, I will analyze two novels that move the needle of hope a little further in a positive direction.