

**SUBURBAN NIGHTMARES: THE LIMINAL SPACES AND BODIES OF FERNANDO BONASSI'S
*SUBÚRBIO*¹**

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In her book *The Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1982), French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva defines the abject as a concrete and ontological entity marked by ambiguity. The abject object/subject at the same time attracts and repels those who come into contact with it. According to Kristeva:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud, holds on to it. But, simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

This incertitude of the abject defies the articulation of stable identities and, consequently, challenges the production of a stable dichotomous social normativity that demands a clear separation between desire and repulsion, self and other, the acceptable and the unacceptable. Abject subjects (criminals, madwomen and madmen, social others) cross from the legal sites to the territories of the non-social; those arenas where societal as well as cultural regulations become tenuous and fluid. Therefore, abject subjects exist within the confines of society, yet without being a sanctioned part of this structure. From this liminal position the abject subject can destabilize the hegemonic social order and expose its constructed, arbitrary nature while also debilitating the barriers that compose the societal edifice and the individual body.

In *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Judith Butler explains that the body as both an empirical and an epistemological construct is mediated through physical, psychological, and socio-cultural boundaries. Butler maintains that "[n]ot only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies are" (ix). The physical as well as the discursive body thus dialogue with the formulation of limits and of liminalities. Bodies engender the frontiers of the social body, but they

also exist within and/or outside the delimitations that configure the corpus and its spaces. Physical and symbolic borders make explicit the separation between hegemonic society and the non-conforming subjectivities and territorialities that exist in its interior and exterior domains. Hegemonic discourse commonly casts transgressive subjects in terms of abjection. This construction serves paradoxically to ensconce the prevalent structure and yet destabilizes it since, as indicated by Kristeva, the abject lies both inside and outside the normative social order.

Abjection is not restricted to the elaboration of individual subjectivities and embodiments. The abject prevails also in the configuration of the social body and in the empirical, as well as exists in figurative cartographies that the citizens of the so-called body inhabit. Accordingly, cityscapes are composed of both the proper and improper spaces, of the well-illuminated dwellings of the bourgeoisie and the “dark” and allegedly dangerous spaces of the subaltern classes.

In Fernando Bonassi’s novel *Subúrbio* [Suburb] (1991, 2006) the abject is present as a geographic as well as a social category. Both aspects of abjection intersect at the crossroads of two different bodies: that of an old man, *o velho*, and that of a young girl, *a menina*. Their bodies are synecdoches for the territory they inhabit: whereas the old man’s decaying physique represents the degradation of the suburban terrain, the young girl’s violated corpse becomes an emblem of the absence of sociability within the peripheries of São Paulo. This essay examines the thematization of the abject in both the social and the personal orbits in Fernando Bonassi’s *Subúrbio*, considering the multiple forms of aggression and necessity that lead to their debasement. The novel’s portray of the physical, as inscribed by deterioration and contravention, remits the reader to the increasing hostility and fragmentation of the socio-spatial circumstances that the metropolitan subject occupies. *Subúrbio* hence establishes a continuum between the individual and the social bodies that points to both entities’ disintegration. Through this continuum, the novel establishes a critique of the crisis of community in Brazil in the aftermath of the military rule (1964-1985).

The plot of *Subúrbio* revolves around an elderly couple who; albeit still inhabiting the same domestic space, does not share anything beyond the house in which they live. The “old man” is a drunkard who becomes enamored by a young neighborhood girl. The child epitomizes both ingenuousness and seduction for the elderly man. Besides representing the offspring he never had, she is also symbolic of an idealized past and provides a vestige of hope and emotional attachment in the surrounding grey landscape: “o velho percebia que o tanto de beleza que crescia naquela menina estava repondo um pouco das belezas que foram envelhecendo junto com ele. Era como se fosse ressuscitado por essa germinação de mulher” (149). As the narrative progresses, the relationship between the two

characters transforms from the innocence of a quasi-familiar affair into the nightmare of sexual violation. The novel's denouement is the climax of an ongoing enactment of brutality at both the social (the lack of meaningful civic and communitarian apparatuses that serve to support and protect the social subject) and the individual levels (the failure of emotional relations and of familial bonds).

As the book's title indicates, the city, or rather, its outskirts, represent one of the primary axis around which the story develops. Focusing on the literal and discursive fringes of the hegemonic metropolis, Bonassi reclaims this zone from the oblivion of dominant culture, allocating to it an (albeit problematic) agency that most of the human characters within the text lack. Neither *asfalto* nor *morro*, *Subúrbio*'s urban terrain is inhabited by the figures that straddle the border between these two regions, both financially and symbolically. It is an area marked by social as well as individual decadence thus illustrating Susana Rotker's contention that, "[c]ities too have their ailments, cancerous zones that should be excised, or at least isolated to specific neighborhoods. Modernity divided the large cities into clearly marked areas: high and low, clean and dirty" (18). The suburban landscape of Bonassi's novel is a dangerous territory because, similarly to a body infected by a contagious disease, its misery and abjection insidiously permeate and corrupt the "healthy" urban corpus. *Subúrbio*'s physical environ, or the "Paisagem a olho nu" (13) evokes the urban decrepitude, the ailing "cancerous zones" alluded to by Rotker. On the vicinity's street corners, "o que mais chama atenção" is the "vigor das sombras escorridas. O bolor impresso no cimento. Fóssil" (13). As the description intimates, the cityscape, both geographically and socially, is a decadent, agonizing organism. Its past layers of sociability have fused into a dead crust that transforms the *polis* into a fossil of another era.

Concomitantly to the ailing urban sphere, the private arena of its citizens is also diseased. The outward registers of this decadence signal to the literal and metaphorical interiors of (inter)personal dissolution. As Bonassi's novel purveys the moldering urban and social corpus, it also concentrates on individual decaying bodies. Flaccid flesh, decrepit limbs, and rotting organs become the object of an abject voyeurism as the narrative voice dwells on the minutiae of corporeal degradation ("Ficou olhando as peles murchas desdobradas como uma toalha amassada sobre a mesa da coxa, confirmando o cansaço dos músculos estirados" [78]), alternating this observation with a perverse surveillance of "healthy" bodies. Physical corruption is paralleled by psychological debasement that culminates in pedophilic brutality.

Confined to the dismal perimeter of the suburb and the eroding *domus*, the individual and the social bodies become simultaneously the agents and the subjects of dejection. In this duality, the figures that populate Bonassi's text challenge the parameters of the prevailing social taxonomy since they cannot

be defined in exclusive terms of transgression or victimization. Instead, Bonassi's characters are at the same time perpetrators and receptacles of multiple types of violence: psychological, sexual, material, civic.

In Brazil, violence has been historically either perpetrated or sanctioned by the state apparatus. Therefore, the contingency of sociability and of polity related in *Subúrbio* can be traced firstly to a tradition of state-sanctioned violence, imposed by the military dictatorship that presently manifests itself in official (i.e. police) violence against the impoverished population. As indicated by Jorge Balán, the "culture of fear" commenced during authoritarian rule has become prevalent, infusing various social spheres. For Balán, nowadays this culture poses one of the foremost threats to democracy "since it may again justify repression, emergency policies that circumvent the constitutional rule, and, more broadly, alienation from the democratic political process" (5). Apprehension transforms political culture and social habits, leading the subject away from participatory venues into delegating civic agency onto those who proclaim to control violence and to tame the "savage" metropolis.

Secondly, the predicament of civil society is also a consequence of the weakening of the social state partly due to the spread of transnational capitalism and neoliberal policies implemented during and in the aftermath of the totalitarian governments. Within this frame of reference, economic profitability became and continues to be the reigning state ideology in various Latin American countries. Neoliberalism has augmented existing social divisions or generated new forms of exclusion. Moreover, the primacy of market-driven economics and policies has lead governments to increasingly privatize state-run enterprises and services, including public safety and mediation of justice. Privatization of public services such as security, health-care, education, and housing, has aggravated socio-economic divisions within the *urbe*, including its geographical segmentation. On the one hand, affluent residents, seeking protection from the contamination of abject poverty and ensuing social hostility, insulate themselves within the enclaves of closed condominiums and gated communities. On the other hand, the less privileged social sectors progressively dwell in no-man's terrains where state power is replaced by other forms of legislation, often the *lex talionis*. In the context of *Subúrbio*, this law becomes evident in the summary lynching of the old man after his criminal deed is discovered. The verdict, passed on by a mob that eschews the discredited legal order is reduced to one single word, "Lincha! Lincha! Lincha! Lincha! Lincha!" (291). In a distorted mirror-image of brutality, the climax of pent up violence, of anger and frustration with the failure of legal order evokes/repeats the *velho's* own brutal rape and murder. Concurrently, the repetition of the verb "to lynch," paired with the exclamation, confers a measure of elation to the scene, transforming the theatrics of violence into a perverse performance of community in

which the old man becomes the scapegoat that cures/coalesces—with his blood— a depraved form of solidarity.²

Sociologist Yves Pedrazzini argues that there is an intrinsic link between social partition and degradation, and violence:

Constatamos um enfraquecimento das defesas tradicionais do sistema social, como os valores de solidariedade e os laços comunitários, já relativizados pelas sociabilidades individualistas contemporâneas. Para responder aos princípios de segurança individual e coletiva, preocupação presente em todas as sociedades humanas, opta-se por medidas estratégicas de segurança, logo após identificar o inimigo: “o pobre” (muitas vezes o jovem pobre). O sentimento de insegurança —talvez legítimo— acentua a distância com o outro, com o pobre, o “novo bárbaro”, a figura do inimigo em suas diversas variantes. (100)

The distinction and the segregating discourses that differentiate between legitimate and illicit citizens, between the proper and improper city, have become incremented not only by fiscal inequities, but also by the unrestrained and unregulated growth of metropolitan areas such as São Paulo.

Population influx into urban regions resulted in the metastasizing of non-regulated low-income residential developments that lack basic infrastructure such as sewage and electricity. This growth—stemming in great part from the migration from the interior to the metropolitan centers where people search for better work and income—often further strains already economically strapped neighborhoods. Although at times informal housing projects eventually become connected to basic services, these locales are nevertheless frequently burdened by the absence of civic establishments such as schools, hospitals, police precincts, etc.³ In their lacking infrastructure, the underprivileged municipal regions disclose the erosion of the social contract within the larger urban as well as national context.⁴

In São Paulo, socio-economic divisions are compounded by the city's geographic make-up that thrusts its economically disadvantaged dwellers to the physical borders of the *urbe*. Transit between the center and periphery is frequently an arduous affair due to the inadequate means and the normally expensive cost of transportation. Bonassi's suburban landscape refers to such a geographic edge of the megalopolis, “na divisa com São Caetano do Sul, onde as tarifas de ônibus sofrem um acréscimo de trinta por cento e a fumaça de Mannesman turva tudo” (13-14). The allusion to the differential in bus prices indicates the geographic liminality of the novel's setting, a liminality that, according to Néstor García Canclini (2001), weakens civic participation within a larger national domain because it dissociates the peripheral populace from the centers of legislative power.

Highlighting the polluted atmosphere in this part of the city, the narrative voice further emphasizes the strenuous conditions on the socio-economic purview of the conurbation. Environmental dilapidation is one of the outcomes of a state apparatus that obeys foremost the directives of a neoliberal, globalized economy. Octavio Ianni contends that the preponderance of a globalized market weakens the nation-state and of its regulatory power since

Em diferentes e arranjos, as organizações multinacionais, ou multilaterais, desenvolvem seus próprios desenhos do que podem ou devem ser as nações e os continentes. Elaboram parâmetros rigorosos, técnicos, pragmáticos, fundados nos princípios do mercado, da livre iniciativa, da liberdade econômica, etc. Princípios que são sugeridos e impostos aos governos que pretendem ou precisam beneficiar-se de sua assistência, ajuda, direção. (43)

Accordingly, state policies designed to protect fair wages, workers' rights, and the environment are often side stepped and/or ignored. In *Subúrbio*, the omnipresent smoke spewed forth by the transnational company Mannesman signifies an economic system in which the state forgoes its regulatory power in favor of investor-friendly measures. The upshot is the degrading of the suburban dwellers' *Lebenswelt*. This dilapidation has both psychological and empirical consequences such as the inexorableness of diseases, which in their recurrence become one the peripheral subject's defining traits: "Depois do trabalho vinha a doença. Sempre, depois. Toda vida. [...] Doenças eram tão comuns naquele lugar que o velho tinha o critério de lembrar pelas doenças que tinham atingido as pessoas da sua memória" (101). Trapped in an ignominious existence, the individual finally becomes reduced to an assemblage of corporeal ailments, a body in distress that resonates its environment's exigency.

The alienation and the hostility generated by the breach in the social contract and the accompanying collective *telos* are repeatedly mirrored in the novel's scenarios. It is significant that the text's settings, which oscillate between the exterior and the interior landscapes of the periphery, do not include any communitarian areas such as public parks, neighborhood associations, etc. The only ambiance that speaks of collectivity is the young girl's school. But even this institution is outlined only as a hollow edifice, seen from the outside by the protagonist's voyeuristic gaze. All other zones of public gathering in the novel are spaces of commerce: the bakery that is also the local bar, the barbershop, the neighborhood store that sells illegal lottery tickets. These establishments, frequented primarily by male customers, do not provide an adequate venue of communication among its customers but are, instead, the podium where relations of power, both metaphorical and economic, are played out. Abuse, both physical and psychological, are constants in these places, adding to the menace of the public sphere.

Subúrbio further emphasizes the anonymity and the disintegration of the *urbe* in its depiction of means and routes of transit as well in the itineraries of the novel's characters. Particularly the *velho* is a debased *flanêur* of sorts, alternatively wandering aimlessly or purposefully (when in search of his object/s of desire, for instance) through various metropolitan routes. In one instance, as he goes to cash his pensioner's check, the old man:

Desceu a Lombroso, a Vicente Giacaglini, depois entrou no começo da Industrial [...] Atravessou a pista Santo André —centro da avenida do Estado no farol. Ficou um instante na ponte, vendo passar aquilo que passa na correnteza: pneus gastos, garrafas, tambores fechados, pára-lamas, sacos de supermercado, tênis. Tudo boiando, como se o rio fosse a esteira de um ferro-velho diferente. (129)

Despite this meticulous recounting of his trajectory, listing several streets the protagonist transverses, the narrative does not assemble a cohesive map of the city. Rather, Bonassi's text severs the urban body into separate, incongruous pieces, painting the portrait of a monstrous *urbe*. This Frankensteinian dismemberment of the megalopolis is stressed in the procession of discarded objects that drifts in the river and which the weary old man observes.⁵ The floating garbage speaks of the wasted lives and of the material waste of modernity that "litters" the megalopolis.⁶ The obsolescence of the items encapsulates the coupled messages of disposal and exchange that infiltrate the crevices of the broken city, deepening its rifts.

Thoroughfares, omnibuses, bus stops and stations appear repeatedly in the text. Not only are these sites allegorical of transit—of humans and of commodities—they are also (analogously to the polluted river) terrains of flux and instability. Like the private and the commercial domains, the notion of social cohesion formulated by the modern nation state has all but disappeared. The street is no longer the ambit of encounters between citizens from various backgrounds but has become what Michel de Certeau has termed a "non-space" (1984). Bonassi's metropolitan avenues expose the failed project of modernity, showcasing the ruins of the "casas dos metalúrgicos cortadas ao meio pela avenida, como cáries que vão pegando uma boca suja sem piedade. Banheiros, quartos, salas, cozinhas. Aquela intimidade junto do meio-fio tinha alguma coisa de fim de mundo" (130). The wrecked tenements enunciate modernity's double failure. On the one hand, the ruins signify the failure of a national modernizing project, the attempt to develop a national industry and thereby fortify national autonomy. Rather, as the previously mentioned allusion to the transnational enterprise Mannesman suggests, modernization within the country has been a partial venture at best. The emphasis on the development of a national industry, popular from the 1930s to the mid-1960s (that is, from Getúlio Vargas' *Estado*

Novo until the military *coup de état*) has given way to the progressive abdication of the manufacturing sector to the spread of transnational capitalism. The preponderance of multinational corporations also reflects the general trend within neoliberalism that sees the state as an intermediary between global capital and spaces of investment within a given nation. According to this rationale, the state's role is no longer to serve the public good, but rather to facilitate the interests of transnational capital within a given national sphere through the deregulation of markets and the slashing of public funds (Nef and Robles 37-8).⁷

Moreover, the rubble of the subsidized working-class homes augurs the waning of the social security system and, by extension, of the social pact. In *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that, within the present-day neoliberal order,

The switch from the project of community as the guardian of the universal right to decent and dignified life, to the promotion of the market as the sufficient guarantee of the universal chance of self-enrichment, deepens further the suffering of the new poor – adding insult to their injury, glossing poverty with humiliation and with denial of consumer freedom, now identified with humanity. (23)

The rationale of profit transforms the city's social settings, as it saturates its main arteries and seeps into its crevices. In *Subúrbio*, the permeation of capital into the traditional fields of collective life is further manifested in the presence of various billboards that interrupt the text. Comparable to the demolished workers' homes, a putrefying mouth on the metropolitan countenance, these advertisements transverse the urban corpus like yet another wound. The marketing intertexts, printed in the format of miniature billboards, disrupt the narrative flow suggesting the laceration of the urban landscape through the prevalence of a monetized (instead of communitarian) ethics in the public sphere.

Isolated in a landscape in which the signs of consumerism abound but where the collective dynamic has all but disappeared, the subject has to re-imagine her/his social identity utilizing the market-oriented symbolic horizon to formulate this identity. Anthropologist Néstor García Canclini believes that, in the framework of late capitalism/neoliberalism, consumption is one of the favored sites for the construction of citizenship. For Canclini, the contemporary period distinguishes itself by various "sociocultural changes" (24) including

[t]he shift from the citizen as a representative of public opinion to the consumer interested in enjoying quality of life. One indication of this change is that argumentative and critical forms of participation cede their place to the pleasure taken in electronic

media spectacles where narration or the simple accumulation of anecdotes prevails over reasoned solutions to problems. (24)

In the absence of congruent political narratives and/or viable venues for civic participation within a larger (for example national) scheme, the contemporary individual recurs to the market to position herself/himself within the social corpus. This organization is delimited by the constraints and by the symbols laid down by the hegemonic economic, social, and cultural episteme, and is often transmitted by the mass media. For Jesús Martín Barbero, as the public space fades, mass media, specifically television, analogously to rites of consumption, establishes new manners of sociability. Martín-Barbero maintains that:

If television attracts, it is, to a great extent, because the street repels. The absence of the spaces—streets and plazas that facilitate communication makes television something more than an instrument of leisure. Television becomes a place of coming together, of vicarious encounters with the world, with people, and even with the city in which we live. (28)

In the conflictive stage of the metropolis, its citizens increasingly insulate themselves within the backstage of the private domain: shopping centers, gated condominiums, individual homes and living rooms whose “windows” that open up onto the flickering panorama of small screen entertainment and marketable dreams/products.

But, inside these zones, interpersonal communication turns into an ephemeral commodity. Hence, as the elderly matrimony watches television together, the only interaction is between the actors on the soap opera, who engage in a simulacrum of affection. In contrast, the couple is unable to exhibit their emotions or to engage in a meaningful relationship. Their interface is limited to hostile silences or to a broken semblance of a dialogue, interrupted by the mass mediated images that invade the living ambiance. Their conversation, in this episode as well as throughout the narrative, is a monosyllabic exchange that does not provide an adequate communicative forum. Emotional sterility leads both characters to seek substitutes for their lack. While the old man finds refuge first in alcohol and then in his perverse passion for the young girl; the old woman insulates herself in the images of commercial culture. Specifically, she is enthralled by an advertisement for jewelry that, in its superimposition of romantic clichés makes her nostalgic for a different, impossible life. For her, commercial culture becomes a surrogate for emotional, if not necessarily material, comfort. In the television programs and their accompanying advertisement spots, in the pages of glossy magazines and the products they tout as emblematic of personal fulfillment, the yearning for affection is translated into the desire for specific

objects and the messages affixed to these articles. Disappointed with her lived experience, the elderly woman withdraws into the space of nostalgia and simulacra so that, “[n]o tempo dessa história a velha era capaz de passar a tarde inteira olhando nessa fotografia fina, nesse anúncio de jóias na contracapa de um número antigo de revista de mulher” (119). The preposition *nessa* (in this) reflects the transference of longing, of dreams into the one-dimensional surface of the photograph, as these are emptied of their meaning and their utopian potential. As the old woman’s imaginings become melded into the glossy magazine picture, they lose their anchor in reality, becoming simulacra of her failed aspirations and ambitions.

The bankruptcy of interpersonal relations alluded to by the proliferation of mass and commercial culture in the old couple’s existence crystallizes further in the description of their living room:

Na sala assistiram à televisão Vozzo, ouviram discos no Grundig, cochilaram a digestão no sofá, pernoitaram visitas tardias, tiraram o sapato ao chegar de longe, trocaram-se crianças alheias, riram de nervoso, choraram de fininho, receberam notícias, contaram salários, fizeram tantas outras muitas coisas, mas quem entrasse ali não ia notar. A sala, no tempo dessa história era o lugar mais vazio da casa. (18)

The once interactive domain of the living room, where experiences, both banal (“contaram salários”) and momentous (“choraram de fininho”) were shared now is an empty and silent expanse. The desertedness of the living quarters connotes the barrenness of the matrimony while also insinuating a generalized deterioration of familial ties. The accretion of manifold little quotidian domestic aggressions—the old man’s alcoholism, the wife’s anger and loneliness, their mutual frustration—creates the rift that leads to the abandonment of a common life project. The solitude of the partners is reflected in the physical ambiance of the house, which instead of a home (*lar*) is “A casa, só” (19).

Concurrently, the violence of an existence plagued by the specter of poverty where “—o dinheiro./ ‘—Como?/ ‘—Faltava... Pra esquecer ... / ‘—Tinha as obrigações também. / ‘—Toda a vida pelo jeito que falam.” (250), and burdened by personal disenchantment erodes the emotional—if not the material—bonds that link the couple, corroding their humanity. Both characters lack individual traits, including a proper name. Their reduction to the adjectival form: *o velho* and *a velha* bespeaks of their anonymity vis-à-vis each other and in relation to the context in which they dwell. The isolation and existential misery of the elderly husband and wife, reflected in the inside and the outside of the *domus* (“A passarela de cimento rachado dançando na lama que se acumulava por baixo, margeando a valeta. O musgo poderia derrubar um estranho” [15]), extends to/penetrates into the characters’ exterior reality.

Subúrbio represents the metropolitan outskirts of São Paulo as peripheral not only in geographic terms, but also in its socio-economic make-up. Like the old pair, most of the residents of their vicinity are located at the limit between the quasi-poverty of the lower middle-class and abject misery. The distinction between the two economic echelons is tenuous and, as the narrative suggests, easily (although not voluntarily) crossed. Social and individual estrangement compound as the citizens of the periphery are caught in the struggle for survival. Anomie is signaled in the tedious weekday routine of the old man, who spends thirty seven years in “descer a rua – esperar – subir o ônibus Mercedes Benz – dormir – acordar – descer do ônibus Mercedes Benz – entrar pela portaria 3 – picar o cartão – subir para o vestuário – número 56 amarelinho – abrir o armário de lata verde/cinza – despir-se da roupa recém-posta em casa” (29). Echoing the disengagement that permeates the daily existence of the proletariat, the narrative voice continues the meticulous register of the everyday travails of the protagonist and enumerates his actions in tiresome detail. The account of the hollow everyday activities points to the emptying of the existential horizon of the suburban dwellers, as they are reduced to an instrumental function within the machinery of production and consumption.

Beyond the impoverished *Lumpenproletariat* that inhabits the outer precincts of the metropolis, the suburb is also the habitat of liminal figures such as Naldinho, the child-bandit “uma pessoa que fazia tudo o que queria. Um demônio. Um bandido. Um menino. No tempo dessa história todos tinham medo e raiva dele. Tinha quem se admirava também, mas não dizia” (43). Naldinho is paradigmatic of the subjects that fall through the cracks of a fissured social and legal order. Paradoxically, it is precisely his outsider status that confers the youngster a measure of power while concomitantly making him powerless vis-à-vis the hegemonic order. Naldinho’s authority (that both attracts and repulses) emanates from the threat of violence, not dissimilar to the menace posed by the corrupt police. Within the marginal social context of the narrative, the delinquent and the agents of law enforcement are mirror images of the same coercive system.

However, in spite of his threatening presence, the juvenile offender still retains in him elements of a troubled, discordant childhood. He is at the same time “pouco mais que uma criança” (43) and “um menino que trazia muitas mortes na cara, como se fosse um bigode ralinho” (43). The facial features of the adolescent reveal the boy’s societal and personal abjection through the contradictory traits of youth and death, innocence and degeneration. In his ambiguity, situated between childhood and adulthood, between the admiration and the abhorrence he elicits, the youngster is emblematic of the figurative and empirical unstableness that characterizes the urban periphery and the live world of its dwellers. The child bandit is both the victim of his social circumstances and the agent of social destruction. As many

marginalized juvenile subjects, Naldinho cannot count on the state's safeguard, be it in the form of social services, financial assistance for his basic necessities, or even legal recourses to protect him. This tense experience of the *urbe* is reinforced by the criminalizing discourse associated with the impoverished youth in many Brazilian urban centers (Adorno 105) that provides the justification for "preventive" and/or punitive measures that often extrapolate the limits of legality. As Teresa Caldeira indicates, young people in the periphery "experience violence and harassment in their use of the city and in their neighborhoods [...] For working-class kids, the experience of the city is one of injustice, not of privilege" (318). When Naldinho is forced to show documentation to the police he is informed that his papers are not valid since "isso aqui qualquer bandido tem" (46). This negation of his legal existence by the representatives of the law effectively evicts him from the precincts of legality and civil order.

In the abject sites of the divided city, its young citizens do not partake in the same rights and are not allocated the same protections as the progeny of the privileged classes, effectively standing outside the hegemonic legislative and social system. They are elements of "exemption" that provide the ideological scaffolding for the governing legal and social order. Zygmunt Bauman asserts that

[l]ooked at from the viewpoint of law, exemption is the act of self-suspension. Self-suspension means that the law confines its concern with the exempted/excluded to holding them outside the rule-governed realm which it has circumscribed. Law acts on that concern by proclaiming the exempted to be not its concern. There is no law for the excluded. The condition of being excluded consists in the absence of law that applies to it. (*Wasted* 32)

Exclusion from law and from the dominant social body transforms the marginal youth into easy prey of various coercive acts and, in turn, can prompt them into transgressing the same juridical system that segregates them. In this framework, transgression becomes a mode to reclaim some measure of agency. For Carlos Alberto M. Pereira, violence—in particular symbolic violence—can reorganize structures of exclusion, generating new forms of visibility. Therefore, when Naldinho tears his identity card and throws it into the garbage, explaining that "se não serve pra nada, então tá melhor aí" (46), he re-captures his agency as he exposes his removal from and, concurrently, his rejection of the state-sanctioned societal realm that, according to Bauman, still retains its modern prerogative of delineating the separation between "order and chaos, law and lawlessness, citizen and *homo sacer*, belonging and exclusion" (*Wasted* 33).

The geographic, figurative as well as economic margins of the city proper represent a grey zone where social regulations become tenuous and/or disappear entirely, providing a fertile ground for

manifold modes of contravention. Or, at least, this is the manner in which the hegemonic discourse tends to represent these areas of the urban topography, transforming them into territories of an abhorrent otherness. Within the neoliberal ideology, the discourse of fear proliferates amongst other commodities, generating, in its turn, new modes of commodification (of the security apparatus, of urban segregation, of private means of transportation and secluded locales of leisure). As signaled by Pedrazzini, within this discourse, poor citizens are often automatically perceived as threats to the established socio-economic urban center and its residents. Nonetheless, the discourse of fear in which the poor are constructed as dangers to the stability and security of the privileged sectors also penetrates the imaginary of the disenfranchised classes and engenders fearsome “others” of its own. This all-encompassing dread of a perilous other manifests itself in *o velho*’s terror of being robbed: [he] “sempre teve medo de assalto. Tinha medo de assalto nessa noite” (60). Even while *o velho* and *a velha* are in the putatively secure terrain of their home, the preoccupation with crime prowls in the shadows outside, threatening to invade the domestic “heaven.”

As the horror of a supposedly dangerous “other” permeates different levels of sociability, it contributes to the waning of the already precarious urban space of community. According to Nancy Cárdua, in her study about the consequences of violence in São Paulo, the connection between the erosion of the social contract and violence lies in that the former promotes the latter but is, furthermore, also a consequence of the fear generated by a hostile atmosphere. Correspondingly, in *Subúrbio*, the disintegration of familial and communitarian ties manifests itself in rituals of violence which are executed within both the domestic and the public realms. Presaging his murder of the young girl, the old man batters his spouse, using her body as the surface on which he etches his anger and his frustrations: “o velho segurou a velha pelos ombros. Forte. Segurou tão forte que sentiu a pele murchar esfregar sobre os ombros. Depois atirou aquela mulher por cima do sofá” (71).

Economic and interpersonal abjection and hostility are also extant in the young girl’s domiciliary surroundings, a “Casa Mal-Assombrada [onde] morava uma família” (269). Her “haunted” home contains manifold ghosts: financial strain, domestic violence and parental neglect. Residing in a *cortiço*, a marginal space within the liminality of the *subúrbio*, the girl’s family is in constant fear of joining the ranks of the destitute populace. Their monetary precariousness weakens the familial structure by promoting isolation and existential *Angst*. On the one hand, her father, a night patrolman who suffers from mental problems, exists disengaged from the material reality that surrounds him. In his estrangement, he embodies the general social anomie in which the metropolitan dweller lives and which, in turn, encourages social and individual dysfunction. On the other hand, the mother cannot fulfill the role of a

guardian to her offspring either since, “[a] mãe lavava roupa até se matar com medo do despejo. O despejo era um caminhão marrom que levava as coisas da gente embora para o depósito. A menina não podia brincar porque tinha que cuidar do irmãozinho” (270). Each one of the family’s members is enmeshed in the struggle of daily survival and, in this framework there is little room for the formation of sentimental ties. Instead, akin to the environment in which they live, their domestic space is laden with multiple modes of aggression. Beyond neglect, the parental relationship is fraught with abuse that also spills over into maltreatment of their offspring as:

[o] pai batia na mãe porque sofria dos nervos [...] Ele brigava com todos [...] Muitas vezes o menino chorava e a menina também apanhava porque o menino tinha que ficar quieto [...] A menina até beliscava ele mas aí o irmãozinho chorava mais e mais [...] Se todo mundo tivesse um quarto o problema era resolvido [...] Só que a família não tinha dinheiro para mudar de casa. (269-70)

The incongruous subjacent allusion to Virginia Wolfe’s feminist entreaty to “A room of one’s own” accentuates the hardship that permeates the family’s existence at an essential level. Forced intimacy due to poverty creates a hostile ambiance that inculcates the customs of mutual aggression in each one of the family members, including its youngest ones. Luiz Eduardo Soares pinpoints three predominant modalities of violence in Brazilian society: the economic violence of the elites, the subsistence violence of the subaltern classes, and finally the all-encompassing and irrational violence of the domestic sphere. For Soares, the latter:

atravessa todos os circuitos sociais e não tem fins lucrativos, nem se submete a cálculos estratégicos, movidos por interesses mercantis. Essa modalidade atinge sobretudo as mulheres, mas também as crianças, e revela uma realidade espantosa, dramática e quase completamente desconsiderada no Brasil. Sua principal arena é a casa e seu nicho social são as relações de parentesco, de conjugalidade e de vizinhança. A casa, outrora cantada em prosa e verso como espaço de proteção e amor, é palco freqüente das mais diversas formas de violência ... (41)

Focusing on the aggression that occurs both within and outside the house, Bonassi ties the threads that link these two variants of violence together, exposing the interwoven fabric of hostility that affects the lives of the disenfranchised populace.

In order to escape her suffocating environment *a menina* seeks to flee, ultimately finding “uma passagem secreta no muro e fugiu” (271). Her flight, however, does not lead her to a safe space, where

she can find refuge from her daily tribulations, but takes her instead from the hostile province of the home into the abject terrains of the metropolis.

The young girl's victimization, first within the family and then outside it, represents the vulnerability of low-income children vis-à-vis the erosion of the social pact. The disintegration of the familial network is compounded by inadequate access to social services (such as day care centers, suitable schooling, after-school programs) and their respective protective localities. As a result, young people from/in the metropolitan wastelands often transit in unsafe arenas and frequently become unstable ciphers within the urban imaginary. The *menina's* symbolic volatility evidences itself in the duality of desire she evokes in the old man. For him, she is at the same time child and woman, granddaughter and sexualized object.

Elizabeth Lowe, in her book about the representation of the city in Brazilian literature contends that, "[s]exual dysfunction and 'perversion' are prevalent signs for the sterility of modern life and the breakdown of meaningful relationships in the urban setting" (138). Inserting himself in the space of the absent parents, the old man assumes the function of the young girl's guardian, shielding her from the inhospitable milieu she dwells in, and, simultaneously, the role of sexual predator. His sentiments towards the child are "uma adoção, um compromisso, o noivado aceito. Nada a fazer" (171). The last sentence of the quote reveals the *velho's* ambiguity towards the child as his emotions shift from the ambit of desire for parenthood ("uma adoção") to the realm of amorous interest ("o noivado aceito"). Equally, her physicality is gradually transformed from the innocence of childhood into a seductive object as it is inscribed by the old man's increasingly sexualized stare. He observes "as curvas dos bracinhos, das perninhas, da cinturinha, da bundinha" (283). The narrative voice accompanies the gaze's progression through the, at first, non-sexualized body parts ("os bracinhos") into the terrain of the sexualized physicality ("a bundinha"). Juxtaposing the diminutive suffix ("inho" and "inha") with a libidinal discourse, the narrative voice exposes the perversion and violence of this voyeuristic exercise and intimates the impending assault. The *velho's* desire is abject as it contaminates the child's innocence with his tainted longing, mingles her purity with his decrepitude, her youth with the death he embodies, transforms affection into violence. Her body, a paradigm of purity becomes marked/marred by the old man's ambiguous feelings of parental and sexual longing. Ultimately, the *velho's* libidinal gaze progressively strips the child of her subject-status, transforming her into an abject object, a familiar yet strange being endowed with both the innocence of childhood and the allure of a sexually mature woman. The child's metamorphosis into an abject object culminates in her murder (the transformation of her

living body into a corpse) and in the postmortem defilement of her cadaver by the old man, who penetrates her dead flesh.

As a prelude to the young girl's rape, *Subúrbio* addresses gendered aggression in its description of the *velho's* voyeuristic escapades. Through a peephole he observes the naked body of his female neighbor. His eye, and, by extension, the reader's eye, fragments the woman's anatomy, concentrating on its disjointed parts and focusing on its intimacy, "a mulher, com a mão, o pulso, no meio das pernas, o cheiro, o cheiro vigoroso subindo até o orifício, a mão, o pulso, a vala, a vala" (63). The "vala" signifies for the male onlooker the symbolic darkness of a female sexuality that both attracts and rebuffs him. The neighbor's corporeality is thus the abject that the masculine viewer must restrain. Through his gaze, the old man reduces the woman to her sexuality, transforming her into a mere object of libidinous contemplation/consumption. The obsession with and the fragmentation of the female corpus is reproduced at a linguistic level through the repetition of specific words such as *o cheiro* and, more importantly, *a vala*. Repetition mimics the double movement of desire and obsession inherent in this scene. But underlying these sentiments is a profound rejection of the female body and, by extension, of female sexuality. As the old man observes his neighbor masturbating, her libidinal energy disconcerts the protagonist since, as an object of *his* desire, she is not supposed to possess any sexual yearnings herself (or the possibility to satisfy her yearning). He, therefore, relegates her into the terrain of a pejorative femaleness, by calling her first a "– Vaca-vaca-vaca" (63) and, subsequently a "– Puta-puta-filha-da-puta" (63). Reduced to a debased status, the woman is "controlled" by the old man's desire-derision and by his libidinous fixation. Her solitary act is paralleled by his masturbation. As he replicates her movements, the old man effectively invades her private sphere and violates the neighbor. In his orgasm, the protagonist expels from his body the abject desire for this subject-object; as he ejaculates, his lust is reduced to a "Lasca de muco voando, batendo e escorrendo na parede limbosa. A coisa desceu ao ralo, e sumiu" (64). Leaving his decaying body, the materialized desire vanishes in the sewer. His sexuality, being debased from its inception, does not enter a productive emotional or libidinal economy, but becomes instead yet another of the city's waste products, disappearing in its abject entrails. The graphicness of the description, with its emphasis on sliminess ("Lasca de muco"), emphasizes the debasement inherent in the old man's voyeuristic exercise, the violence of the gaze transformed into repugnant matter.

In its intrusiveness and inherent pugnacity, the old man's voyeuristic exercise echoes the methods of surveillance implemented in Brazil during the military dictatorship. Similarly to the protagonist of Bonassi's novel, the authoritarian regime literally and metaphorically disjointed the

physical frames of the regime's opponents, stripping them of their humanity. In this context, the sexualized feminine body was a privileged target of assault. Rape was a common tool in torture, meant to destroy the victims both physically and psychologically. In the framework of late-capitalist socio-economic organization, women's bodies continue to be one of the preferred surfaces on which aggression is emblazoned. Destabilization of traditional social arrangements leads to the confusion of established (notwithstanding problematic) gender roles in many societies. Jean Franco asserts that, "Structures that maintained productivity, dignity, and *hombria* (manliness) based on the notion of patriarchal governance have collapsed. Behind the shiny surface of globalization lurks the primitive *lex talionis* that is practiced among those cast aside in the explosive conjunction of consumerism and poverty" (220-21). Emasculated by an economic and cultural logic that aims to maximize productivity and from which he is expelled, the male subject procures to reassert his patriarchal power by exerting control over the female body. In *Subúrbio*, this dominance is expressed not only in the voyeuristic escapades of the old man (who, when he is looked back at, cannot feel aroused by the naked frame of his neighbor), but also through his rape of the young girl. Corresponding to his voyeuristic appropriation of the neighbor's anatomy, *o velho*, when violating the child, dismembers her mentally and transforms the girl into a collection of physical parts. Moreover, as the child protests his sexual advances, he erases her subjectivity and silences her by breaking her neck "[m]as o fato é que o velho não queria que ela falasse no meio da sua felicidade. Colocou a mão na boquinha dela. ... ele espremeu a nuquinha dela contra a caixa de papelão de OMO no chão. Depois de alguns segundos o velho sentiu que ela tinha ficado quieta" (283-284). The sexual crime is, as Rebecca Biron suggests, an attempt at reintegration into the hegemonic patriarchal system, but it also connotes the expulsion of the criminal from this same organization. Cast aside from the workforce, unable to establish a meaningful relationship neither in the private nor in the public realm, the elderly man resorts to violence as a form of establishing a perverse connection to the girl, and by extension, reinstating his association to the larger private and public organism (the family, the collectivity). For him, the rape signifies a nefarious conjugal union, the culmination of a degraded and ultimately deadly "matrimony."

It is significant that the rape takes place in the makeshift "house" that the old man and the child have erected beneath a picnic table in a park. Within this scenario, a debased simulacrum of the domestic sphere, the old man transforms *a menina* into a surrogate for familial and emotional ties. Constructed out of "pedaços de caixas de papelão e jornais esquecidos pelo chão" (282), the shack assembled of the rubbish that is emblematic of the lost traces of personal and public memories (as suggested by the verb "esquecidos") is also indicative of the child's obliteration from both these domains. The garbage that

surrounds the old man and the girl represents not only the disposability of the latter but also remits to the larger proliferation of waste occasioned by the discourse of modernity (Bauman *Wasted*). As Nelly Richard indicates, the fascination with the “new,” dictated also by the capitalist necessity of creating ever-expanding markets is paradigmatic of the modernity. According to Richard:

Modernity is expert at multiplying eviction notices against anything that disobeys the slogan of temporal rupture that “the new” uses to coldly dismiss the old and toss in the garbage whatever is left behind by the velocity of commodity production. ... Garbage, remains, leftovers, dregs: everything that shows signs of physical unusefulness or vital deterioration; everything that remains like a ruined fragment of discarded totality, of a broken totality of thought or existence. (49)

The scene of the rape is strewn thus not only with the objects of a wasteful modernity, but also by its subjects. In the scheme of a society that relegates the peripheral youth to the status of debris, the child is just yet another artifact of an abject socio-economic order. In tandem to the girl’s disposability, *o velho* due to his age, his alcoholism and, perhaps most importantly, his retirement from the workforce, is “evicted” from the space of production and of consumption, becoming himself refuse.

Argentinean critic Beatriz Sarlo observes that social disjuncture inevitably leads to hostility. For Sarlo the roots of urban violence “no son mecánicamente económicas, sino de la cultura desagregada que se produce en un medio donde el horizonte de expectativas es precario. Los que salen a delinquir son los que viven en una cultura desestabilizada, entre otros factores, por la desocupación y la pobreza” (60). Socio-economic inequity and the lack of a positive futurity, both cause and effect of one another, cooperate in the corrosion of the social fabric that affects both the private and the public domains. In the context of Bonassi’s suburban terrain, the old man—similar to Naldinho, the girl’s father and other anonymous inhabitants of the margins—is both the casualty and the executor of the culture of violence that perturbs Brazil’s increasingly late-capitalist dystopian landscape. Nestled amongst—or at the edges of—the pockets of prosperity generated by the neoliberal rationale, the abject sites of the *urbe* multiply and, with them, the abject subjects that inhabit said territories, the suburbs of this new economic order.

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Notes

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² In his discussion of the plague in literature and myth, René Girard (1974) explains that death, often the death of a scapegoat is frequently represented as a form of cleansing, allowing the community to re-congregate and heal itself after the sacrifice. In *Subúrbio*, the demise of the old man represents a similar effort to eradicate the malaise from the social body. Nonetheless, death in this context is an unfruitful placebo for an incurable disease. The leprosy of the social corpus stems from the rotting of a larger (both national and global) socio-economic structure. The old man's perversion of family and of desire is but a symptom (even if a mortal one) of the pest.

³ Speaking of the privatization of the public sphere, particularly of public services, Jorge Balán maintains that: “Latin American cities that provide limited and inefficient public services with an obvious bias favoring the middle classes – not necessarily the upper-income groups, who have always resorted to the private sector for health, education, and security – are also attempting to balance the budget in the face of a fiscal crises [...] Subsidized public services, even if essential, are reduced or privatized” (3). It can be argued that this turn to privatization and gradual diminishing of public services is affecting the traditional constituency of said services, namely the middle classes as well as the low-income populace.

⁴ On October first, 2007, the Organization of United Nations (UN) published a report linking violence and unregulated urban growth in São Paulo. According to the UN, São Paulo, with 0.17% of the world’s population is responsible for 1% of the world’s crime. Citing the UN’s report, the Brazilian online periodical *O Globo* reports that: “O relatório utiliza o caso de São Paulo para ilustrar como a expansão caótica das cidades colabora para a elevação das taxas de criminalidade nos centros urbanos. De acordo com a ONU, a capital paulista se expandiu à impressionante taxa de 5% entre 1870 e 2000, quando bateu os 18 milhões de habitantes. Apenas entre 1940 e 1960, a população da capital cresceu 171%. No mesmo período, a migração do campo para a cidade fez a periferia metropolitana inchar 364%. Incapazes de lidar com as demandas por serviços urbanos e justiça, as instituições civis foram ‘esmagadas pelo ritmo e o tamanho do crescimento populacional’, diz o estudo.”

⁵ For Adrián Gorelik, the socio-spatial segmentation of the city is reflected in its cultural discourse. Gorelik affirms that, “[n]unca a cultura urbana esteve mais fragmentada, produziu tantas imagens, reproduziu tantas figuras. Mas não pelo reconhecimento de posições contrapostas inconciliáveis sobre diagnósticos comuns, mas pela acumulação de visões da cidade como estratos geológicos incomunicáveis entre si, que reproduzem – e justificam – a mescla de tempos da cidade pós-expansiva. Cortado o fluxo contínuo do tempo *progressista*, com a queda da tensão modernista que outorgava um sentido e um projeto à heterogeneidade material da cidade, a paisagem urbana aparece como uma justaposição de artefatos efêmeros com restos de infraestrutura obsoleta, tecido decadente, fábricas abandonadas, enormes vazios, moradias precárias nos interstícios e, de repente, como enclaves auto-suficientes, incrustações radiantes de novidade técnica ou social [...] a cidade é assim um *patchwork* no qual cada fragmento libera seu sentido, mas nessa liberdade não predomina a ‘diferença’, mas o contraste e a desigualdade. Essa é a modernização atual, pós-expansiva, cuja mescla de tempos replica a leitura cultural da cidade como ruína da modernidade” (77). *Subúrbio*’s emphasis on ruins, decaying spaces and bodies relates to the wreckage of modernity and of modernization as well as the consequences of said failure to the metropolitan population.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman associates the manufacture of waste to the production of modernity. According to him, “The production of ‘human waste,’ or more correctly, wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant,’ that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inseparable

accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’) and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of ‘making a living’ and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood)” (5). The hierarchical construct of modernity is thus ensconced on its wasteful foundation.

⁷ In their essay on globalization, neoliberalism and socio-economic underdevelopment, Jorge Nef and Wilder Robles summarize what they call the “neoliberal package” (37) in six main policies aimed to augment profitability: 1) re-establishment of the rule of the market; 2) reduction of taxes; 3) reduction of public investments; 4) deregularization of the private sector; 5) privatization of public enterprises; 6) “*the elimination of the collectivist concept of the ‘public good.’*” This is to be replaced with a view of the common good emphasizing ‘individual responsibility’ (38 emphasis in the original).