

Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman*: The Spectralization of the Other and the
Zombie

Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman* revisits the myth of the zombie in 20th century United States. Goldman's portrayal steers away from the most frequent representation of the zombie in popular culture as the infectious walking dead, to concentrate on the zombie-spectral subject as the dispossessed, the abandoned and the disposable. The article places this revision of the zombie at the center of a critical matrix that draws from Agamben's vision of the *homo sacer*, Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject, and Butler and Spivak's concept of spectral humans. Bare life, the abject and the spectral contribute to creating a vision of the present that is contemporaneous to a repeating past of subjection and subordination.

Key words: spectral, zombie, bare life, abject, neoslavery

We do not know it, we cannot really know it, but abandoned being has already begun to constitute an inevitable condition for our thought, perhaps its only condition.
Jean Luc Nancy. *The Birth to Presence*

The nineteenth century, with its classic regime of industrial capitalism, was the age of the vampire. But the network society of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is rather characterized by a plague of zombies.
Steven Shaviro. *Connected, or What It means to Live in the Network Society*

As Deleuze and Guattari put it, "the only modern myth is the myth of zombies — mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason" (335). In fact, the last few decades have seen an explosion of zombie movies, from George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to J. C. Fresnadillo's *28 Weeks Later* (2007), among many others. The critical landscape has responded accordingly, with Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism" (2008), edited volumes such as Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton's *Zombies are Us* (2001) and Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad's *The Undead and Philosophy* (2006), and monographs such as Mat Mogk's *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Zombies* (2011). As to why the zombie has made a comeback in the 20th and 21st centuries, critics such as Comaroff and Comaroff argue that there is a direct connection between the implosion of neoliberal capitalism at the end of the twentieth century and the prevalence of the zombie as character (24). For Jon Shaviro, the reason is that "Zombies present the 'human face' of capitalist monstrosity. This is precisely because they are the dregs of humanity: the zombie is all that remains of 'human nature,' or even simply of a human scale, in the immense and unimaginably complex network economy" (172). This monstrous reflection of the power of capitalism has split into two distinctive representations. The zombie can be the figure of "nonproductive expenditure" that squanders and destroys wealth, to use Shaviro's term (172), and this is the most frequent representation in American culture, but the zombie can also be the worker or producer behind that expenditure. That is actually the way the zombie was first introduced into American culture. The interest in this liminal figure goes back to the American occupation of Haiti (1915-34). Ghosts have cut across cultures, but Haiti directly associated revenants and labor (Dendle 47). In 1936, in fact, Zora Neale Hurston allegedly documented the existence of zombies and photographed one, Felicia Felix-Mentor, in *Tell My Horse*. Hurston defines zombies as "bodies without souls," as "the living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again" (456) to work mindlessly on the plantations. There is, therefore, "a residual communal memory of slavery: of living a life without dignity and meaning" (Dendle 47) in the life of this mindless hulk. This "living a life without dignity and

meaning,” however, goes beyond slavery and what Shaviro calls the 19th century classic regime of industrial capitalism has expanded exponentially to the network society of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, if there is a direct link between the zombie and slavery, there is another between the zombie and the worker in a capitalist economy (Stratton 270). Not only has the worker shifted towards the spectral. At a time of unprecedented migrations and population flows, critics such as Jon Stratton and Nikos Papastergiadis have noted that other figures, such as the migrant and the refugee, have also moved in the same direction. Workers, refugees and zombies become part of a triangulation that participates of the trend towards spectralization, a new register for assessing contemporary forms of dehumanization (Papastergiadis 147, 148) and for coding “inferior subjects as unworthy of life” (Lauro and Embry, 87).

This article claims that Francisco Goldman’s *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997) rewrites the myth of the zombie in late 20th century United States. Goldman taps into the vision of the zombie as the worker behind expenditure in the midst of a global economy. The novel steers away from the exploration of the zombie as the shuffling, idiot bodies, wandering and listlessly tearing apart the flesh of the living (Shaviro 172), as portrayed in popular culture, to concentrate on other representations of the half-dead as the dispossessed, the abandoned and the disposable trapped in capitalist mysterious practices. In Goldman’s novel zombies do not literally raise from the dead, but correlate with the figure that Nancy calls “abandoned being,” and with Butler and Spivak’s term “spectral humans,” beings deprived of “ontological weight” who, failing the tests of social intelligibility required for minimal recognition, not only are disqualified for citizenship but also actively qualified for statelessness (15). Hence the process of zombification in the novel is not literal, but rather relates to “the condition that awaits all of us from whom the state withdraws protection” (Stratton 278). It refers to the situation of those who, in Jon Stratton’s words, are “excluded from the rights and privileges of the modern state”; those who being displaced, “are positioned legally as bare life”; those who, inhabiting a legal limbo, “can be treated in a way that enables them to become associated with a condition mythically exemplified in the zombie” (Stratton 267). This redefinition of the zombie connects back to the figure of the neoslave that Hurston describes in *Tell My Horse* and opens the figure to contemporary manifestations. Economic slavery and different forms of subjection become a specter, a revenant that seems to come back from the past into the present and the future.

In *The Ordinary Seaman* there are no zombies working on the fields, just a group of sailors stranded on a boat, the *Urus*, for six months. Goldman got the idea from an article in the New York *Daily News*, which ran an article, “Sailors abandoned,” about seventeen sailors who had been living in a floating “hellhole” on the Brooklyn waterfront for months (383). In the novel, a handful of Central Americans is lured by the promise of work on a freighter docked in New York. And indeed, they find work but they are never paid. In fact, they never move an inch until the end of the novel. Although the *Urus* flies under the Panamanian flag, there is no protective Panamanian or American flag for these men. No citizenship applies, just a flag of convenience that materializes as exploitation of convenience. Since there is no future, there is only the past, which returns through kaleidoscopic narratives from land and sea, through tales that revisit the voice of “The Ancient Mariner.” Immobilized on the ship and forbidden to step on American soil, the crew becomes hostage to a Captain Elias and his *primero* or first mate, Mark, the real ghost owners of the mystery ship. The disposable migrants become a new brand of neoslaves that gradually dematerialize into metaphorical zombies, and they are literally described as such by Mark towards the end of the novel. Only Bernardo and Esteban manage to step off the ship. The former is dumped in a hospital when he is dying from an infection; the latter manages to step out of his position of subservience and find a community in Brooklyn.

Several theoretical approaches are useful in order to conceptualize the crew’s liminal position. The abandoned sailors stand as the representatives of a “life that does not deserve to be lived” (Agamben 137), the life of the *homo sacer* as elaborated by Giorgio Agamben. For the philosopher the *homo sacer* “has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his

gens, nor . . . can he perform any juridically valid act” (Agamben 183). Stripped of every right, the sailors can be conceptualized as bare life. Bare life is understood here in two interrelated ways. The first refers to lack of protection. Since the seafarer’s legal status is entirely dependent on employers’ documentation (Naimou 13-14) and the Captain fails both to renew the Panamanian registry and to give the sailors the shipping articles to sign, the men are effectively stateless and unprotected by the law, be it the Panamanian law or the United States law. The captain simply creates a state of exception on the ship. Without legal protection either on or off the ship, the second understanding of bare life comes into focus, for the the state of unprotection can be equated to the liminal condition of death-in-life. The men become impersonations of the living dead (Cf. Stratton 278). The crew also becomes the embodiment of Bauman’s concept of “wasted humans” as elaborated in *Wasted Lives*. Bauman has argued that the global spread of the modern form of life has set loose and put in motion enormous and constantly rising quantities of human beings. They are what he terms “the collateral casualties of progress” that are regularly disposed of because of being disposable (7, 15, 12). Contained and commodified on the ship, the men and their living quarters become part of the spectacle of the abject as described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, a gradually unpleasant sight for both captain and his first mate. In fact, Bernardo’s infected leg as a result of a cooking accident on board will place abjection at the center of the novel. Bernardo’s body becomes a synecdoche of the whole crew, an infection from which to stay clear. Bare life and the abject are two of the axes that converge on the process of spectralization of the crew. From seamen the sailors morph into neoslaves/refugees, and from refugees into the living dead, humans without agency, prisoners, slaves, and hostages. The links between migrants, refugees and zombies have been explored by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Jon Stratton (2011), and Papastergiadis (2013) among others. The Comaroffs draw attention to the fact that zombie tropes have become prevalent as a way to conceptualize and make sense of the uncertainties associated with contemporary migration in the South African context (Papastergiadis 148). They argue that migrants have always been considered frightening because they usually look different; Like zombies, migrants are characterized by their impaired speech (the Barbarian bla, bla); they come from elsewhere, which makes them immediately suspect of alien customs and mores. There is always a dread evoked by the migrant that is akin to the experience of confronting a zombie. In both cases, there is the feeling of looking into the eyes of an alien being (Papastergiadis 148). In the South African context, the Comaroffs talk of image of migrants as “a growing mass, a shadowy alien-nation” who resemble zombies. They are the rootless “nightmare citizens” “threatening to siphon off the remaining, rapidly diminishing prosperity of the indigenous population” (21). Stratton, on his part, has specifically analyzed the relationship between zombies and displaced people, refugees, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. All of them are originally from non-western states and are striving for entry (265) and are causing increasing anxiety in the target countries. In the popular rhetoric migrants appear “like apocalyptic zombies, as faceless, unthinking mass of less-than-human people that accumulates at the border, threatening to overwhelm the state’s defences by their sheer pressure and destroy the human beings and the social order inside” (278). If the zombie was originally “a slave, raised by Voodoo priests to labor in the fields” (Lauro and Embry 90), Goldman’s novel aligns itself with these current visions of the zombie as migrant. There is no need for Voodoo priests or plantations in the current landscape of exploitation, just a process of objectification at the hands of two ghost owners legitimated by spectral—if legal—practices.

American Dream Run aground

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave!
 You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip!
 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Set in the 1980's, the story opens with the beginning of a journey that takes Esteban, a young man from Nicaragua, to a new life on board of a ship docked in New York. At the airport in Managua he meets Bernardo Puyano, a *Viejo* that boasts of his superior position on the ship, a waiter. In this new version of the American Dream, Esteban hopes to leave behind the images of the war in Nicaragua, his participation in a BLI, an irregular warfare battalion, and the death of his girlfriend, la Marta. Together with the rest of the Central American crew they are picked up in New York and are taken to a "deserted and apparently defunct end of the port" (19) where the *Urus*, which was to leave NY in four days, was docked. The fact that the buildings of the port looked abandoned and deserted is revealing, for it foregrounds the decline of industrial port jobs. The decline is simultaneous to another process, the economic boom of Wall Street in the 1980's (Naimou 52). The experience of the crew on the *Urus* straddles both tendencies, for the stranded men stand at the end (or a continuation) of colonial histories but are caught in the intricacies of a ghost or spectral capitalism. Both tendencies are represented converge in the name of the ship. The newly named ship, the *Urus*, as the Captain/owner later reveals, is only conceivable under the changing conditions of neoliberal capitalism and its attending practices, such as the translocalized division of labor, national polities and economies increasingly porous and less sovereign; and the setting of many people in motion (Comaroff and Comaroff 25). At the same time, the name of the ship, "urus," refers to an extinct large long-horned wild ox of Europe that is the ancestor of domestic cattle, according to Merriam Webster's Dictionary. As the novel unfolds, the crew will reveal itself as the cattle, the Third World labor that has historically sustained commercial ventures from colonial times to the present. Moreover, the word "Urus," newly painted on the prow (20), offers a visual and historical palimpsest of those past ventures. Significantly, the word *Urus* is also the "you are us" and the "UR-US," an UR text (Silva Gruexz 67) that creates a repeated sense of history from slavery to the present. Anchored and stranded, the *Urus* will hardly move in space, but it does move in time, as it reckons back the specter of slavery, a specter that is always ready to come back. Berthed in the middle of desolation, the boat was immediately sized up by Bernardo as a "broken eggshell" (20), and so he tells Esteban. For the hopeful youngster, however, the pessimistic voice of the old man pertains to someone who is all too used "to everything going wrong" (21). On board they are greeted by the captain, the "primero oficial," Mark (23), and his dog, Miracle. Captain Elias explains the lack of electricity on board because of an explosion when *en route* from New Brunswick, Canada. They would be delayed in port until some spare parts arrived from Japan. Bernardo was aghast at the explanation, and the image of the ship as a disastrous carcass gradually and painfully reveals itself.

Unsurprisingly, when the crew looked south over the waterfront warehouse and terminal roofs and trees, they do not see the majestic and welcoming image of the Statue of Liberty. They just see its upper portion, a green, oxidized arm in the air. Close to the shore, the image is even less majestic, with driftwood, broken pier debris and litter lining the bank. The vision is similar to Kafka's *America*, where Karl Rossman is standing on a liner slowly approaching New York Harbor when a burst of sunshine illuminates the Statue of Liberty. In its unexpected glimmer, the beacon of a welcoming America is invested with ambivalence, and the arm rises up as if bearing a sword instead of the customary torch (44). Likewise, in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, the torch becomes "the blackened hilt of a broken sword" (14). As in all these previous descriptions, the Statue does not salute the newcomers with the promise of a new life. Rather, its static and threatening quality becomes a symbol of the crew's immobility, as Bernardo will remind them throughout the novel: "When that statue walks, *chavalos*, this ship will sail" (45). There are false starts during the first weeks, however, and the Captain puts the crew through futile activities such as the lifeboat drill. For Esteban the Captain subjects the crew to such meaningless exercises out of frustration and boredom. He had simply decided it would be amusing to see them sitting on the boat, as if the vision somewhat confirmed the idea he already had about them. The Captain is right in

¹ Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

his assessment: this is a desperate handful of men that, expecting a miracle, are ready to get on the *Urus* lifeboat as the last resort. As the drill forebodes, the ship was already floundering. In fact, when the Captain said it was enough and he laughed a high-pitched yelp of a laugh, the crew remained there, sitting on the boat, “humiliated and stunned, as if each was privately wondering what he could do to recover his pride *right now* and coming up with nothing” (37). The sense of pride and personal worth, the men will find out, is one of the first human attributes the men will have to let go in their transformation into a human cargo.

Their liminal status as subjects/objects, workers/neoslaves/refugees is further reinforced when the Captain lays out their legal status. While on board, the crew was in Panama and protected by Panama sovereign laws since the *Urus* had a Panamanian registry. Onshore, the Captain clarifies, they are in the United States and they were perfectly legal until their transit visas expired (26). But the protection of the sovereign laws of Panama is not such. Panama operates what is known as open registries or “flags of convenience” that allow a series of advantages to shipowners: They have neither the will nor capability to impose domestic or international regulations on registered ships. At the same time, they provide an impossible labyrinth that masks shipowners from international law and the national requirements (Naimou 71). Panama simply offers a “lawless space” unhindered by the regulations of a nation state (Silva Gruesz 66). The *Urus*, however, is not even Panama’s responsibility since the sailors, as Bernardo keeps repeating, are unlicensed seafarers. The captain, however, projects this lawless space onto the shore, and cautions the crew not to leave the *Urus*. Port cities, he clarifies, are dangerous, especially if the crew left the port yard and entered the streets around *los proyectos* (26). They run parallel to the end of the waterfront, and are government housing for the very poorest people, controlled by gangs who did not like strangers wandering through.

The men do leave the ship and cut through the *proyectos* on their way to Brooklyn. In fact, they were more worried about running into Immigration Police and ending up in an underground cell, like the ones the Captain told them about, than about the gangs themselves. Sure enough the crew was attacked and mugged by some *morenos* and a few Latino-looking *trigeños*. The transgression reinforced the Captain’s authority and his admonition to stay in what he calls “Panama.” Unsafe on American ground, unprotected by Panama sovereign laws, immobilized and gradually abandoned by the Captain and his first mate as the economic venture gradually flounders, the sailors shift between a series of identities: they are undocumented and stateless workers swiftly turning into hostages and refugees. The men turn into what Bauman calls “the outsiders incarnate.” They are outsiders everywhere “except in places that are themselves out of place—the ‘nowhere places’ that appear on no maps used by ordinary humans on their travels. Once outside, indefinitely outside, a secure fence with watching towers is the only contraption needed to make the ‘indefiniteness’ of the out-of-place hold forever” (Bauman 80). As a place of containment, the ship becomes a “nowhere place” that folds the sailors within and perpetuates their externality. There is no need for barbed wire or watchtowers around the stranded boat, for its isolation from the land secures its out-of-placelessness.

Ship, Anti-Ship, and the Welcome to the Past

The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. . . . Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts.

Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

A specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

Just like in traditional immigrant narratives the newcomers have occupied specific neighborhoods where they have been spatially and ontologically immobilized (Kandiyoti 2009, 40-41), the *Urus* becomes the locale that separates the sailors from American soil. Discipline, Foucault argues, “sometimes requires enclosure,” as it organizes an “analytical space” (*Discipline* 141, 143). The ship stands as the enclosed and disciplined space that harbors the “docile bodies” of the sailors. For the crew the ship becomes a rerouted home and place of exile, a refuge, a disciplined space, a place of exception, also a hospital, as the novel unfolds, that will reveal the double side of hospitality and its inner hostility. The image of the static ship and the stranded sailors converses with Paul Gilroy’s vision of the boat as a mobile signifier in *The Black Atlantic*. The liminal position of the *Urus*, situated in a middle passage of sorts, emphasizes not the circulation of ideas but rather the persistence of different forms of subservience and colonization. This continuity between past and present points at the subtle mechanism that articulates contemporary contacts between immigrants and citizens. Étienne Balibar (39) has argued that the colonial heritage has structured the way immigrants are being introduced into contemporary metropolises. Immigration management has become a form of “imported colonialism” (Hoffman 2009, 248), a boomerang effect that, according to Foucault (*Society*), reproduces previous encounters and modes of dealing with contingents that are deemed inferior and in need of development and civilization. Just like there is no need for barbed wire around the ship, those contained within do not need to be shackled either. As in other contemporary accounts of stranded Caribbean migrants on a boat, there is a persistent dynamics that assimilates them to previous experiences of bondage. In Ana Lydia Vega’s “Encancaranublado”, for example, after exercising different modalities of mastery upon the unstable boat, the Haitian, the Dominican and the Cuban are finally rescued by an American ship. Unceremoniously, we read, the Arian and Apolinian captain gives precise instructions: “Get those niggers down there and let the spiks take care of ‘em” (20). In spite of their national differences, American hospitality relocates the three men to the hold of the ship, the same places the black slave population has occupied in the American imaginary. A new version of slavery thus returns as a revenant to structure contemporary interactions between immigrants and host countries. For the *Urus* crew, like for the three Caribbean migrants in Vega’s story, the figure of the slave, “as a category of personhood in the Americas,” degraded and in fragments, still shapes the conditions of contemporary life (Naimou 7). The *Urus*, once again, appears as the UR text that speaks back to a hemispheric racial history, but also as the “you are us,” a cautionary voice against a repeated history of exploitation.

The stagnant *Urus* also recasts Michel Foucault’s vision of the boat as a “floating piece of space, a place without a place,” a location that is a “counter-emplacment,” as “the heterotopia par excellence” (“Other” 22). The heterotopia, Foucault explains, starts to function fully when people find themselves in a sort of absolute break from their traditional time (“Other” 20). Contained and immobilized in the *Urus*, the men are on board of a heterotopia/chronotope that condenses the inseparability of time and space. On the *Urus*, time “thickens, takes on flesh . . . likewise, space becomes charged and responsible to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). On the stranded boat, immobile space correlates with immobile time. The ship is dead and harbors no home a la Bachelard. It is just “a mass of inert iron provocatively shaped like a ship” (38). The stasis in time and space is confirmed when the third Friday on board the Captain lets them quit work early and announces a meeting and a barbecue. The Captain informs the crew that he is satisfied with their work, and so is the ghost owner, who is anticipating a “reasonably imminent departure” (68), but due to the delay in port, among other complications, the owner has a cash problem and is unable to pay them. There was a bright side to the situation, he assures the crew, for they really did not need the cash since they were illegal off the ship. Bernardo speaks first to state that the situation is not a blessing. It is unjust. The ship is a swamp of safety and maritime violations and not getting paid was just *un gran insulto*. In Bernardo’s assessment, the Captain is asking them to be slaves (68). The Captain corrects Bernardo claiming that slaves do

not get paid, whereas they were going to be paid or the ship was never going to move. Moreover, he argues, the laws protected them, Panamanian law, international laws, United States law. In fact, as stated before, there is only one law on board, the law of the master/Captain/owner. As if to placate the possibility of a mutiny, the Captain announces promotions for the whole crew, a charade to keep everyone in check with the promise of upward mobility and a raise. To crown the perfect farce and neutralize Bernardo's words, the Captain announces that the old man was promoted to Segundo official.

Significantly, the charade creates a zone of indistinction where opposite concepts mean the same. Promotions are the same as demotions; keeping a record of everyone's dues has the same effect as not keeping such record; discipline is equal to non-discipline; hospitality is the same as hostility, and lack of violence is a form of coercion. As a hostile abode and as a disciplined space, the ship appears as an open space the migrants are free to leave, for the Immigration Service, the Captain reminds them, has nothing against "illegal aliens" leaving. Captain Elias's word, as the embodiment of the law, "affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it no longer prescribes anything" (Agamben 49). For the crew the "law demands nothing . . . and commands nothing other than its own openness." Paradoxically the "law applies . . . in no longer applying, and holds [them] in its ban in abandoning [them] outside itself" (Agamben 50). The open possibility that the crew can leave includes them through exclusion and excludes it through inclusion (Cf. Agamben 50). Paradoxical as it sounds, the "law of abandonment," to use Nancy's words, "requires that the law be applied through its withdrawal" (44). Elias's words do not prescribe anything because the men are already ontologically contained and immobilized as "illegals," as already outside the law before they cross any threshold. This conceptualization allows the Captain to prescribe without prescribing, to command through the very openness of his words. The men are excluded and outlawed, yet they are defined by the law and in a precarious relationship to the law itself (Cf. Downey 109).

Either excluded through inclusion or included through exclusion, the crew's lives are examples of bare life, of "lives lived on the margins of social, political, cultural, economic and geographical borders" (Downey 109). The novel adds another layer to the concept of bare life, for those seeking refuge tend to be assimilated to refuse (Cf. Trinh 3). The correlation comes to the fore when the crew comes into contact with "*Los blacks*," as the Captain called them. *Los blacks*, the inhabitants of the projects, sit at the end of the pier with music boxes, bringing city life and sexiness right under the sailors' noses. Their presence becomes gradually aggressive, as they keep the ship under siege at night, hitting different parts of the hulk with bottles and sending shards of glass over their heads. One night one of the kids broke away from the others and started shouting at them a volley of insults, *fucks and mothuhfucks*, the only ones the crew could understand. They even spray-painted DEATH SHIP on the grain elevator, and skulls over crossed bones. Another night someone wrote CAGUERO DE LA MUERTE, which, the narrative voice explains, could mean "Shitter of Death" but also "Cargo Ship of Death" if one leaves out the r in *carguero*, "but the grain elevator being the crew's latrine, maybe they did mean that" (50). Either way, the graffiti points at the situation of the crew as a cargo that correlates with excrescence, with the redundant and the spectral. When Esteban wonders why their situation made the black kids angry, El Barbie answers that it makes them sick to live on the same planet with a bunch of losers (50). It is, however, a case of lumpen versus lumpen, as Esteban reminds the youngsters when he calls out "vos, son lumpen", "Lumpen jodido," "Fucked lumpen, just like us" (51). The Urus turns into a text that bespeaks the palindromic message U R Us or We R U. Both the youngsters and the crew are examples of bare life that lack the legal protection of the state. Unprotected and spatially contained in the projects or on an immobile ship, both groups mutate into unprotected, abject and spectral humans, into versions of the living dead.

To this contact with the outside world the novel adds the ghostly appearance of a couple of Argentinian *ancianos* who appear on the ship and converse with Bernardo. During the exchange, Bernardo confides to them their situation on Urus, a violation of every conceivable maritime violation, and pleads them to alert the church that takes care

of seamen in their situation. Apart from the encounter, which Bernardo kept from the rest of the crew, nothing happens on board. The *Urus*, becomes what Bernardo anticipated all along, a “dead ship” (106) impossible to resuscitate. By the end of the summer the abandoned crew had become accustomed to the sight of one another, dressed in rags, “increasingly sad eyed, shaggy, and dirty as young corpses risen from graves” (46). The ghost ship is finally populated by metaphorical zombies, by subhuman figures left to starve and die. That is the state the crew is discovered by the Ship Visitor, who had been alerted by the Argentinian lady. Significantly, the section that introduces the Ship Visitor’s perspective in the novel, “As IS, Where Is” is written in the simple future and the future anterior, with sentences such as “[The Ship Visitor will] board a ship whose name and port of registration will have recently been painted off . . . He’ll have seen abandoned crews and ships before” (129). The Ship Visitor is used to the sight, and he regularly meets the likes of the crew five days a week, “men and boys, also women and girls, from the poor continents, on the move, crewing ships that sail all the world’s oceans and seas and that occasionally stop at this great port” (132). The vision of the *Urus* in the simple future reverberates within a pattern of abandoned ships, hence the use of the future anterior. The tense inscribes the future within the past, within the journeys of exploitation that throughout centuries have converged on New York Harbor. The specter of slavery becomes the future, a revenant that is always to come back. The common denominator in all these passages is the human cargo on its way to dehumanization. There is, as Derrida remarks in *Specters of Marx*, the doubtful contemporaneity of the present to itself. The present of the *Urus* is contemporaneous to a recurrent past and a possible future that folds the boat within a similar pattern of exploitation. The future is already predetermined by a recurrent past, by the fact that NY has been a place of immigrant detention and abandonment, invisible labor, and anonymous burial (Naimou 51). Thus the future anterior turns into a boomerang tense straight from the past that breaks down the boundaries between the past, the present and the future.

Only Esteban manages to step off the boat and start a life as an “illegal” refugee on the streets of Brooklyn. Given the captain’s admonitions not to leave Panama and step into illegality, Esteban, the logic runs, would have to face either the gangs of the projects or the ultimate gatekeeper, immigration authorities. For the young man, however, no gatekeeper, could be fiercer than total descent into dehumanization. Urged by Bernardo, he steps out of his assigned role as hostage/slave/zombie and traverses the distance between the ship, a chronotope of time and space, and the forbidden terrain of New York. He is now effectively illegal and becomes a border crosser of sorts, but has managed to step out of the slave-master dialectic. In his first walk into illegality he feels the penetrating gazes of pity or disgust. He is filthy, dressed in rags, the living dead walking into a geography of waterfront ruins looking for something to steal and take back to the ship. He does not encounter vicious gatekeepers, however, other than a pack of rabid dogs and a couple of African Americans with whom he amicably disputes two ducks. Incidentally, they voice the popular wisdom that Sandinistas are coming right up through Texas, according to the President (199). Even the buffer zone of the *proyectos* is not frightening anymore. They just appear as a series of street names that become increasingly familiar. Esteban finds that he is taken for a homeless, or as a *vago*, as addressed by a young Mexican woman, Joaquina, in Brooklyn. She proposes mopping the doorway of the beauty salon where she works in exchange for coffee. The deal marks the beginning of a conditional hospitality. The encounter with Joaquina is the first contact with the community of Spanish speaking exiles. All of them are refugees from countries; Esteban, however, is a refugee from a ship (266)

Under the new circumstances the *Urus* becomes a place of refuge, a space Esteban is able to transform to his advantage. For the first time the young man is not defined by the ship but becomes the actual definer. The *Urus*, as the narrative voice expressed it, harbored a bachelor community of Central Americans, immobilized spatially, narratively and conceptually as nitwits, slaves, losers and zombies. In Esteban’s inversion, however, the ship does not equal imprisonment, it just provides a bed at night. The young man was illegal and he felt as furtive as a rodent (311), but he knew

he as on the verge of a new life (312) as part of a community. Soon enough, he found a night-shift job in a small chair factory, and extended his own acts of hospitality towards the crew at a time when the captain seemed to have abandoned the ship altogether. Some of sailors went into Brooklyn regularly to buy food although still frightened by the neighborhood. Their spatial practices are illegal since they are undocumented on American soil, yet their trespassing contrasts with Elias and Mark's maritime violations as well as their free mobility in Central and South America. Their mobility, the novel illustrates, is predicated on the immobilization of others.

Ghost Owners, Ghost Masters

Unlike the somber vision of the Statue of Liberty the crew sees from the boat, the novel offers a simulacrum of arrival to New York as staged by Elias, his friend Yorico and Mark, who "cheered, touched their glasses, and hugged like old-fashioned immigrants when the illuminated Statue of Liberty came into view, the narrow cluster of gold-lit skyscrapers at the tip of Manhattan behind" (303). Elias and Mark's optimism is based on their faith in free enterprising and free movement, a mobility that contrasts with the immobility of the the crew and the ship itself. As envisioned by the Captain and Mark, the plan was to get one of those cheap flag of convenience registries and incorporations, and import "the cheapest possible crew, even have them pay their own airfare. Work night and day, repair the ship fast . . . pile up debts" (276). The crew was already envisioned within the master/slave dialectic as exploited and unprotected pariahs. They were already on their way to spectralization. Elias imagines a whole range of possible business ventures, such as keeping the ship, luring investors, or simply making money through fraud. Contrary to what Elias claims, ("All you need is imagination and cojones" [299]), all Elias and Mark need is the legal and abstract maze of neoliberal capitalism and its spectral, remote and obscure practices to continue with their business venture (Papastergiadis 157-58). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida notes that Marx elaborated on the spectral virtue of money when he claimed that Das Geld could be the origin of spirit, Geist, and of avarice, Geiz (57). Elias and Mark will reap the benefits of this spectral side of money by creating a persona that is never traceable or accountable. Paradoxically, as Elias and Mark spectralize the crew, they spectralize themselves as well as their own avarice.

When the business venture fails it is not because of lack of imagination or what the owners understand by courage but because of a technical deficiency. As a result, all the possible outcomes turn into one. The ship's cargo turns into a human cargo of "useless nitwits" (278), of "idiots" immediately codified as inferior, redundant and disposable. Interestingly, Mark seems to forget that it is through his and Elias' agency that the men are put in that position. Once transformed into the unprotected, the disposable and the *homo sacer*, the men can be treated as slaves. As Mark thinks to himself, the two men own a "secret slave ship in New York Harbor" (304) whose crew is made up of their "little brown guys, property of Captain Elias Cortés and First Mate Mark Pizarro" (305). The intercalation of the owners' names and Spanish conquistadores points to the juxtaposition of times and personas and the recurrence of the colonial heritage in the present. The made-up names speak to a time that is totally out of joint, that is disadjusted, discorded and anachronistic (cf. Derrida 25), a time that cancels progress and boomerangs back to the past. At this point of their joint undertaking, their "little brown guys" are no longer valuable because their labor is irrelevant and futile. This circumstance, as Papastergiadis argues, "links the slave to a theory of the subject as a spectral entity. It no longer refers to the other as an object for use and exploitation, but as redundant or purposeless thing" (148). The novel registers the mutation from worthy and exploitable slaves, at least worth feeding, to worthless possessions the owners can forget about and abandon. The process of spectralization is never decoupled from the racial, from the fact of being "brown," and from the heritage of colonialism and slavery. The men are lumped together in a faceless mass Mark seems to see everywhere: "He is sick of being reminded, of feeling angry and guilty everywhere he goes, that's all, because everywhere he goes he sees them: busboys, McDonald's, even working in pizza parlors now instead of Italians and Greeks" (305).

Mark only individualizes Bernardo, whose stories he shares with his girlfriend. The rest of them, Mark claims, literally fall into the category of zombies (308). The fact that Mark uses the word zombie is relevant, for it literally establishes the correlation between migrants and zombies, between a migrant invasion and a zombie invasion. The dread evoked by the migrants Mark sees around himself is akin to the experience of confronting a zombie. In both cases Mark is looking into the eyes of an “alien being” (Cf. Papastergiadis 148) that is trying, most likely, to enter the protected space of his civilized existence. Paradoxically, Bernardo, the dissonant voice in the crew, will epitomize the condition of bare life, for he can be left to die with no consequences. Mark abandons him at a hospital in the hope that he hospital staff will cure him and deport him. After all, he is just an undocumented old man, according to the common sense of the community, who “somehow snuck into the country in just his underpants with a burnt and infected leg” (320). Bernardo, according to this logic, represents the infection of illegals/zombies that comes from the south, and threatens the wellbeing of the target country. As if to emphasize the contrast between the crew’s stagnation and the owner’s free movement, Mark takes a plane to Yucatán so he can chill out.

Denouement: Ship Run aground

There are no boat mutinies in *The Ordinary Seaman*. There is, however, a carefully staged farce similar to Melville’s *Benito Cereno*. In Melville’s masterpiece the charade consists in pretending that slavery articulates every minute gesture or social interaction on the San Dominick. In *The Ordinary Seaman* the charade works in the opposite direction. Elias, Mark, and the crew pretend there is no slavery. Elias, in contrast, stages a farce that promises salaries, a proper job, and a protective flag. There are a couple of times when the tension on the *Urus* could have led to a mutiny, but the revolt is never staged and the men return to their subordinate position. What brings the men back to subservience is the fear and the uncertainty as to when they will be abandoned for ever. For six months this not knowing co-opts the crew from staging a mutiny against an absent Captain. During that time the men navigate different subject/object positions: they have been slaves without literally being enslaved; they are seamen without ever setting sail or being legally so; they are stateless persons without formally losing their citizenship (Naimou 54); they are zombies without being dead. When they take over the ship, however, they shake off this series of identities to become what they were before. In his 19th century autobiography, Frederick Douglass expressed the turning point in his life through the well-known chiasm “you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (295). Similarly, Goldman illustrates how the handful of sailors mutate into slaves-zombies and how the group regains their identities. The crew decides to steal the ship once they find that Bernardo never went back to Nicaragua, as they were assured by the Captain. The *Urus* sails even if the Statue never walks, thus honoring Bernardo by proving him wrong. For the men, taking over the ship means finally “going home” (377). Like Babo in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, the men get out of their scripted roles as inferior and as neoslaves, even if for the Ship Visitor they are just idiots, losers or dupes, and people incapable of helping themselves (379). When the Ship Visitor finally gets on the deck, the men concede they did not get very far, but they didn’t do too badly (380). As to the rest of the crew, they decided to take a chance and went with Esteban into town. The youngster is now part of a community that can extend its own hospitality.

Goldman’s narrative shows what happens when a group of Central Americans is left to starve on a stranded boat, and is gradually transformed into neoslaves, stateless refugees and metaphorical zombies. At the same time, the novel explores what happens when two men come into some money and morph into neoslaveholders. Both sets of

characters undergo a process of spectralization and embody the boomerang effect of the past. Masters and neoslaves represent the double monstrous representation of capitalism, the “nonproductive expenditure” that squanders and destroys wealth in North, Central and South America, and the racialized bare life that produces that expenditure. *The Ordinary Seaman* thus revisits the zombie as the modern myth *par excellence*, but also recasts the myth as infectious and spectral. The zombie represents the UR text that comes back like a revenant, but also the U ARE US that folds the future into that repeating past.

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