Edible zombis: fresh fish and the industry of cosmetic corpses

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Doing research on fishery commodities in Portugal led us to an enigma: for a dead fish to be fresco (fresh) it must be alive. This paradox manifests at a popular, commercial, and legal level. It denotes the interruption of the difference between being dead and being alive in the commodity form. In Portugal, we suggest, the commercialization of peixe fresco (fresh fish) is based on the production and consumption of edible ‘zombis’: seafood corpses technologically and symbolically crafted as undead. An open concept, ‘edible zombis’ is part of an experimental vocabulary that foregrounds the productive agency of undeadness, both biological and commercial, in the seafood economic complex. It relates to the ordinary practice of necromancy in the commodity-based world. Edible zombis are commodity fetishes that fetishize their producers and consumers, suspending them from the capitalist system in which they live.

They are everywhere: markets, storage units, refrigerated vehicles, billboards, restaurants, homes. ‘I want a dozen of them’, says 44-year-old Lina to a vendor at the Cruz de Pau Market. ‘Here, my dear, take these two bags’, the vendor tells her, ‘put one on each hand and catch them yourself’. Lina grabs the bags and pauses for a few seconds. Her quiet stillness contrasts with the hectic surroundings. ‘Go on, darling, they are all fresh and alive (frescos e vivinhos)’. The vendor’s last words spur Lina. Her eyes turn into targeting sights. She bends her upper body over the white styrofoam boxes displayed on the market stall and starts grabbing sea corpses, energetically. Close to her, other people act identically. They seek peixe fresco (fresh fish). They seek the undead (see also Figs 4 and 5 below).

In Portugal, the prevalence and popularity of these liminal aquatic creatures disrupt ‘modernist bifurcations of living and dying’ (Lyons 2016: 59). Here, our attention goes to the pervasive yet underexplored ways in which the commodity of fresh fish interrupts the dualism of being dead and being alive: in Portugal, fresh fish must conjointly embody both. We aim to explore this phenomenon not as a paradox or eccentric practice but as a realm of normative suspension; the ordinary interruption of the relation of difference (Heidegger 1969 [1957]: 47). Since what we pursue occurs
through commerce, we draw on post-structural perspectives of political economy to grasp it (Gibson-Graham 2006; Larner & Le Heron 2002; Le Heron, Campbell, Lewis & Carolan 2016; Morgan, Marsden & Murdoch 2006). Our contribution not only feeds debates within anthropology of seafood (Bestor 2004; Hamada & Wilk 2019; Lien 2015) but also may be promising more broadly for agri-food research and its emerging field of biological economies (Le Heron et al. 2016; N. Lewis et al. 2013).

To be clear, our research on fresh fish led us to an analytical path that bypassed normative dualisms for ‘knowing economy differently’ (N. Lewis, Le Heron, Carolan, Campbell & Marsden 2016: 10). Along this path, we encountered Marxist concepts, notably commodity fetishism. Marx advocates that the commodity has a magical aura: ‘its Fetish character’ (Fetischcharakter) (Marx 2015 [1867]: 47-59). His argument is that commodity forms conceal ‘the particular kind of labour to which they owe their creation’ (2015 [1867]: 74). Therefore, they emerge as ‘mysterious thing[s]’ (2015 [1867]: 47), ‘endowed with [a] life’ of their own (2015 [1867]: 48) that is independent of their means of production, and exert a magical power over people. This, Marx says, is commodity fetishism.

In particular, the consumption of fresh fish in Portugal poses the challenge of producing economic value out of unorthodox compost: the coexistence of life and death in a single form. Of course, we do not assume this coexistence to be an exceptional phenomenon. As Marilyn Strathern (1980: 182) noted, the conventional dichotomization of seeming opposites may eclipse other relationships between them. There is more than the notion of life and death as basic contraries. They may also be imagined and experienced hierarchically, processually, boundlessly. For example, whether through reincarnation, regeneration, cryonics, or even compost, social scientists have highlighted the merging of life and death in various ways (e.g. Ariès 1974; Desjarlais 2016; Hertz 1960 [1907]; Lock 2002; Verschuer 2020; Vitebsky 2017). In these pages, we focus on its common occurrence in the form of fresh fish, and that is the novelty of our argument. To this end, we find the concept of ‘zombi’ useful, a concept that has ‘been subject to much cross-cultural appropriation, decontextualization, and recontextualization’ (Niehaus 2005: 192). Etymologists say it derives from the meanings of ‘fetish’ and ‘god’. Philologists associate it with social power, as Zombi was a name for West African chiefs. Additionally, in folklore and postcolonial studies, zombies are often depicted as disturbing figures of bewitched enslavement, feared monstrosity, societal otherness, or capitalist states of living. At heart, the zombi defies interpretive control; that is its appeal.

We take zombi as a vehicle to assist us in our theoretical formulation. Being neither alive nor dead, zombis reveal the weakness of definitions. They are useful for thinking about indeterminacy, undeadness, and the transgression of meanings as ordinary guiding principles in social activity – and, significantly in our research, in orienting consumer desire. While the concept of zombi helps us to interpret our ethnographic materials, it contributes to expanding both knowledge of economic activity (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Lauro & Embry 2008) and the experimental potential of the anthropological (ad)venture. Following this line of reasoning, we argue that the commercialization of fresh fish in Portugal is based on the production, distribution, and consumption of ‘edible zombis’, an experimental concept that we expound as our argument unfolds.

In the following pages, we explore the ordinary world of fresh fish in Portugal, first by looking into the meanings consumers and small retailers attribute to freshness. This
ethnography leads us to an arena of liminality in which the limits of the seemingly oppositional categories of life and death are exceeded: the market for fresh fish. We then bring Marx’s commodity fetishes into our discussion, and narrate our visit to the backstage operations of one of the biggest seafood retailing companies in Portugal. We describe what we found there, and our conversations with company employees. We then introduce one of the techniques they apply to ‘avivar’ (revive) the fish. This is part of the technologies of enchantment (Gell 1992) the fresh fish industry employs to suspend the border between life and death in eatable bodies – the edible zombis. Finally, we explore the commodification of undeadness in and through fresh fish as a response to the market demand for the unmediated and non-commoditized. From the fishermen, through the producers to the consumers, edible zombis guide us through a field of anthropological inquiry less concerned with the statuses of life and death (Whitehead 1968: 148) than with that which makes the suspension of the differences between such statuses an ordinary experience in the commodity-based world.

**Grasping freshness: towards the undead**

In 1974, a social fireball fell on the Portuguese village of Barão de São João, in the Algarve. Following the Portuguese Revolução dos Cravos (Carnation Revolution), in April of that year, hundreds of international ‘political tourists’ arrived in the village. They came to help in the post-revolutionary socialist era. With them, a new lifestyle was established in the village, and today Barão de São João is inhabited essentially by Germans, Dutch, and British who devote their time mostly to the arts, yoga, and organic farming. This is ‘the Algarve of hippies and artists’, ‘of the freaks with credit cards’, as the area’s long-term Portuguese residents say.

Ross is a 71-year-old British man who has lived in Barão de São João for twelve years. He identifies as a yoga teacher and ‘practitioner in detoxification’. On a late morning in June 2017, he told us how fresh food is crucial in his life. He associated it with ‘energy’, a ‘vibrant look’, and, most often, ‘life’. Claire, his 43-year-old British wife, is also a fervent advocate of freshness, which she recognizes by the ‘screams’ of the perishables. As she put it, fresh edibles ‘literally scream this to me: “Wow! I’m so full of prana, so full of energy!”’ A devoted yoga teacher, Claire often adopted yoga vocabulary to explain her relationship with food, and _prana_ – ‘life force’ – was her preferred synonym for freshness. A revealing equivalence. By attending to it as a force, she freed the notion of freshness from the material form. In the teleology of _prana_, freshness exceeds materialism. ‘We need food to be alive to get the nutrients from it’, Claire said. ‘This is what supports our bodies. If everything we eat is dead and isn’t alive, we start feeling … heavy, or sleepy; feeling that something doesn’t feel right in the body’. She reproduced the conventional belief in death as different from life, as two halves of an antithetical relationship. Ross put it bluntly: ‘Food has to be alive, not dead, to be fresh’.

He complemented his conviction with a revealing personal story: ‘When I used to go fishing, we would _kill_ the fish, cook them on the boat, and eat them within ten minutes.’ He opened his eyes affirmatively, and concluded: ‘If you want fresh fish, that’s fresh!’ After attributing freshness to aliveness, he referred to the killed as an epitome of freshness. The contrasting normative meaning which they had endorsed that day – life as different from death – was reformed. The freshness of the fish, it seemed, resurrected the ‘killed’.

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As social researchers, one of our ethnographic maxims is to take seriously all participants in our research, human and otherwise. To take Ross seriously implies regarding his view and the fish of his story as worth embracing. The concepts of ‘alive’ and ‘fresh’ which he applied to the fish were much more than ornamental metaphors meaning one thing while intending another. They served to (re-)conceptualize the very idea and experience of life. As Arthur Hocart put it, ‘[L]ong ago [humans] … ceased merely to feel life; [they] conceived it’ (cited in Pina-Cabral 2018: 523). Ultimately, the selective terminology that Ross used to refer to the fish he ‘killed’ points to a field of suspension in which the difference between alive and dead is interrupted. In that context, the advent of death was not a terminus but a mode of birth (Lyons 2016: 61) that brought new beings into existence.

The living dead

The suspension of the ‘dead-or-alive’ twofold logic in relation to fresh fish is not exclusive to foreign yoga practitioners living in remote villages in Portugal. In September 2016, the head of Cabaz do Peixe (Fish Basket) – an association based at Sesimbra fishing harbour specializing in selling fresh fish – led us to the same conceptual disordering. António, the retired fisherman who runs the association, argues that seafood freshness is a post-mortem achievement. ‘It begins at sea, right after the fish is captured’, he said, and entails a series of events and diverse intermediaries. António spoke extensively about the characteristics of ice needed for conserving the caught fish, hygiene in the boats, different types of storage boxes, temperature limits for preserving the dead fish, and the tags that identify the method, area where caught, and the ‘fishing art’ utilized. After his detailed explanation, we asked him what it means for a fish to be fresh. This time the answer was brief: ‘É quando um peixe morto está vivo’ (It’s when a dead fish is alive).

After being with Ross and Claire, António’s paradoxical explanation seems hardly idiosyncratic. A pattern of signification emerges: although the fish must be ‘killed’ before achieving the status of being fresh, its connotation as fresh implies that it is somehow alive. That is, fresh fish are neither fully dead nor fully alive, a sort of undead beings. These are not only new beings, but new kinds of beings and new ways of being that circulate and exist among the living.

We are referring to beings such as the one displayed on the refrigerated takeaway vans of the Portuguese supermarket Continente. Circulating daily on the roads, these vans show a bright fish with eyes wide open ‘screaming’ – to use Claire’s expression – the following: ‘I’m not any fish’ (Fig. 1). As it stands, this talking creature typifies the fresh fish the supermarket delivers to consumers’ homes: nonhuman beings enacted as living dead. It is a form of life within death that emerges as significant to people in the seafood economy. Breaking with the distinct states of life and death, such a fish reveals more about humans’ consumption desire for undeadness than any extra-ordinary attempt at reordering species hierarchy. That fish’s undeadness becomes-with the economy of freshness.

The Portuguese have long been regarded as voracious consumers of fish (Braga 2004; Castelo-Branco 1969: 170; Sobral & Rodrigues 2013). The historical consumption of fish in Portugal relates not just to the country’s coastal geography but also to its religious tradition. Catholicism cultivated a ‘food order’ based on alternating between ‘dias de gordo’ (feast days, or literally fat days), when all kinds of food were allowed, and ‘dias de magro’ (fasting days, or literally skinny days), which excluded meat but allowed...
By then, Portugal’s seafood economy was considerably based on salting and drying fish. Such modes of preservation allowed fish to be stored over long periods without deteriorating. Against this backdrop, salted and dried cod became a prime symbol of Portuguese gastronomic identity (Sobral & Rodrigues 2013). Stiff, opened, dehydrated, expressionless, the salted and dried cod’s corporality bared its condition: dead. Such corporality embodied a temporal and physical detachment from the cod’s previous alive life in the distant waters of the North Atlantic. Unambiguously, death was a salient element in this economy of fish preservation.

Yet in Portugal, the advent of industrial technologies of artificial cold storage in the twentieth century (Parreira 1951: 12) radically increased the ‘production’ and circulation of fish in a different state. Especially evident from the 1970s onwards, the fish for sale became bonded to their previous aquatic lives. Exhibiting a ‘natural’ appearance and a physical connection to its origins, the ‘full-body fish’ gained unprecedented momentum and spread throughout the country. As the prime product of a ‘technology of enchantment’ (Gell 1992) – one capable of turning dead sea corpses into vigorous, undead-like edibles – ‘peixe fresco’ (fresh fish) escalated then into a category of commercial value, integral to a ‘magic’ economy of space and time (Moeran & de Waal Malefyt 2018). In contrast to the salted and dried cod, the undead-like fish that came to flood marketplaces in urban Portugal relate to the magical withdrawal of spatial and temporal distances between their origins, production, and consumption (Altvater 1989; Marx 1973 [1939]: 524).

This withdrawal is commonly and cunningly signalled in fresh fish marketplaces. For example, consider the Lidl supermarket in Mem Martins, a parish council in the municipality of Sintra, Lisbon region. With their staff and infrastructure, the fishmonger stalls are the only division in the supermarket that has full-body animals for sale. These aquatic corpses are expressive and vivid in appearance. Their eyes and
mouths are open. At a distance, they seem to be talking with the consumers who gesture and look at them. Above the stalls, there is a ‘mysterious’ sentence written in large bold letters: ‘Fresh fish: the ocean at your table’.

**Commodity fetishism and the industry of undeadness**

In his critical approach to freshness, António, the retired fisherman who runs the Cabaz do Peixe association, sees it as a condition subject to market principles. To be sold, all his fish must be checked by the fishing dock veterinarian, who rejects those with wounds and any other corporeal signs evidencing their capture. ‘The fish tastes the same as the others, but because it seems killed, it does not work in the market’, he explained. ‘The market’ does more than just sell death; it determines and, in turn, accommodates the type of death that is alive. ‘It must seem as if the fish is swimming [alive] in the ocean’, António concluded.

Food industry professionals call the shape, appearance, and ‘expression’ of freshness in perishables ‘cosmética’ (cosmetics). The cosmetics of undead aliveness in the fresh fish market is defined in European commercial law. EU Council Regulation 2406/96 lays down common marketing standards for fishery products, instituting ‘freshness ratings’ in whitefish through visual(izable) requirements. In its Portuguese version, these include ‘pigmento vivo’ ([a]live pigment), ‘pupila negra e viva’ ([a]live black pupil), and ‘guelras de cor viva’ ([a]live colour gills). ‘Viva/o’ (being alive) is a key factor in the Common Market for fresh fish corpses.

Most of the people working in the Sesimbra fishing dock do not buy fish. ‘We get those fish with cuts or with any other traces of capture for free’, António stressed. There was a time when these market rejects had a place in the parallel economy, and such fish were sold below their market price. However, modern legislation, higher fines, and new national and European food safety standards and surveillance put an end to this practice. António introduced us to this world of remnants, abundance, non-commodities, and non-cosmeticized fish corpses from which capitalism retreats and where, consequently, some market(ing) qualities – such as ‘fresh’ – lose social efficacy. Indeed, by explaining that the words ‘freshness’ and ‘cosmetics’ have no place in that other world of market rejects, António implicitly pointed to a necessary step in fish freshness: commodification.

There is a large volume of literature on the social significance of commodities (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; McCracken 1990; Miller 1998). This may entail association with or dissociation from other commodities, social statuses, people, feelings, ideas, or their means of production. As an example of the latter, the commercial potential of fresh fish lies in the possibility of dissociating it from the labour involved in its commodification. Indeed, for a fish to embody freshness and be transformed into a commodity, it needs to be flawless in form, intact and natural (‘as if the fish is swimming in the ocean’). Bodily evidence of capture, by contrast, renders labour visible. It reveals a fish biography (Kopytoff 1986) associated with the fishing business at large, which links the fish with the treatment to which it was originally subjected. And this is inappropriate for the market of freshness (Jackson, Evans, Truninger, Meah & Baptista 2019). Simply put, a fresh fish becomes a commodity by the way it conceals the labour that made it into a commodity; in Portugal, fresh fish are commodity fetishes (Marx 2015 [1867]: 47-59).

‘Fetish’ derives from the Portuguese words *feitiço* and *feitiçaria*, which pertain to ‘magical practice’, and from the Latin adjective *facticius*: ‘manufactured’ (Pietz 1987:...
The fetish idea ‘originated in a mercantile intercultural space’ (Pietz 1987: 24), concretely on the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth century. The European merchants visiting the coast devised a general explanation for the hosts’ ‘supposed irrational propensity to personify’ or hyperbolize certain objects, including European manufactured objects, beyond their ‘real’ instrumental and market values’ (Pietz 1987: 23). In the eighteenth century, Charles de Brosses expanded the use of fetish and developed the concept of fetishism. In the book Du culte des dieux fétiches, de Brosses presents fetishism as ‘the logic of the fetish’ (Morris & Leonard 2017: vii). This conceptualization came anchored in a vision of otherness: it meant a contrast with the Enlightenment of Europe. Yet Marx saw the notions of fetish and fetishism as insights into the workings of the West. He used them to critique the capitalistic mode of production and that which had become the crux of the West: the commodity.

In Capital, Marx starts his discussion of commodity fetishism by giving the example of a wooden table, which, ‘as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, is changed into something transcendent’ (2015 [1867]: 47), unrelated to both the labour that produced it and its actual use. For Marx, commodity fetishism means ‘the mystical character of commodities’ that eclipses ‘the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities’ that caused them (2015 [1867]: 47) and the consequent emergence of commodities as autonomous things. Correspondingly, in Portugal, once full-body fish enter the commodity market as fresh, they ‘magically’ become autonomous beings – and, indeed, ‘vivinha’ (‘alive [+diminutive]’ [Fig. 2]) – unrelated to the means that ‘produced’ them.

Basically, to place fetishism at the core of capitalist production means to conceive capitalism as a kind of feitiçaria that reproduces itself by producing enchanted goods.
In this light, the power of a (*facticius*) commodity derives not from its use value but rather from its magical character, such as its alienation from the processes and means that brought it to market: commodity fetish stands for the capitalist making of its spell (Moeran & de Waal Malefyt 2018). Accordingly, as a both commercial and ‘mysterious thing’ (Marx 2015 [1867]: 47), fresh fish dwells in ambiguous terrains, ‘necromantic’ fields (2015 [1867]: 50) where the border which is held to exist between life and death dissipates and loses its ordering power. Yet the fetishistic power of fresh fish does not manifest just at the markets and in the final commodity form (2015 [1867]: 48) but also at the places of labour that produce it. It is to these places and their people that we now turn.

*The backstage of industrial fresh fish*

By challenging the duality of being dead and being alive, Ross, Claire, António, and the many other people we engaged with in our research implicitly referred to the dissolution of another crucial difference in everyday social life: true and false. While it may be true that fresh fish are dead, it is not false that they are also alive. Fresh fish are *and* are not alive, are *and* are not dead – simultaneously. They resist dichotomy. Standing outside the true-or-false regime, fish freshness seems to be incongruous with scientific reasoning and, as many scholars assert, human thinking in general. For example, think of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s comment, ‘[S]cience can only exist where it is possible (de jure) to separate the true from the false’ (2011: 143); or the following observation by Donald Davidson: ‘[W]ithout the idea of truth [and, thus, falsehood] we would not be thinking creatures’ (2005: 16).

However, the merging of death with life and true with false is greatly accepted in and produced by techno-scientific enterprise in the seafood sector. Fresh fish requires it. Consider the multinational corporation Jerónimo Martins that runs the Pingo Doce chain of supermarkets. It is one of the biggest retail chains in Portugal, and freshness is the core concept the company uses to enhance public reputation and commercial activity. This is publicly declared in the enterprise’s institutional website (i.e. ‘Fresh produce is part of the essence of Pingo Doce’), and stressed in boards displayed in the supermarkets (i.e. ‘100% guaranteed Freshness’). The company ensures the excellence of its fresh produce by using sophisticated technologies and drawing on science to support its claims. At the Pingo Doce head offices, the food safety manager talked to us about fresh crustaceans: ‘To confirm the purity and area of origin of our shrimp, we carry out genetic testing’. Indeed, Pingo Doce works closely with six biotech laboratories certified by the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation. Among other services, these labs provide the retail company with DNA barcode sequences and molecular information about the ‘internal product integrity’ of the fresh perishables that arrive in the company’s warehouses. These ‘data’, we were told by Pingo Doce’s technicians, are important for guiding the company’s treatment of the ‘peixe de viagem’ (travelling fish) that come from Africa’s Atlantic coast. ‘I always look for a lab that gives me confidence’, the head of food safety said, confirming the association between freshness, technology, science, and human assessment in the Pingo Doce business.

In January 2017, we went to the heart of Pingo Doce’s operations: we visited its main warehouse. Located in Lisbon, this is a place of transformation and technological resurrection, where efficacious ‘magic’ commodities are born (Marx 2015 [1867]: 50). It is where most of the company’s foodstuffs become commercial products, before
reaching the supermarkets. Equipped with gowns and coverings on our heads and shoes, we walked in long empty corridors and warehouses packed with edibles. To access the meat and fish sections, we passed through disinfection rooms and machines which sanitized our hands and our already-covered shoes. We heard and learned about the different environments, infrastructures, temperatures, and technologies that Pingo Doce uses to work on the food. We also heard and learned about the qualifications of each department head manager. During our fieldwork, these were the people who explicitly enacted freshness (Jackson et al. 2019) as a direct result of technological (trans)formation. In the offices, labs, and warehouses where they work, freshness emerges as an industrial accomplishment (Freidberg 2010), an outcome in the commodity form issued from human expert judgement and high-tech equipment, such as Brix refractometers, penetrometers, temperature probes, ethylene gas generators, liquid nitrogen freezer machines, and thermographic cameras.

In the fish section, the last one we went to, we found ourselves in an ample cold room filled with sea corpses. Yet these corpses were about to become alive, not only through the actions taken and explanations given by Marcos – a staff member in the fish department – but also through the corporeal and material affordances scripted in the fish bodies. A new type of argument related to freshness came out: we learned about the undead. At one point, Marcos grabbed a red snapper that for him epitomized the ideal of freshness (Fig. 3). He raised the fish with one hand to the level of our eyes to dramatize its sturdiness. Then he passed the other hand gently over the dorsal fin of the fish, in a caring way, as if the fish was sensitive to his touch. Referring to the politics of commodity making in the wild salmon industry in Alaska, Karen Hébert
mentions the gentle way commercial fishermen and other seafood producers handle the salmon. Such a ‘babying’ of them (Hébert 2010: 568) is part of the deliberate practices that make salmon a quality commodity for upscale market segments. Yet Marcos presents a different case, outside market determinisms. That red snapper was more than a commodity being gently handled by its labourer for a niche market. That red snapper had a fetishistic power over the labourer himself, conveyed by means of their trans-species encounter (Haraway 2008: 46). This was part of the mundane acts of affect happening in the warehouse fish department that challenged political economy accounts of markets as abstracted, disembodied, disembedded apparatuses (N. Lewis et al. 2016: 10). Fundamentally, they challenge ‘the general assumption that industrial [commodification] and affective relationality don’t go well together’ (Lien 2015: 16).

After a few seconds in silence holding the ‘sentient’ sea creature, Marcos announced enthusiastically: ‘rigor mortis’.

This is a physical condition that happens shortly after the fish’s death, when the adenosine triphosphate (ATP) that is responsible for storing and using energy drops down, making the fish’s muscles contract and become rigid. Scientists highlight that the quality of rigor mortis, which may subsist from a couple of hours to several days, is crucial for the post-mortem nutritional quality of the fish flesh (Berg, Erikson & Nordtvedt 1997). The end of rigor mortis makes the muscles relaxed and limp, and they never recover their rigidity again. This is the time when the fish starts to deteriorate, mostly due to the operation of the endogenous enzymes lysosomal cathepsins in the flesh.

Right after Marcos’s remark, Maira, another staff member accompanying us, told us in a scientific tone how the stress the fish suffer at the moment of their capture influences their subsequent freshness. Indeed, the ATP content in the fish’s muscles at the time of death, which affects the quality of rigor mortis, is determined by handling stress (Lowe, Ryder, Carragher & Wells 1993). In other words, the methods used for killing the fish, or simply the circumstances of their death, affect the rigor mortis, which in turn affects the post-mortem quality of the fish. After hours collecting information on the technological processes behind the transformation and conservation of food, in the fish department, we observed that while freshness was still coupled with science and managerial procedures, this was in a much more earthy, lethal sense: the fish’s fate from the killing method. Freshness, after all, is an effect of the work of death.

For Maira and her working colleagues, the red snapper with which Marcos demonstrated an affectionate relationship and most of the other fish corpses in the warehouse were also alive: ‘Look at this beauty here watching us’, Maira said, pointing at a (‘fresh’) shiny dogfish lying (dead) in a white polystyrene box. In fact, during our visit, Maira, Marcos, and their colleagues constantly intermingled the concepts of death, aliveness, and freshness as if each one corresponded to the others. In this industrial space of fresh fish commodification, it was not only the forms of power over life and death that merged (Foucault 1978: part 5) but also the very understandings of what it is to be alive and to be dead. Life and death were blended accomplishments and distributed into the material and semiotic networks that entailed, as cryonic scholars also suggest, the understanding of life as a ‘becoming’ brought forth by death (Verschuer 2020: 149).

The overwhelming relevance of undeadness in the fresh fish complex urges us to narrow down our conceptual approach. The commodity fetish prism is still too broad and does not speak to the specificity of our research. We need to experiment with another concept.
Edible zombis: a conceptual experimentation

There is a vast bulk of literature that addresses how categories guide thinking (e.g. Ferguson 1994; Foucault 1972). Opening the notion of fresh fish and its role in the economy to different conclusions and ways of thinking requires different categories for understanding it (N. Lewis et al. 2013: 182): it requires conceptual experimentation. Accordingly, we submit zombi as a rendition of the boundless and cryptic principles integral to the commodity fetishism that drives the fresh fish economy in Portugal. Besides linking closely to the uncanny yet prevalent circulation of undeadness in the Portuguese seafood market, the promise of seeing fresh fish as zombis lies in the way they embody the transgression of solid distinctions. As Veronica Gomez-Temesio (2018: 747) notes, zombis refer not only to the blurring of boundaries between life and death, but also to the ‘rebellion’ of challenging apparently stable categories, associations, ideas. Overall, we embark on the zombis’ ‘rebellion’ for sidestepping the limits of ‘the orthodox categories by which we know and act upon [sea-]agri-food economy’ (Le Heron et al. 2016: 1).

Yet to do justice to the concept’s disruptive potential, thinking with zombis entails challenging the existing common paradigms of thinking about zombis. Contrasting with mainstream associations of the zombi with Haiti, as well as with abjection, horror, colonialism, racialization, slavery, enclosure, plagues, somnambulism, or automatons, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) indicates that zombi is of West African origin, and descends from the Kimbundu nzambi (god) and Kikongo zumbi (fetish). In relation to these roots, zombi embodies a power or idolized condition originating in a magical practice – a facticius arising from feitiçaria (e.g. Pietz 1985; 1987). Moreover, the OED attributes the third volume of Robert Southey’s History of Brazil (1819) with the first use of the word ‘zombi’ in English. Based on the work História da América Portuguesa (1730), written in Portuguese by Sebastião da Rocha Pita, Southey used zombi while describing an uprising of West Africans in the Brazilian colonial state of Pernambuco in 1694-5. ‘Zombi,’ he wrote, ‘is the name for the Deity, in the Angolan tongue’ (cited in Whiteley 2017: 164). Yet Southey was not the first to use ‘zombi’ in written English. Thomas Lindley used it some fourteen years earlier in his Narrative of a voyage to Brazil (1805). Referring to a system of rule practised by West Africans, Lindley says: ‘They formed a political constitution, beginning by choosing a prince, whom they saluted with the name Zombi (or Powerful): this dignity was to last for life only: continuing elective; from among the most experienced, brave, prudent, of the nation’ (cited in Whiteley 2017: 165).

Whether as ‘Powerful’ (Lindley), ‘Deity’ (Southey), or ‘fetish’ (OED), the philological and etymological approach to the zombi inspires us to (re)position it in an area of social vigour, agency, and potentiality. This is not to say we discard the colonial legacies the concept incorporates in much of the burgeoning zombi literature (e.g. Charlier 2017; Davis 1988; Lauro 2017). In particular, zombi that relates to Haiti or to the hidden nature of labour forces in the capitalist and ‘occult economies’ that grow from the exploitation of the concealed ‘living dead’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999: 289, 295; see also Geschiere 1997; Taussig 1980: 20) is useful in our analytical endeavour. Employed by various anthropologists in their postcolonial ethnographies, this zombi is practically a metonym for the obscure, magical character of the capitalist commodity fetish. Yet we also consider its precolonial import: zombi as the means of liberation, a ‘dignity’, a powerful and agentic facticius fetiço (‘fetish’) that manifests itself as ‘life force’ (Ackermann & Gauthier 1991: 469-70).
We have adopted this compositional zombi, which eludes essentialist or definitive interpretation.

Using edible zombis in lieu of fresh fish highlights the powerful role of undeadness in the mainstream seafood economy in Portugal. Circulating as commodities, edible zombis liberate producers and consumers from the limits of ‘rational’ activity. They are about potentiality and reinvigoration (think of Claire’s prana), but also about commodification and subjugation. They are clean, shiny, raw, and pure; not an effect of that which disquiets but that which delights and comforts ‘their generative times’ (cf. Cohen 2012: 402).

Into the industry of ‘avivar’

In the Algarve, Sasha, the head of the Pingo Doce’s regional fish department, explained to us how her staff ‘aviva’ (revive) – her technical expression – the fish they receive from the international distributors by immersing them in salmoura (brine): water impregnated with salt. Once thus washed, the fish are placed on thin plastic films in thermocol boxes full of ice. From then on, Sasha said, ‘they are ready to go out’. At the offices of another major food retailer in Portugal, the head of the Sonae Agricultural Department tells us that this industrial revivification procedure has a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it restores a vivid appearance to the corpses, affording them an aesthetics of life; on the other hand, ‘pára-lhes a vida’ (it stops their life) – as if such corpses were not already dead. The technical routine of avivar brings to light the role of both ‘noncoherence’ (Law et al. 2014: 173) and occultism in seafood capitalism practice.

In the book Zombies: an anthropological investigation of the living dead, Philippe Charlier describes how, in Haiti, the deceased is revived (‘avivado’) by the ‘bathers of the dead’ (2017: 9). These bathers apply washing techniques to the dead, and salt is considered ‘the food of life’ (2017: 11). Towards the end of the zombification process, the corpse is sprayed with icy water to finish awakening its senses. To Charlier, the entire event is co-ordinated by a Vodou priest called bokor, who will remotely operate the zombi with a bottle filled with ti-bon-anj: the spiritual elements (or ‘soul’) of the zombi’s previous life.

There is a direct correlation between Charlier’s work in the places where the bokors operate in Haiti and our fieldwork in the industrial fish workplaces in Portugal: Sasha and all the other ‘expert’ technicians alike, who inhabit techno-scientific labs, distribution storehouses, or warehouses of fresh fish, work as agents of zombification; they are masters at producing post-mortem life, specialists in ‘awakening’ dead (sea) bodies and sending them to the public space. They are industrial bokors who produce the edible zombis, which, as with the ‘zombism’ in Haiti (Ackermann & Gauthier 1991: 467), are also subjected to a potent magical instrument that people use to put them in circulation: capital. After all, fresh fish are hostages to the market. They come to public life as market(ing) existences, as commodities, therefore they are enslaved to the magic power of capital (Marx 2015 [1867]: 64). In the Zombiland of fresh fish, money in the wallet is the flask which contains the ti-bon-anj. The practice of ‘avivar’ represents the mobilization of techno-industrial zombification as a capitalist endeavour – it pertains to the work of magic in commodity making.

Sasha showed us fish corpses with bright open eyes, shiny skins, and vigorous muscles, which, according to her and the rest of the team, endowed such corpses with ‘vida’ (life). At one point, Sasha led us to a snapper fish that she had rejected. It was one of the few fish they had to return to the supplier. Like all the other fish there, this snapper
was a corpse. However, the scales on its lower part were light green, ‘as if it’s just dead’, she said. Its physical appearance was unworkable for them, uncommodifiable: ‘We are very demanding and can’t accept it’. This was a decision made in the realm of cosmetics. Gustatory or olfactory parameters were not taken into account; death was an attribute of surfaces. Basically, that snapper was worthless in the economy of how freshness is displayed, so it was rejected from the group of edible zombis; that snapper corpse was ‘just dead’.

In the Pingo Doce fish warehouses, death gives birth to a form of value: freshness. In these industrial zombifying units, Marcos, Sasha, and their co-workers demonstrate that true, false, death, life, difference, reality, are not absolutes but products of relations which are open to being reformulated, blurred, or suspended. Importantly, they indicate how the fresh fish industry offers encounters with undeadness for the producers while they work at it for another crucial figure in the capitalist system, to which we now turn.

(Non-)consumers and the allure of reciprocal fetishism

We are having dinner at the home of Anabela, who lives in a two-bedroom apartment in the bustling Arroios neighbourhood in central Lisbon. This is part of an ethnographic experiment which we call ‘tasting events’ (Jackson, Evans, Truninger, Baptista & Nunes 2020). Inspired by Anna Mann et al.’s article ‘Mixing methods, tasting fingers’ (2011), we research meals ‘at home’ and dive into people’s domestic relationships with food. The interior design of Anabela’s residence is minimalistic, but the whole atmosphere is wild. A Mac computer projects loud African music streamed from YouTube while three children run between the kitchen and the living room. Six more adults fill the place, bodily and sonically. At the table, we talk about freshness and, as usual, fish colonize the topic. ‘I always honed in on where the fish is fresh’, Luisa says. A discussion about how she ‘chases it’ in Figueira Market, in downtown Lisbon, goes on between three women:

Luisa: I don’t know how exactly, but I immediately spot a fresh fish.
Carmelinda: How do you do it?
Luisa: The scales, the eyes; when everything is nice … I don’t know how to explain it accurately …
Anabela: A person senses it instantly!
Carmelinda: But how?
Luisa: The fish must be alive.

During our three-hour meal, they refer to the market as a kind of fishing-hunting ground and the sea vertebrates lying (biologically) dead on the fishmonger’s stalls as their living prey. Implicitly, they share a thought: fresh fish are more than commodities lying prostrate and unresponsive; they are untamed actants in the piscatorial chase. In this chase, the (pur)chaser becomes a capturer, and so her/his activity takes its place in an economy of skill, authenticity, and fishing-hunting. It complicates the modernist separation – spatial, temporal, and symbolic – between killing and buying animals (Vialles 1994; for contrast, see Townsend 2011). A whole world of labour investments and intermediaries – such as the fishing boats, storage rooms, ice, crates, fishermen, veterinarians, industrial workers (i.e., Sasha and her workfellows), distributors, fishmongers, and preservation and restoration technologies – is left aside in this process. The urban market, made of shelves, cash registers, market stalls, price tags, certification logos, consumers, and sellers, becomes an arena of fishing-hunting practice. In this fantasy, the boundaries between the living and non-living are blurred:
normative duality is suspended. Here, commodity consumers are also the locus of fetishism.

In ‘Disjunction and difference in the global cultural economy’, Arjun Appadurai puts forward the idea of the ‘fetishism of the consumer’. By this, he means the transformation of the consumer ‘into a sign, both in Baudrillard’s sense of a simulacrum that only asymptotically approaches the form of a real social agent, and in the sense of a mask for the real seat of agency’ (1990: 307). He draws on the power of global advertising in disseminating ideas of consumer agency wherein ‘the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser’ (1990: 307). Appadurai does not develop this idea further. Still, he offers us an interesting proposition as he shifts the focus of fetishism in commodity-based regimes from the commodities to the consumers of the commodities.

In Portugal, the fresh fish economy involves the fetishism of the consumer. Rooted in a broader theory of value (Pietz 1985: 9), this fetishism involves consumers’ incorporation of an illusory notion of themselves. It transports them outside the market realm. As if in an act of magic, this is an illusion of self-value which positions consumers as non-participants (not even as ‘choosers’) in the capitalist system that, nonetheless, they are part of – namely as buyers. But rather than this being the direct product of the global advertising industry (Appadurai 1990) or the work of commercial companies (Arnould, Cayla & Dion 2018), in our case, the fetishism of the consumers arises from the commodity, which fetishizes the consumers’ experience of themselves. Those kinds of commodity, edible zombis, are not just passive matter that embody a humanist teleologic magic. They are also enterprising enchanters, magical agents in their own right. In other words, edible zombis are not just fetishized but also fetishizers: the fetishization is reciprocal between consumers and consumed.

As mentioned above, the actual presence of fresh fish – the forcefulness of their eyes, pupils, scales, fins, mouths – in the Figueira Market has a magical effect on Luisa. Such fish radiate the spell of undeadness, of being in their natural habitat. Consumers are spellbound, and motivated to enact a fantasy: the fish is not dead, Luisa is not a consumer, they are not in a marketplace. Enchanted and enchanting, fresh fish expand the possibilities of Luisa’s experience, namely by alienating her role as a constituent in the chain of capitalist economy. There, ‘chasing’ fresh fish, she dives into non-commodified, magic depths; into a realm of immediacy where the fish is intrinsically and unmediatedly linked to its raw origin.

Inspired by his studies with the Hadza in present-day Tanzania, James Woodburn characterizes some hunter-gatherer societies as ‘immediate-return’ systems. These systems, he stresses, are formed by people who ‘go out hunting or gathering and eat the food obtained the same day’, and so ‘obtain a direct and immediate return from their labour’ (1982: 432). Although this characterization bypasses various complicating factors (e.g. Brunton 1989), it is helpful for thinking about its opposite: the ‘delayed-return’ system. Central to commodity-based societies, the latter is a structural form of organization involving a delay and division between investment, labour, and consumption (e.g. J. Lewis 2008: 12). In delayed-return systems, food emerges fundamentally as the commodity product of a chain of agents.

Luisa lives in a delayed-return system and the Figueira Market is part of it. Yet the fresh fish encounter pulls her out of that system. It transports her into an ‘immediate-return’ fisher-hunter dimension, oriented to the direct and immediate return for her activity. It involves alienating Luisa from her consumer role and stripping the fish’s
commodity of its own history: the traces of the human hands, faces, and bodies as well as the material technologies that produced and distributed it. In other words, the edible zombis abstract her from what she is actually doing: choosing and buying fish corpses, facticius commodities made by skilled professionals and technological performances over a period of time. Rather, Luisa becomes entangled in the fish’s fetishized nature: the edible zombis fetishize her.

In this relationship, the commodity-to-consumer encounter is part of economic processes of value generation (Haraway 2008: 46), which constitute fresh fish as more-than-commodities and the consumers as more-than-consumers. It is a site of reciprocal
This calls attention to two points: (1) the fetishistic agential capacities (rather than just the ‘Fetischcharakter’) of commodities; and (2) the multidirectional attribute of fetishism, as not static and centred on the commodities alone but able to flow from the purchasables to the purchasers.

At its core, freshness is a concept that achieves social, economic, and ideological protagonism from the way it is associated with ideals of purity, wholesomeness, naturalness, and immediacy (Jackson et al. 2019: 79). It bonds the food and, in turn, its consumer to an idealized state of unrefined rawness, as if interrupting the predominance of human technology, industrial material culture, and extractive capitalism in everyday life. As several authors highlight, the escalating demand for ‘fresh food’ in Portugal (Schmidt, Truninger, Guerra & Prista 2018) is largely a response to the demand for unmediated ‘connections between the food we ingest and its origins’ (Townsend 2011: 98). Space and time count in this process. In spatial terms, freshness means the experience of ‘nearness’, while in temporal terms it relates to the absence of delay (Jackson et al. 2019: 85). In our case, the fetishism of both fresh fish and consumers entails a break from time and space. The spatial distance between the consumers and the fish’s origins evanesces; the time duration of the fish’s death vanishes; the space and time of the labour that ‘made’ the fish’s freshness disappear; production, distribution, and consumption merge: capitalism evaporates. That is the magic of edible zombies (Figs 4 and 5).

**Conclusion**

In Portugal, the enactment of fresh fish celebrates life in and through death. It is a field of suspension that interrupts the social activity of dualisms: life vs death, true
Edible zombis

vs false, production vs consumption. At its core, the social and commercial efficacy of fresh fish arises from the work of ideas, beings, and ways of being that are marginal to the seemingly rationalist, sober world in which the fresh fish achieves value: the commodity-based world.

Freshness involves the transference of empowering nourishing qualities from the consumed into the consumer. This implies that prior to that transference the dead fish needs to be ‘avivado’ – resurrected – so that its vitality can be acquired by and incorporated in the consumers. Moreover, directly buying and handling sea creatures that embody healthful vitality, bodies without scars and cuts, stimulates the sensation of capturing them; it brings the consumer closer to an idealized state of naturalness and triumph, as a kind of fisher-hunter-winner. In this process, the notion of alive merges with the notion of dead, and consumers gain a self-magical character. In Portugal, fish freshness is ‘capitalist magic’ at its best (Appadurai 2018: vi).

The merging of death with life in corpses regarded as fresh fish materializes into what we call edible zombis: a concept that captures the necromantic side of the seafood economic complex in Portugal. Edible zombis are cosmetic creatures staged for being ‘caught’ by consumers without intermediaries. Market(ing) creations, they conceal the labour that bore them, thereby preventing them and their purchasers from the association with the capitalist structure wherein both act and ‘are’. Edible zombis soften the conspicuous tension within the domesticity and mediation in the contemporary food industry, while at the same time they are the incarnation of the human desire to control nature.

Fundamentally, edible zombis are successful at invigorating commodity consumption by virtue of their double (magic) ability: they are commodity fetishes that fetishize consumers. As agentic, edible zombis suspend consumers from their role in the market chain, namely as commodity-purchasers, and fetishize them as protagonists in a non-commoditized activity: fishing-hunting. Their encounter is thus much more than a mere meeting of commodities and consumers, becoming an encounter between prey and hunters; between the unmediated, unprocessed, undead and their chasers. We argue that the capitalist habitats where edible zombis and consumers interact are sites of reciprocal fetishism.

Marxian ideas helped us to expand our knowledge of the seafood economy and experience in Portugal. Concretely, they helped us to experiment with a new conceptual vocabulary – reciprocal fetishism – to describe and explain the places where consumers and edible zombis interact. Tuned to a post-structural political economy of food, such a vocabulary destabilizes orthodox economic categories, which are unsatisfactory for grasping the processes through which undead fish gain agential capacities to affect both consumers and producers.

On the general level, edible zombis disclose capitalism as being much more than about production and consumption, and reveal it as being about the experience of life itself. Moreover, in contrast with the general use of Marx’s version of fetishism ‘in a negative way’ (Stallybrass 1998: 184), we use it to refer to necessary attributes in social life: the feitiços, magic, and suspension that fetishism entails. Accordingly, edible zombis as commodity fetishes highlight how the experience of life may encompass the consumption of parallel realities; states of suspension from conventional rational worlds, which, in their essence, are common to the whole human world. As Edward Evans-Pritchard argued, ‘No one is mainly controlled by reason anywhere’ (cited in
In Portugal, the economy of fresh fish not only demonstrates this; it capitalizes on it.

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NOTES
1 We use pseudonyms.
2 We are grateful for this observation by an anonymous referee.
3 We use the spelling 'zombi' (without an 'e') as this is the word that corresponds to its supposed first written appearance in Portuguese (1730) and English (1805). Coming from West and Central Africa, the term contains antagonistic meanings, not just life and death, but also agency, subjection, magic, empowerment, liberation, fetish. The indeterminacy that we are interested in here is more marked in zombi than in its most common version, zombie.
4 This was when the national political regime was dethroned by military and Portuguese civilians.
5 Marx wrote the phrase ‘the annihilation of space by time’ (1973 [1939]: 524) to describe the attempt at diminishing the obstacle of distance for capitalist development.
7 In January 2017, they were 415 supermarket shops.
8 For an interesting comparison, see Anya Bernstein’s work on cryonic practices in Russia. Bernstein says cryonicists treat dead frozen bodies ‘as if they were alive’ (2015: 769).

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Zombis comestibles : poisson frais et industrie des cadavres esthétiques

Résumé

Des recherches menées sur des produits issus de la pêche au Portugal ont mené les auteurs à une énigme : pour qu’un poisson mort soit fresco (frais), il doit être vivant. Ce paradoxe se manifeste à un niveau populaire, commercial et juridique. Il dénote l’interruption de la différence entre le fait d’être mort ou d’être vivant sous la forme de la marchandise. Au Portugal, indiquent les auteurs, la commercialisation du peixe fresco (poisson frais) est basée sur la production et la consommation de « zombis » comestibles : des
cadavres de produits de la mer technologiquement et symboliquement fabriqués comme des morts-vivants. Concept ouvert, les « zombis comestibles » font partie d’un vocabulaire expérimental qui met en avant l'agencéité productive de la non-mort, à la fois biologique et commerciale, dans le complexe économique des produits de la mer. Ce concept est lié à la pratique ordinaire de la nécromancie dans le monde de la marchandise. Les zombis comestibles sont des marchandises fétiches qui fétichisent leurs producteurs et leurs consommateurs, les suspendant du système capitaliste dans lequel ils vivent.

**Zombis comestíveis: o peixe fresco e a indústria de cadáveres cosméticos**

Resumo
A investigação sobre produtos da pesca em Portugal levou-nos a um enigma: para que um peixe morto seja fresco, tem de estar vivo. Este paradoxo manifesta-se aos níveis popular, comercial e legal. Indica a interrupção da diferença entre estar morto e estar vivo sob a condição de mercadoria. Em Portugal, a comercialização de peixe fresco assenta na produção e consumo de ‘zombis’ comestíveis: cadáveres de pescado tecnologicamente e simbolicamente trabalhados como mortos-vivos. Como conceito aberto, o ‘zombi comestível’ faz parte de um vocabulário experimental que coloca em primeiro plano a agência produtiva, tanto biológica como comercial, dos mortos-vivos dentro do complexo econômico do pescado. O conceito está ligado à prática corrente da nécromancia no mundo baseado em mercadorias. Os zombis comestíveis são mercadorias fetichizadas que fetichizam as pessoas que as produzem e as consomem, suspendendo-as do sistema capitalista em que vivem.

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