

# *Poetic Cartographies:* A Literary Journey Through the City

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*Reading the city consists . . . [of] making the city visible through the mechanisms of language.<sup>1</sup>*

Juiz de Fora is a city of half a million citizens located in south-eastern Brazil, a two-and-a-half-hour drive away from Rio. Its history dates back to the eighteenth century, when the construction of the *Caminho Novo* connected the region of gold extraction (Ouro Preto and Mariana) to the ports of Rio de Janeiro and small villages appeared along the margins of the road. These villages rapidly evolved from simple resting stops for muleteers to small communities and, in some cases, to large farms for coffee production. By 1850, the Santo Antônio do Paraibuna village became Paraibuna City and by 1856 changed its name to Juiz de Fora.

Its privileged position close to the border between the states of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro and its prominence among the cities that emerged during Brazil's imperial period (due to its extensive coffee production and industrial

pioneering) allowed its streets and squares to be the setting for fruitful encounters and objects of narration. The cultural effervescence of the early twentieth century, together with the new factories and labourers, caused Juiz de Fora attract the attention of writers and poets, creating a fertile soil for literature.

Comparing the Juiz de Fora of yesterday and today through literary records, however, might prove to be a difficult task. The disparity between the city described by the authors of the modern movement and the city of today lies in the impoverishment of the urban experience and, consequently, in the shortage of narratives about its space.

Clearly, this is not a privilege limited to a medium-sized city in the interior of Brazil. The question of experience and narrative is a subject that represents a significant share of the Western theoretical *ethos*. Walter Benjamin, as early as the first half of the twentieth century, diagnosed the impoverishment of experience in modernity as a result of a deliberate search for a release from the experience engendered by the severe economic crisis and the imminence of war.<sup>2</sup> Some decades later, Giorgio Agamben wrote about the expropriation of experience and the impossibility of translating simple events into real experience in the contemporary world. Nowadays, however, the reason for this impossibility need not be something from daily routine, such as barbarism or hunger: 'we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice'.<sup>3</sup>

So, in the midst of this crisis of experience, what happened to the narrative? The Brazilian author Paola Berenstein brings this question to the table, corroborating and challenging Benjamin's and Agamben's definitions: she proposes shifting the attention from the 'issue of the (im-) possibility of the fulfilment of experiences, of its impoverishment or destruction . . . to another fundamental, directly related issue: the difficulty of transmitting

or narrating the experiences, that is, the (im-) possibilities of sharing, of exchange'.<sup>4</sup> One way of explaining this phenomena is the 'pacification' of public space, an effort to erase the difference and the alterity inherent to the public sphere, creating an sterilized space that gives no chance for the survival of the narrative.

Bearing this in mind, diagnosing and analysing the crisis of narration might be a potent way to attack the problem of experience and, consequently, to generate knowledge about lived urban space. This potential is one of the main motivators of this paper, which aims to present *Poetic Cartographies*, a project that focused on the study of narratives as a way of generating knowledge and stimulating new experiments within Juiz de Fora's urban space.

### **The Project**

Michel de Certeau discussed the close relationship between story and movement, between narrative and the act of wandering. To narrate is to go through; all stories are a travel report, a spatial practice. The narrated story, according to De Certeau, produces geographies of action and is not content to just *tell* the movement; it *performs* it. Those who walk, therefore, narrate; and those who narrate walk through the words.<sup>5</sup>

Influenced by this notion, the *Poetic Cartographies* project was born out of a desire to merge two levels of city reading, both defined by the narration and the act of walking through. The first level is that of observation and experience *in loco*, in an exercise similar to that of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, who walks through the city searching for the stories hidden in the corners and dark alleyways, always at a slow pace, denying the rhythm imposed by the traffic. The second level can be accessed through someone's records, that is, the contemplation of a painting or a photo, the analysis of documents and urban design drawings, the reading of a novel.

The advantages of exploring these levels are clear. With the *in loco* observation, the body is included in the action and materiality can be experienced at its maximum, creating a two-way street where the environment affects the individual and the individual affects the environment. On the other hand, the level of 'indirect contemplation', much explored by urban designers and architects, can be seen as a *reading of a reading*, a practice that takes advantage of multiple gazes directed toward the city, which enriches the process and fills it with subjectivity.

In order to expose the citizen to both levels of city reading, a route was proposed with temporary urban interventions that could unite literary and urban themes. The location of this route was the city centre, because of its historical relevance, its liveliness and high density.

In the search for a more practical approach to simultaneously analysing perception and materiality, words and concrete, the idea of a literary cartography emerged, which could graphically represent the intersections between narrative and wandering, physical and symbolic space. The main goal of the exercise was to awaken new views of the city and to liberate us from conventional methodological ties.

The first cartographic experiment was an attempt to spatialize the existing narratives of the centre of Juiz de Fora. *Letras da Cidade*, a compilation of texts and poems written by Juiz de Fora's authors, was used to make a survey in order to rank the streets, squares and buildings that most appeared in the poems and novels situated in Juiz de Fora.<sup>6</sup> This survey helped the identification of the most frequently recurring places and their relation to the rest of the city fabric (Fig. 1).

The second experiment was based on the appropriations of users in each part of the city centre. The identification of these appropriations allowed a comparison between the occupations of today and those described by the poets and writers of the past. Interesting situations could be observed



Fig. 1. Map of Juiz de Fora's narratives recurrent places.



Fig. 2. Map of urban figures of speech. Images personal archive Isadora Monteiro.

when cross-referencing the data from a contemporary map of the region with the information from past narratives: several pedestrian streets that form a strong part of the character of Juiz de Fora's city centre were not always there. This transformation of the city fabric (very common in European cities but very unusual in Brazil) is a muted narrative about the city, almost unknown to its inhabitants who usually take the pedestrian lanes for granted, ignoring the fact that this piece of information tells a story of resistance against the Brazilian model of prioritizing cars over the free circulation of people.

The third cartographic experiment was the mapping of the urban figures of speech (Fig. 2), interpreting the city as a text, trying to identify the areas or situations that could be compared with known figures of speech. The large avenues, with wide lanes and intense traffic, were marked as a hyperbole. The main pedestrian street was categorized as a synaesthesia due to the variety of sensorial stimuli it offers passers-by: the smell from the popcorn carts, the taste of toasted peanuts, the sound of the siren that marks midday or the music of the guitar player who has a regular spot in a corner. Irony, in turn, could be observed in a school that was built on the grounds of the old public jail. The notion of catachresis was attributed to the places that lent certain pieces of furniture or spaces a use different from the original: for example, stairs and flowerbeds used as benches.

These experiments did not have a structuralist intention of creating linguistic patterns to analyse urban space; they were intended as an icebreaker for the design stage and as an instrument that could allow the emergence of a *cidade entre* (the in-between city), a concept created by Ethel Pinheiro and Paula Uglione that describes the 'third city' that is formed through the union of the built and experienced aspects of urban space.<sup>7</sup>

### **Urban Literary Interventions**

The next stage was dedicated to choosing locations and proposing interventions. A promising strategy was that of overlapping the layers of every

map and looking for the points highlighted by the accumulation of markings and colour references, indicating their recurrence in the various narratives and spatial analyses. This way, the nodal points of the urban imaginary of Juiz de Fora were brought to the surface and therefore chosen as spots for the interventions (Fig. 3).

Practical issues were taken into consideration: the technical and financial viability of the project, the availability of resources, the wish to use only recycled and reused materials and the necessity of a do-it-yourself production. The main objective, however, remained the same: the activation of imaginaries, the unlocking of the experience and, even more important, the awakening of new narrators. Therefore, the installations would be exhibition devices of narratives about the city, always focused on giving support for texts, illustrations, audio-visual material, theatrical presentations, etc.

One of the proposals suggested creating in the epicentre of the project (a piece of land that has been empty for more than 15 years because of real estate speculation), a multipurpose square with ephemeral furniture and scaffolding structures that could be disassembled and rearranged over time. The project included a large space designated for encounters and screenings within an amphitheatre inspired by the *Cineroleum*, an installation designed by the British practice Assemble (Fig. 4). Another intervention was situated at the Paraibuna, a river of immense symbolic value for Juiz de Fora's history. Here, the main idea was to project graphic poems and illustrations on a screen created by the spraying of the waters of the river, to be seen by the people on the banks and by passers-by (Fig. 5).

The 'poem line' proposal was a structure made out of timber pallets and old frames that displayed poems and illustrations while also framing the part of the landscape praised in the text (such as the chimney of the Bernardo Mascarenhas factory, represented in the collage of Fig. 6). Another project, the Reading Lounger, offered a simple structure as an invitation to passers-by to sit down for a moment and read one of the books left at the site of the installation. In each one of the loungers, a mirror could be used to observe



Fig. 3. Map of the urban interventions' route.



Fig. 4. Ephemeral square conceptual collage.  
Images personal archive Isadora Monteiro.





Fig. 5. Paraibuna river installation.



Fig. 6. Line of poems conceptual collage, 2016. Images personal archive Isadora Monteiro.

the surroundings, while a small photo device displayed an old picture of the scenario described in the poems (Fig. 7).

The potential demonstrated by the studies and proposals inspired a shift from paper to the real world. An experimental installation was created, combining various elements from different points on the route, creating a collective urban reading room. This installation included the poem line, the reading loungers, the photo devices, armchairs, books, postcards and several notepads in which the guests could write about their life in the city.

In January 2017, the occupation took place in the square in front of the central theatre, one of the liveliest places in the city centre. The presence of benches, loungers, books and mirrors in the middle of the usually empty space incited curiosity.

The interaction between the people and the installations, hesitant at first, generated precious moments of encounter, conversation and sharing. This simple change in the way of appropriating the space brings to mind Foucault's heterotopias: spaces that escape the ruling logic and enable other kinds of inhabiting; a new layer of occupation and a new way of 'urban being' in a space defined by homogeneity (Figs. 8, 9 and 10).

Soon after the opening, the notepads contained little verses and stories about the city. Across social media, photos, comments and other interactions were also registered through the project's hashtag, perhaps as an indication of how narratives will be generated from now on. The intervention may have been ephemeral, but for some people, the memory and the seed for future narrators may have found fertile soil for an unlimited time.

## **Conclusion**

It is almost impossible to measure the impact of the experience on the improvement of the entailing of narratives about the city. It is also clear that such an isolated experiment is not capable of changing an entire city's culture or initiate, by itself, a new era in Juiz de Fora's urban literature.

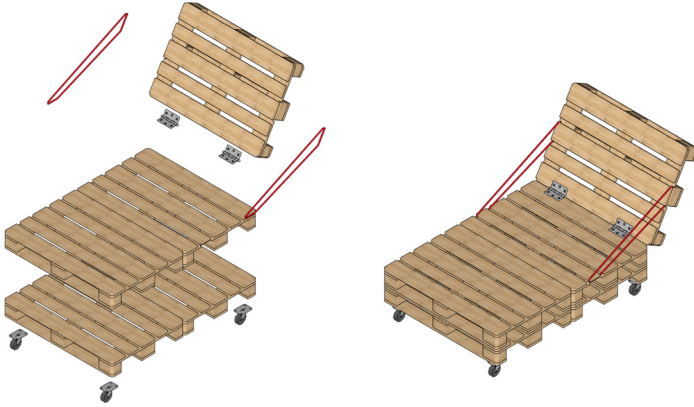


Fig. 7. Lounger's assemble diagram.



Fig. 8, 9 ,10. Experimental installation - urban reading room, 2017.  
Images personal archive Isadora Monteiro.

However, taking the discussion back to the relationship between experience and narration, it is easy to see that some of the scenarios described by Benjamin, Agamben and Berenstein could be avoided through an *Poetic Cartographies* intervention: instead of the humdrum aspect of the routine, an unexpected change of course took place; instead of the usual isolation and liberation from experience, multiple encounters were enabled; instead of a regular, individual walk along the same street, a slower, shared and more poetic one could be experienced.

Little changes may resonate and have great impact on the 'circuit of affections', as Vladimir Safatle described a kind of collective sensibility that has a great impact on the way people see, feel and interpret life in general (and therefore cities as well).<sup>8</sup> These little shifts in perception are extremely powerful and can definitely change the way citizens experience urban space and consequently choose to narrate it.

- 1 Renato Cordeiro Gomes, *Todas as cidades, a cidade: literatura e experiência urbana* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1994), 23.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2 (1927-1934)* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press, 1999), 734.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London/New York: Verso, 1993), 13.
- 4 Paola Berenstein Jacques, *Elogio aos errantes* (Salvador: EDUFBA, 2012), 16.
- 5 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1988).
- 6 Leila Maria Barbosa and Maria Timponi Rodrigues, *Letras da cidade* (Juiz de Fora: Funalfa, 2002).
- 7 Ethel Pinheiro and Paula Uglione, 'A memória do futuro e a busca por uma nova sensibilidade cidadina', in: Cristiane Rose Duarte and Roseline de Villanova (eds.), *Novos olhares sobre o lugar: ferramentas e metodologias, da arquitetura à antropologia* (Rio de Janeiro: Contra Capa, 2013), 129-144.
- 8 Vladimir Safatle, *O circuito dos afetos: corpos políticos, desamparo e o fim do indivíduo* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2015).