

Urban Narratives in Literature: Cultural Representation, Resistance, and the Reinterpretation of Cities in the Global South

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Abstract

This article examines how literature participates in the construction and contestation of urban narratives, treating fiction not as a mirror of the city but as a critical practice that refracts and reshapes urban life. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, it analyzes literary works from the Global South, particularly Brazilian classics such as Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) and Rachel de Queiroz's *O Quinze* (1930), to show how they dramatize exclusion, resilience, and the uneven geographies of modernization. Alongside these texts, writings by Carolina Maria de Jesus and Conceição Evaristo highlight how marginalized voices articulate alternative historiographies of the city. By engaging with the triad of memory, history, and narrative, the study demonstrates how fiction constructs symbolic geographies that challenge colonial frameworks and unsettle dominant spatial ideologies. In doing so, literature manifests itself as a form of urban theory: it documents collective memory, reevaluates historical events, and generates imaginaries that complement and contest institutional accounts of development. The article concludes that urban narratives in literature expand the repertoire of urban studies and contribute to global debates on cultural representation, resilience, and the redefinition of cities in contemporary imagination.

Keywords: urban narratives, literature and urban space, decolonial thought, resistance and representation, Global South

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Introduction

Literature has long functioned as a lens through which societies imagine both themselves and their spatial environments. When read alongside urban studies, the city surfaces not merely as a geographic backdrop but as a dynamic agent that shapes and is shaped by narrative. The literary city is therefore never a neutral stage; it is infused with memory, ideology, and cultural struggle. In the twentieth century, rapid demographic growth, urban expansion, and technological change transformed cities into central arenas of modern human experience. Literary production absorbed these transformations, turning the city into both a source of utopian projection and dystopian critique. As Gomes (1999) observed, the city came to embody promises of technological progress while simultaneously exposing deep social contradictions.

Yet, as most global debates on the literary city have largely privileged Euro-American traditions, perspectives from the Global South have often been marginalized. This imbalance raises the central question of this article: how do literary works from the Global South contribute to reimagining urban narratives beyond Eurocentric frameworks of modernity? Addressing this question requires recognizing that Southern cities are too often portrayed only through lenses of crisis (scarcity, violence, or dysfunction). Fiction, however, reveals them as far more complex: as sites of cultural resistance, symbolic reinvention, and alternative historiographies.

Following Aníbal Quijano's (2005) concept of the "coloniality of power," this study argues that literature from the Global South illuminates how colonial hierarchies persist in urban development and in the production of knowledge itself. Fiction challenges these hierarchies by reframing the city as a contested cultural and political project, opening space for voices historically silenced in official accounts. In the Brazilian context, the literary effervescence of the 1920s and 1930s exemplifies this dynamic, when literature increasingly engaged with political and social struggles. As Antonio Candido (2000) notes, even authors who avoided explicit ideological positions ended up embedding them in their works, shaping the intellectual character of the period.

Building on these historical precedents, contemporary decolonial writing continues to disrupt dominant frameworks, exposing inequalities of class, race, and gender while reaffirming urban peripheries as spaces of resilience and creativity. Authors such as Carolina Maria de Jesus¹ and Conceição Evaristo,² among others, exemplify this trajectory (Tremba, 2020; Ultramari & Jazar, 2021). Seen in continuity, these interventions show that literature is not merely an archive of memory but a critical practice that reshapes urban imaginaries across time and space.

Memory–Narrative–History

The city imagined through literature is never a direct reproduction of physical space. It emerges at the intersection of memory, history, and narrative, a triad that determines how urban life is

¹Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914–1977) — Black Brazilian writer and housekeeper, best known for *Quarto de Despejo: Diário de uma Favelada* (1960; translated as *Child of the Dark*). The text, written from her experience in the Canindé favela in São Paulo, documents hunger, precarious labor, and daily struggles, transforming lived memory into a collective testimony of marginalization.

²Conceição Evaristo (b. 1946) — Black Brazilian writer, activist, and scholar. She is widely recognized for the concept of *escrevivência* ("life-writing"), which articulates the interconnection between the lived experiences of Black women and literary production. Her work challenges canonical hierarchies and asserts the epistemological value of marginalized voices.

remembered, interpreted, and contested. Rather than treating these dimensions in isolation, fiction weaves them together, producing symbolic geographies that compete with official maps and planning documents.

Memory in literary texts is both intimate and collective. It condenses sensory fragments—sounds of marketplaces, the texture of drought-stricken soil, or the rhythm of popular rituals—into anchors of urban meaning. Carolina Maria de Jesus, for example, framed her *Quarto de Despejo* (1960) through the remembered hunger and indignities of favela life, transforming personal recollections into a collective record of marginalization. Her fragmented notes are not neutral preservation but acts of selection and emphasis, certifying that certain images of the city remain legible to future generations.

Memory operates not as a neutral preservation but as a culturally filtered recollection. As Clifford Geertz (1997/2004) reminds us, meaning-making is always embedded in cultural contexts, and literary representations of the city often privilege rituals, sounds, or images that communities recognize as their own.

History, in contrast, reflects institutionalized accounts of wars, migrations, and planning reforms. Fiction interacts with history by reframing or contesting these official versions. Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*³ (1902) reinterprets the Canudos War not simply as rebellion but as a confrontation with the state's project of modernization, dramatizing the violence of homogenization. Rachel de Queiroz's *O Quinze*⁴ (1930) similarly transforms the drought of 1915 into more than a climatic event: it becomes a symbolic turning point that exposes the fragility of urban reception of migrants. Literature thus refuses to passively repeat history; it recodes it through narrative voice.

Narrative is the mediating practice that binds memory and history into meaning. Choices of metaphor, focalization, and rhythm determine how events are framed and which voices are privileged or silenced. Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work" is particularly relevant here: narrative strategies invite readers to collaborate in meaning-making, ensuring that the city represented in fiction is never closed or singular, but open to reinterpretation across time and audiences. Conceição Evaristo's concept of "*escrevivência*" illustrates this: her narratives merge lived experience with fictional construction, asserting that storytelling is always a political act of positioning. In this sense, the literary city is not only depicted but actively constructed, shaped by the author's social standpoint and ideological horizon.

When memory, history, and narrative converge, they generate what might be called the "narrated city", a version of the urban distinct from material form. This divergence is not a weakness but a critical opportunity: it reveals the anxieties, aspirations, and exclusions that material plans often obscure. Fiction can exaggerate or omit, but in doing so it produces a counter-archive that resists homogenizing visions of modernity.

³Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões* (1902) — Monumental classic of Brazilian literature that depicts the Canudos War (1896–1897), a violent conflict in the state of Bahia between the Brazilian army and the community led by Antônio Conselheiro. Blending journalism, sociology, and literary narrative, Euclides portrays the *sertão* both as geographic aridity and as a symbolic arena of resistance. The massacre that concluded the war left thousands dead and became emblematic of the violent consolidation of the Brazilian Republic.

⁴Rachel de Queiroz, *O Quinze* (1930) — Influential modernist novel addressing the drought of 1915 in northeastern Brazil. Through the lens of individual suffering and forced migration, Queiroz represents the famine and the precarious reception of rural migrants in Fortaleza. The work is both literary testimony and social critique, inaugurating her career as the first woman admitted to the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Methodologically, this triad enables a layered reading: (1) identifying mnemonic traces embedded in the text, (2) examining how official history is appropriated or contested, and (3) analyzing the narrative strategies that integrate memory and history into coherent accounts. Such a sequence clarifies how literature not only documents but also theorizes urban life, often with greater sensitivity to everyday practices than formal planning discourse.

In the Global South, where colonial and technocratic frameworks have long dominated urban governance, this interplay becomes particularly revealing. Literary counter-narratives challenge institutional historiographies by offering alternative ways of imagining space, whether through drought diaries, testimonies of forced migration, or depictions of peripheral neighborhoods. In these narratives, fiction is not ancillary evidence but an epistemological intervention, giving form to shadow urbanisms that coexist with, and resist, dominant urban orders.

Representation, Interpretation, and Appropriation

To claim that the “narrated city” differs from the “concrete city” is to understand that literature generates its own symbolic geographies. Representation in fiction is not neutral description but a selective act that fuses material and metaphorical dimensions. As Gomes (1994, p. 24) observes, literary depictions of the city combine geometry, imagery, and human entanglement into “sensitive accounts of ways of seeing.” A novel does not reproduce urban form; it condenses experience into images, crowded alleys, drought-stricken landscapes, silent plazas, that often communicate more powerfully than technical documents.

Interpretation builds upon this representational act. Authors bring frameworks (political, cultural, or personal), that guide how the city is narrated. Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões* interprets the sertão not only as barren land but as a metaphor for abandonment and resilience, dramatizing a clash between centralized modernization and local autonomy (Ventura, 1998). Rachel de Queiroz’s *O Quinze* reinterprets drought migration as more than a climatic disaster: it becomes testimony of state neglect and a critique of exclusionary urban reception (Câmara & Câmara, 2015). In both cases, historical events are transfigured into literary statements about inequality and power.

Appropriation highlights how urban narratives circulate beyond literature itself. Texts are re-read, politicized, and mobilized by readers, institutions, or policymakers. The image of the *sertão* as “desert” has been appropriated alternately as evidence of national backwardness and as a symbol of cultural resilience. Dalton Trevisan’s⁵ silence about Curitiba, in turn, has been interpreted as refusal, critique, or absence, each reception producing new layers of meaning (Jazar, 2020). Such re-significations show how literature remains vulnerable to shifting interpretations that extend far beyond authorial intention.

This triad — representation, interpretation, appropriation — accents the political mobility of literary narratives. Fictional accounts often blur the boundaries between record and imagination, creating a sense of verisimilitude that compels readers to question official discourses of development or modernity. Appropriation makes these accounts active within

⁵Dalton Trevisan (b. 1925) — Brazilian short story writer, famously reclusive, often nicknamed the “Vampire of Curitiba.” Known for his minimalist style and focus on everyday urban tensions, his work portrays the contradictions of modern life in Curitiba through fragmented, elliptical narratives. His silence and absence from public life became as emblematic as his prose, reinforcing his aura as one of Brazil’s most enigmatic literary figures.

public discourse: novels become archives for collective memory, resources for cultural identity, or even tools of political critique.

Seen this way, literature is not an embellishment of urban studies but an interlocutor. Its representations dramatize contradictions of urban life; its interpretations embed ideological choices; and its appropriations ensure that meanings evolve across time and audiences. By tracing these processes, we reveal literature as a dynamic participant in the negotiation of urban knowledge, actively shaping how cities are remembered, governed, and reimagined.

Narratives of Exclusion and Resilience

Literary depictions of the Brazilian hinterland (*sertão*) offer some of the clearest examples of how fiction becomes a site where exclusion and resilience are simultaneously staged. Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) and Rachel de Queiroz's *O Quinze* (1930) stand as emblematic works that reveal how modernization and urbanization unfolded through violence, displacement, and marginalization, yet also produced forms of endurance and collective memory.

In *Os Sertões*, Euclides situates the Canudos War as a paradoxical confrontation. The *sertão* is described as geographically barren yet symbolically fertile, a territory that central state projects sought to discipline, but which resisted incorporation. His portrayal of the region as a “desert” condensed two registers: the material harshness of drought and the metaphorical abandonment of its people (Ventura, 1998). Canudos appears as more than a rebellion; but as an alternative community asserting autonomy, whose destruction exposed the fragility of modernization premised on homogenization. Here, the city's progress is revealed as inseparable from peripheral erasure.

Queiroz's *O Quinze*, written three decades later, translates the drought of 1915 into a narrative of human vulnerability and forced migration. Migrants arriving at the gates of Fortaleza find not sanctuary but exclusion, confined to precarious camps that expose the inadequacy of state intervention. The novel layers personal loss, such as families divided, hunger endured, with collective trauma, transforming structural neglect into lived experience. By drawing on her own childhood memories of visiting these camps (Queiroz, 1972), Queiroz created a hybrid text that functions simultaneously as testimony, critique, and symbolic representation.

Together, these works dramatize exclusion as more than spatial separation: it is a political process that defines who belongs to the city and who remains outside its imagined community. Euclides portrays sertanejos as systematically marginalized for failing to embody modern citizenship, while Queiroz depicts migrants as doubly excluded, expelled from the countryside by drought and rejected by urban elites. Both authors, however, also highlight resilience. In *Os Sertões*, Canudos is remembered as a collective resistance, articulating alternative forms of faith and governance. In *O Quinze*, resilience appears as stubborn endurance, the capacity to maintain memory and social bonds despite displacement.

By foregrounding both exclusion and resilience, these narratives complicate binary visions of “modern cities” versus “backward hinterlands.” They reveal the interdependence of city and *sertão*: one grows at the expense of the other, yet both are bound through circuits of migration, violence, and cultural reinvention. Their resonance extends beyond historical context. Today, *Os Sertões* is revisited as a commentary on state violence and erasure of cultural difference, while *O Quinze* informs debates on environmental justice, migration, and urban precarity.

Methodologically, these texts exemplify how literature can serve as critical urban theory. They expose the contradictions of modernization, dramatize the costs of exclusionary policies, and articulate forms of resilience often absent from institutional archives. Fiction here is not supplementary evidence but an epistemological lens that makes visible the uneven geographies of Brazilian development.

Conclusions

This article has argued that literature must be read not as an ornament to urban history but as a critical interlocutor. Our analysis has shown that by distinguishing between the narrated city and the built city, we can see how fiction refracts urban life through metaphor, memory, and narrative strategy. These refractive gestures are not distortions but interpretive interventions that expose the fractures of class, race, gender, and power often obscured in official archives.

The central question posed (how literary works from the Global South reimagine urban narratives beyond Eurocentric frameworks) finds its answer in the examples discussed. Euclides da Cunha and Rachel de Queiroz dramatize the *sertão* as both excluded and resilient, revealing the interdependence of peripheral hinterlands and expanding cities. Carolina Maria de Jesus and Conceição Evaristo extend this trajectory by foregrounding marginal voices that challenge dominant urban imaginaries. Together, these works illuminate how literature resists homogenizing visions of modernity and articulates alternative ways of inhabiting and representing the city.

From a methodological perspective, this reading demonstrates that fiction functions as a form of urban theory. It records collective memory, reframes historical events, and produces symbolic geographies that complement, and often contest, planning documents and institutional accounts. For urban studies, engaging with literature is therefore not ancillary but essential: it opens interpretive pathways attentive to subjectivity, cultural production, and everyday resilience.

Finally, the implications extend beyond the Brazilian case. Literary narratives from the Global South circulate internationally, reframing debates on development and citizenship across borders. In this sense, fiction operates as a form of global urban citizenship: it connects diverse experiences of struggle and creativity, generating solidarities through shared stories. By recognizing this contribution, scholars and practitioners alike can build a historiography of the city that is more inclusive, plural, and sensitive to the complexities of lived space.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

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