

CONTEMPORARY URBAN BRAZILIAN FICTION AND DISCOURSES OF POWER

Sophia Beal
University of Minnesota

Abstract: Nelson Vieira has deftly defended contemporary Brazilian prose that pairs sophisticated narrative techniques with pulpy disquieting themes. With relationship to various authors (Roberto Drummond, Rubem Fonseca, Samuel Rawet, Sérgio Sant’Anna, and Dalton Trevisan), Vieira has argued that their fiction—in its combination of aesthetic innovation and uncomfortable subject matter—challenges discourses of power in Brazil’s everyday reality. These discourses of power involve bourgeois society’s rigid norms, hegemonic value systems, discrimination of marginalized groups, or reductive understandings of “high art” as pure and superior to mass culture. Drawing on Vieira’s insights on Brazilian contemporary urban fiction, this article first argues that the rise of Brazilian urban fiction can be understood not only as a response to urbanization, but also as reflective of a desire to aestheticize conflicts related to place, power, storytelling, and language. Next, the article argues that the first four novels of João Almino’s Brasília quintet—with the specific backdrop of Brazil’s capital city—contrast sophisticated form and pulp themes to examine the ties between language and authority as they relate to the hypocrisy and superficiality of its elite characters.

Keywords: João Almino; Nelson Vieira; Urban Brazilian fiction; Brasília

Resumo: Nelson Vieira defende a prosa brasileira contemporânea que combina técnicas narrativas sofisticadas com uma temática “pulp”. Em relação a vários autores (Roberto Drummond, Rubem Fonseca, Samuel Rawet, Sérgio Sant’Anna e Dalton Trevisan), Vieira argumenta que sua ficção – ao combinar inovação estética e assuntos inquietantes – desafia os discursos de poder no cotidiano do Brasil. Tais discursos envolvem normas rígidas da sociedade burguesa, sistemas de valores hegemônicos, discriminação de grupos marginalizados ou entendimentos redutivos da “alta arte” como pura e superior à cultura de massa. Com base nos insights de Vieira sobre a ficção urbana

contemporânea brasileira, este artigo primeiramente argumenta que a ascensão da ficção urbana brasileira pode ser entendida não apenas como uma resposta à urbanização, mas também como reflexo de um desejo de estetizar conflitos relacionados a lugar, poder, narrativa e língua. Em seguida, o artigo conjectura que os quatro primeiros romances do quinteto de Brasília de João Almino – com o pano de fundo específico da capital brasileira – contrastam uma estética sofisticada e uma temática “pulp” para examinar os laços entre linguagem e autoridade relacionados à hipocrisia e à superficialidade dos personagens abastados.

Palavras-chave: João Almino; Nelson Vieira; Ficção brasileira urbana; Brasília

Nelson Vieira has deftly defended contemporary Brazilian prose that pairs sophisticated narrative techniques with pulpy disquieting themes. With relationship to various authors (Roberto Drummond, Rubem Fonseca, Samuel Rawet, Sérgio Sant’Anna, and Dalton Trevisan), Vieira has argued that their fiction—in its combination of aesthetic innovation and uncomfortable subject matter—challenges discourses of power in Brazil’s everyday reality (“Closing” 109-110; “*Evil Be Thou*” 356-58; “Hitler” 432; “Introduction” xxi-xxv; “Metafiction” 584; “Narrative”; 436). These discourses of power involve bourgeois society’s rigid norms, hegemonic value systems, discrimination of marginalized groups, or reductive understandings of “high art” as pure and superior to mass culture. Thus, graphic descriptions of pedophilia, sadism, murder, debauched sex, dismembering, torture, rape, adultery, and stalking in the work of authors such as Trevisan and Fonseca transform into something more than sensationalism because of the way they are narrated. Drawing on Vieira’s insights on Brazilian contemporary urban fiction, this article first argues that the rise of Brazilian urban fiction can be understood not only as a response to urbanization, but also as reflective of a desire to aestheticize conflicts related place, power, storytelling, and language. Next, the article argues that the first four novels of João Almino’s Brasília quintet—with the specific backdrop of Brazil’s capital city—contrast sophisticated form and pulp themes to examine the ties between language and authority as they relate to the hypocrisy and superficiality of its elite characters.

Almino's Brasília quintet—a series of five novels written between 1987 and 2010—can be historicized as part of a larger trend of urban narratives in Brazilian literature. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the urgency surrounding the struggles of Brazil's starving *rural* populations inspired much of the country's most innovative literature. Examples include Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas* and João Cabral de Melo Neto's *Morte e Vida Severina*. In contrast, in subsequent decades, daily life in *cities* and the urgency surrounding the struggles of Brazil's *urban* population began inspiring some of the country's most innovative literature. Karl Erik Schøllhammer argues that “em cinquenta anos, o Brasil deixou de ser um país rural para se tornar um país que, apesar de sua extensão, concentra quase 80% da população em grandes cidades. Vista assim, a década de 1960 marca o início de uma prosa urbana arraigada na realidade social das grandes cidades” (22). While the Brazilian regionalist novels emphasized the social, as Vieira argues, contemporary Brazilian fiction emphasizes the individual, the “inner world of the narrator/hero” (“Fictional” 139). Urban social issues, according to Vieira, do not dissolve, but are integrated into characters' consciousness: “In contemporary literature, the increasingly urbanized city evolved as part of the subjective self, the urban Gestalt reflected in psyches of urban protagonists” (“Contemporary” 224). That urban Gestalt involves tribulations: “contemporary voices often highlight fractured, unstable, or mutable/multiple identities, struggling with daily existence and the powerful behemoth of urbanization” (Vieira, “Contemporary” 225). Therefore, many of the techniques of postmodern fiction (fragmentation, narrative interruption, unreliable narrators, pastiche, and metanarrative) have been used in contemporary Brazilian fiction to express the unrepresentable and incomprehensible character of the city and its influence on subjectivity.

The year 1960 constitutes somewhat of a turning point in this transition. On the one hand, that year brought Clarice Lispector's *Laços de Família*, Nelson Rodrigues's *O Beijo no Asfalto*, and Fernando Sabino's *O Homem Nu*, all landmark texts of Brazilian urban prose. On the other hand, 1960 brought the inauguration of Brasília, Brazil's modernist capital built in the rural savannah at the country's core. Northeastern peasants—fleeing droughts—migrated to Brazil's center to build this new capital city,

which was the last time in Brazil's history that a city would be seen as a panacea. To capture Brasília creatively involves engaging the connections among language, place, and power. In the late 1950s, when President Juscelino Kubitschek opted to move the capital to the center of the nation, the idea of Brasília became cloaked in reductive slogans. Brasília was continuously represented as the City of Hope, Brazil's boldest construction endeavor of all time. It was meant to propel the nation into a prosperous, rational, egalitarian, technicized future. Since the 1900s, the Brazilian government often has used ostentatious mega-infrastructure as proof of national progress, while simultaneously concealing the ways in which that so-called transformation actually kept traditional power structures intact (Beal, *Brazil* 1-7). The false notion of Brazilian progress via mega-infrastructure pervades the twentieth century with Brasília as its most dramatic example. This false notion is akin to Timothy Brennan's notion of the national myth. A nation collectively distorts an aspect of its identity to link its imagined community with lofty moral values in a process that obscures contradictions (45-49). The greatest contradiction of Brasília—as Holston has argued eloquently—is that, despite its promises to be egalitarian, it became among the most socially segregated cities in Brazil (Holston 23; Paviani 20; Ferreira Nunes 12). This was no accident: the inequality was due primarily to the government's lack of regulation of land speculation. If the Brazilian government spoon-fed its citizens slogans about a City of Hope, artists have been particularly attentive to how government discourse on Brasília was objectionably monolithic.

In each subsequent decade since the 1960s, writers have become more inspired by the crises that have accompanied rapid urbanization, seeking to defamiliarize urban violence via their aesthetic choices. Examples include Conceição Evaristo's *Becos da Memória*, Marcus Vinícius Faustini's *Guia Afetivo da Periferia*, Rubem Fonseca's "A arte de andar na ruas do Rio de Janeiro," Milton Hatoum's *Cinzas do Norte*, and Luiz Ruffato's *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos*. As Vieira posits, with the increase of book sales in urban bookstores in the twenty-first century, growing literacy rates, and the expansion of the internet as a site to promote reading and writing literature in new forms, "Brazilian urban literature is thriving" ("Contemporary" 224). Almino is part of this trend.

Cities in fiction have been associated with self-discovery (Lowe 17), networks of social relations (Williams 155; Moretti 112), and the aesthetic challenge of writing about the un-representable (Ramos 121). Sociologist Georg Simmel saw a tension in city life between the possibility of greater spiritual freedom and the peril of alienation, a tension frequently developed by novelists (53-55). These associations shed light on how the city is an almost endlessly malleable metaphor. Yet the city functions most profoundly in contemporary Brazilian literature as the locale produced by irreconcilable interwoven stories, which touch on tensions related to symbolic capital and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, *Language* 238; Bourdieu and Wacquant 167). Cultural geographer Doreen Massey argues that “arriving in a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made” (119). Literary critic Robert T. Tally turns this idea into a dialectic, contending that “all spaces are necessarily embedded with narratives, just as all narratives must mobilize and organize space” (Tally 2). For Foucault, “space is fundamental in any exercise of power,” and urban novelists are particularly attentive to connections between exercising power via language and over space (“Space” 252). Fiction—with its keen attention to language, symbols, and human interactions—is a privileged site for exploring symbolic capital and symbolic violence and their role in maintaining status-quo social hierarchizations in the city. Many of the most intriguing works of contemporary Brazilian literature involve the question of how geographies of power are bound up in storytelling. Who has the power to write their story into a city? How is storytelling an act of urban resistance? How does urban planning itself tell a story? What radical allegiances—to borrow Richa Nagar’s term—can be formed by telling stories differently?

It is not surprising that these questions pervade Brazilian literature in a moment of rapid urbanization. A 2016 issue of the journal *Science* observes that “Earth has become an urban planet. More than half of the world’s people now live in cities” (Malakoff et al). Brazil is keenly aware of this phenomenon. It has seventeen cities with over a million residents. Moreover, it holds five of the Americas’ fifteen most populous

cities: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, Salvador, and Fortaleza. Brasília—despite its outpouring of dynamic twenty-first-century writers—has largely been ignored by literary critics. This is due to its lack of association with literature, readers’ preference for prose in contrast to Brasília’s abundance of poets, and the fact that so many of its authors’ books are published and circulate only locally (Beal “The Art” 39).¹

Brasília author Almino constitutes an exception. He enjoys an uncontested place among the Brazilian literary establishment. He is a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters who publishes with the premier publishing press, Record. Almino’s Brasília quintet begins with his 1987 *Ideias Para Onde Passar o Fim do Mundo*, followed by his 1994 *Samba-Enredo*, his 2001 *As Cinco Estações do Amor*, his 2008 *O Livro das Emoções*, and finally his 2010 *Cidade Livre*. These books—as well as his subsequent two novels—have been translated into multiple languages and won (or been finalists for) major book prizes (awarded from Casa de las Américas, Portugal Telecom de Literatura, Jabuti, Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura, among others).

Although they vary immensely in quality (*Ideias Para Onde Passar o Fim do Mundo* does not hold together as a novel because its long digressions into characters’ pasts never merge convincingly; *Samba-Enredo* is immensely creative; *O Livro das Emoções* is hilarious and flows effortlessly for the first three quarters; and *As Cinco Estações do Amor* has an unconvincing plot and a less engaging narrator than the other novels), these four novels fit together clearly as a series that explores parody and pulp with the backdrop of Brasília. In my focus on parody, pulp, and superficiality, my reading of these novels diverges from Pedro Meira Monteiro’s. He argues that—in their focus on living in “o instante,” the four novels’ characters open themselves up “generosamente à multiplicidade e ao fluxo da vida,” allowing for a possible freedom to love and to be (68). In contrast, I see these characters as marked by an absence of love and of emotional fulfillment, somewhat akin to Vieira’s interpretation of Trevisan’s short fiction in

¹ Examples of Brasília poets whose work only circulates locally are: Nicolas Behr, Meimei Bastos, tatiana nascimento, Nanda Fer Pimenta, Kika Sena, and Katiana Souto.

“Narrative in Dalton Trevisan.” The intense emotions the characters’ cheap thrills elicit are short-lived and ultimately only falsely or fleetingly fulfilling.

The Brasília quintet functions as a commentary on contemporary “liquid societies,” to use Zygmunt Bauman’s term. Bauman coined the term to contrast societies in the last half century to previous societies that were supposedly more stable and consistent. For Bauman, in contemporary society, there is pressure to move quickly, buy compulsively, and jump from one amorous relationship to another. The motivation behind these behaviors is a fear of going out of style and a desire to avoid one’s mortality by filling each segment of time to the fullest, thus privileging quantity over quality:

In our world that knows or admits no limits to acceleration, such hopes [of resurrection and reincarnation] may well be discarded. If only one moves quickly enough and does not stop to look back and count the gains and losses, one can go on squeezing into the timespan of mortal life even more lives (Bauman 8).

The first four novels suffer from having an overabundance of characters who are not sufficiently distinctive, which perhaps is an intentional way to comment on how Ana Kaufman fills her home with friends on Sundays and the Dionysian Cadu fills his life with sex partners, yet any feelings of love or communion are ephemeral.

Monteiro interprets the first four novels of the quintet as traditionally modernist in their reflections about language’s inadequacy for representing emotions and memories. Yet, the novels’ characters’ actions are so unbelievable and the narrators are often so absurd that they cannot be seen as models for real people, but as textual constructions that address how texts influence one’s interpretation of what is real or true. Thus, my reading is more postmodern and Monteiro’s more modernist.² The fact that the characters do not undergo a self-transformation or maturation during the course of the books accentuates the novels’ critique of a petty, superficial, materialistic, hypocritical elite that—despite its self-obsession—misses the mark in its reflections. Cadu—in *O*

² In this comparison, I draw on the contrasts between modernism and postmodernism developed in Brian McHale’s *Postmodern Fiction* and Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative*.

Livro...—writes a diary in which he professes his love of Aída and Joana, yet the reader sees past his self-delusion, recognizing him as parasitic, pathetic, and self-interested. The humor of the novel derives from the disconnection between Cadu’s opinion of himself and the narrator’s divergence of opinion. Occasionally, the narrator lets slip that he, in fact, is trying to reframe the lust that drives his actions as if it were love: “Aquele desejo de fazer sexo com ela [Joana] eu não sentira jamais com intensidade igual por nenhuma outra mulher. Decidi chamar de amor aquela intensidade” (*O livro* 250). In such instances, the novels draw attention to how characters use language to attempt to convince themselves that more lofty emotions drive their base impulses.

All the novels in the Brasília quintet share a metalinguistic tendency. A narrator, frustrated by a writing process, reflects on a major writing project (a novel-length blog, a movie script, a hybrid samba-enredo, an academic book, and an annotated photographic autobiography). Writing on metanarrative, Vieira—taking a stance more aligned with the conceptions of postmodernism of Linda Hutcheon, Andreas Huyssen, and Brian McHale than the more damning evaluations of postmodernism of Fredric Jameson—argues that postmodernism, as it challenges “universal truths, singular meaning and stable points of view complements the propensity within textual self-consciousness toward demystification, alterity and inquiry” (“Metafiction” 584). Indeed, the narrators in the quintet—who are all frustrated writers working through their memories—reveal the impossibility of arriving upon an absolute truth about the past they endeavor to recall. Another component of this metafiction is to draw attention to the artificiality of a novel. *Ideias* is narrated by two dead people, and *Samba-Enredo* is narrated by a computer that—in a clever twist on the impossibility of an entirely neutral omniscient narrator—fails to be objective, despite being inanimate. In one of the many metafictional instances in Almino’s quintet, Cadu tells his brother, Guga, that he would like to publish a diary with photographs about his life, to which Guga wryly replies: “Se não estás no meio de nenhum conflito étnico, cultural ou racial, tua história não interessa. A menos que substituas a narrativa por uma catástrofe ou uma cena hiperviolenta” (*O livro* 39). The commercial tactic that Almino himself takes to win readership is salaciousness. A constant

stream of sex scenes floods the action-packed novels. Even computers and ghosts copulate. The many graphic scenes potentially could be interpreted as a condemnation of the taboo of mentioning sex, exposing how hegemonic value systems influence what is deemed “appropriate” for “high art.” Yet the fact that both rape and consensual sex scenes are described in graphic detail undermines this interpretation, linking these scenes more convincingly to a commentary on sensationalism in mass culture and the viewers’/readers’ ethical positioning with relationship to it.

In Almino’s novels, characters self-consciously try to free themselves from bourgeois society’s rigid values, particularly as they relate to sexual relations and gender. Women are portrayed as often tormented by bourgeois moralism, while men are mostly liberated from it. Narrators and characters provide misguided ethical evaluations, connected to their desire to free themselves from the moralism of their Catholic upbringing, patriarchal society, or the military regime they endured. Monteiro argues that the first four novels in Almino’s quintet reflect on the Latin-American lefts’ sad realization that their fight for freedoms in the 1960s—when reflected upon in 1987—did not pan out as hoped (63). Moreover, their consciousness of this failure often leads characters to over-assign bourgeois moralism as an explanation for actions and emotions. Eva’s feelings are hurt when Joana sleeps with Eva’s husband, Cadu, in *Ideias*. Ana agrees with her friend Chicão’s accusation that her moralism made her fight with her transgender house guest, Berta, in *As Cinco....* The computer narrator of *Samba-Enredo* accuses the married Ana of not having sexual relations with the married president because she was unconsciously guided by her “moral burguesa” (72). In the first two cases, characters seem so self-conscious about shedding their alliances with dominant morality that they lose their confidence in distinguishing ethical from unethical behavior. Eva cannot see Joana’s affair as a betrayal of trust, and Ana cannot see Berta’s graphic talk of sex in front of Ana’s young niece as unconscionable. They are instances of symbolic violence in which women incorrectly blame themselves as being morally inferior to their adversary (Bourdieu and Wacquant 167).

But in other instances, Ana fails to recognize her own hegemonic moralism, such as when she thinks “nunca esqueci a cena grotesca de várias mulheres nuas” taking a sauna together or remembers her “verdadeira repugnância” when Joana hit on her, without considering her own homophobia (*As Cinco...* 122). As the novels speed through violent dramas and love triangles, characters make misguided ethical evaluations, leaving it up to the reader to supply any type of ethical evaluation to events that unfold. This is particularly true in Cadu’s recollection of a rape, narrated with nonchalant distance, which normalizes violence against women: “Houve uma pequena luta corporal, e, após dominá-la pela força, ela relaxou” (*O livro* 131). This narration contrasts with how Ana narrates being raped by Eduardo (“Foi um estupro, não posso chamar de outro nome”) and how the narrators (Mário and Silvinha)—cognizant of Íris’s emotions—report the gang rape of this character who has mental health issues (“Eles eram o diabo: a maltratavam, riam dela, pegavam no seu corpo sem respeito, humilhavam-na”) (*As Cinco...* 135; *Ideias...* 190). Cadu never refers to his act as an *estupro* and fails to recognize the grotesque and unethical nature of his actions, as if his position as a white, elite male gave him the authority to rape and to have the last word about the incident.

An aspect of Almino’s narrative technique that piques readers’ attention is the contrast between exaggerated, unbelievable plot twists and familiar, entirely believable dialogues. The contrast has a defamiliarizing effect since readers cannot fully fall into the fantasy world of fiction without being jolted into connecting the narrative to their own lives and use of language. Vieira argues that contemporary urban Brazilian fiction unmasks how “violence, commonly associated with lowlife criminals can affect the high lifestyle of the rich and the indifferent” (“Closing” 111). The novel in the quintet most preoccupied with fear of violence, *As Cinco...*, demonstrates this idea via the symbol of Ana’s gun, a weapon purchased for self-defense, which ends up shrouding her life in physical violence. Fear of violence and physical violence grind Ana’s life to a halt in *As cinco...*, and she is saved by the exaggeratedly heroic Carlos in *telenovela*-style scenes (he carries her out of her burning home and then runs back in to save her possessions, and he wrestles down an armed aggressor who threatens her).

In Almino's novels, characters are shocked by the almost continuous presence of physical violence, yet fail to recognize the presence of symbolic violence in their everyday conversations and thoughts. The quotidian dialogues reveal an intellectual elite that fancies itself progressive, yet lets slip instances of racist, classist, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic conjectures. Since the plotlines—especially of the first four novels—are unbelievable (for instance, Cadu, when the plot calls for it in *O Livro...*, suddenly proves to be an excellent computer hacker, though nothing in the previous novels would suggest he had this ability), the reader latches onto the believable, banal dialogues. These include dialogues in which members of the intellectual elite balk at their servants' requests for raises or make racialized comments in *As Cinco...*, which reveal the hypocrisy of an intellectual elite that makes claims for social equity, but only when that transformation does not jeopardize their wealth or power (31). Thus, Almino underscores Silviano Santiago's argument that Latin American writers challenge the neocolonial power structures that are often reinforced in everyday language and practices (16-17).

The most noteworthy characteristic of Almino's first four novels is their combination of "low" and "high" art, which challenges this very distinction. Vieira contends that this is a feature of Brazilian postmodern novels of the 1980s and 90s ("Closing" 110). The graphic sex scenes and pulp-fiction plotlines align Almino's novels with "low art," whereas the sophistication of the metafiction, the writing itself, and the literary allusions position his novels within "high art." This contrast makes readers uneasy, never quite sure how to interpret a scene. For instance, in *As Cinco...* when four young heterosexual men kill a transgender woman (in the Plano Piloto), who two of them know well, the scene seems utterly unbelievable. Yet if the scene is read as an (admittedly distant) homage to the infamous killing of the indigenous Brazilian Galdino Jesus dos Santos in the Plano Piloto in 1997 (lit on fire by five young wealthy men as he slept in a bus stop), the unbelievability of the fictional hate crime suggests the

unbelievable barbarity of the real crime.³ As Vieira argues with respect to Fonseca, Almino “rubs society’s nose in the gutter of life in order to jolt its bastions of rigidity and complacency, while displaying his own ‘high art’ and erudition by making pertinent intertextual references” (“Closing” 114). This strategy challenges high art’s “authoritarian grip on prescribed culture, social norms and ideological views” (“Closing” 111). Many scenes in the first four novels of the quintet can be read as a parody of frivolous elite characters, but these scenes can also be read as critiques of frivolous elite readers who derive pleasure from reading trashy scenes or discomfort from seeing their own hypocrisy staged.

Despite Almino being a bastion of “high art” himself, his fiction questions the validity of efforts to silo so-called high and low art. Vieira postulates that

Brazilian writers see this wry combination or integration of high and low aesthetics as a means of repositioning the elite reader’s too comfortable and staid optic. [...] to challenge the power behind dominant socio-political ideologies, notions and expressions of culture in order to contest the high and low paradigm in literature as well as in society” (“Closing” 115).

The lack of alignment in Almino’s novels between the “high art” narrative techniques (metafiction, fragmentation, allusion, shifts in point of view, unreliable narrators, pastiche, and carefully wrought sentences) and the “low art” or genre-fiction content (hitmen, hackers, thieves, people who change their name and identity, disappeared characters, drugs, suicides, séances, gang rape, guns, kidnapping, sex workers, adultery, and so forth) stands out profoundly in Almino’s quintet. This mixture of so-called literary and popular fiction causes defamiliarization because the reader is jolted between registers, forced to never fully fall into the fantasy world of the story and to never know quite how to label the book. The excessive turmoil experienced by characters—the president is killed, his sister commits suicide, their friend burns her house down in a suicide attempt—is normalized via narrations that allow little space for reflecting on one limited situation before moving on to the next one.

³ For a thoughtful interpretation of the barbarism of Galdino’s murder as it relates to Brazilian society and history, see Foot.

If one's only knowledge of Brasília came from reading the novels in Almino's Brasília quintet, one would glean an image of a prurient, socially segregated, and violent capital in scenes set from 1957 to about 2080. Monteiro argues that the Brasília of the first four novels in Almino's quintet reveals "uma falência de sonhos coletivos, da impossibilidade de que o ideal afinal se concretize" (63). In *As Cinco...*, characters reflect on the city being "a cidade do vazio," alluding to how characters' senses of fulfillment, trust, safety, happiness, and peace of mind are always short-lived or zeroed out (*As Cinco...* 150, 196). The constant references to the Plano Piloto's artificiality, to its lighting, to its apocalyptic appearance, and to the shimmering surface of the Lago Paranoá make Almino's Plano Piloto appear to be all surface, as if it were a stage set (*Ideias...* 78, 237; *As Cinco...* 13, 195). The Brasília quintet plays with the Plano Piloto's role as a slick façade that masks turmoil and dissatisfaction on the level of the individual and the nation. This rendering reflects the superficiality of Almino's elite cast of characters and the fragility of a young democracy, parodied in the quintet via the corrupt politician and rapist Eduardo Kaufman and the frivolous and sex-obsessed president Antônio Fernandes.

Despite Almino's stature as the novelist who earned Brasília a reputation as a literary city, his first four novels portray the capital as a wasteland for so-called high art. The two photographers featured—Cadu and Escadinha—exploit women's nudity and urban poverty respectively in their uninspiring photography in *O Livro...* Ana's favorite piece in her Brazilian art collection—housed in her lakefront Brasília home—is an Hélio Oiticica *Parangolé* described as being encased in glass (*Samba...* 80). The irony of a sculpture that was meant to be worn, danced in, or put into motion being displayed in such a static way is lost on the characters. It serves as a metaphor for the Plano Piloto: an ambitious art project that suffers from a lack of human interaction that would bring it to life, in part—as the novels describe—because the wealthy socialize in private spaces and the popular classes live miles away in the periphery. Yet the city does emerge as a vibrant home of the arts in its portrayals of popular cultural forms, such as the campy carnival

procession and the clever integration of samba, rock, and repente lyrics within *Samba-Enredo*, which challenge the binary of “high” and “low” art by using the latter as an integral component of the former. Writing in 1986, Vieira argues that “the recognized rise of popular culture in Brazil during the postmodernist era has incited many a polemic as to its value or place in relation to a more erudite, established, or aesthetically elitist culture,” a polemic Almino stirs in *Samba-Enredo* (“Hitler” 427).

After four novels featuring Joana, the reader knows more about her underwear, curves, wealth, and sexual escapades than about her emotions, career, or desires. Yet with Almino the reader always has the sense that the text is operating on more than one level. Could it be that this superficial characterization of Joana (and most of the other characters) is meant to scrutinize a human tendency to judge people in petty misguided ways? Yet when the novels do reveal the emotions, desires, and depth of characters—such as in the case of Cadu and Ana who have the opportunity to narrate for themselves—the reader is still struck with their incapacity to do right by themselves, their family, their friends, or their greater community. There is no possibility of redemption among these characters as Monteiro posits. Yet Monteiro also emphasizes the centrality of emotions in the first four novels of the quintet, but these emotions seem artificial, wavering between overly detached and melodramatic.

Cidade Livre, however, in its character development and its lack of a stark contrast between form and content, takes a different tack. It reads as a different genre than the previous four novels. There is less melodrama and pulp topics; the scenes are more believable; characters are more complex; the subject matter is broader and more historical; the reader can empathize with characters; many of the scenes take place in public spaces; and it is a better wrought novel than the first four. It shares its predecessors’ scathing critique of all forms of religion, mocking people’s faith that prayer can solve real world tribulations, such as cancer. It also shares the setting of Brasília; the prostitute-turned-prophetess character, Íris, featured in the entire quintet; nontraditional

families; allusions to Brazilian literature; a nonlinear plot; and *Samba-Enredo*'s and *O Livro das Emoções*'s humor, one of Almino's great strengths as a writer.

While the first four novels render Brasília's elite via parody and pulp, *Cidade Livre* awakens more of a critical consciousness about fiction's stake in interpreting Brasília. It shares its precursors' metafictional focus, but to a markedly different end. The novel employs Dominick LaCapra's concept of *empathic unsettlement*: a middle ground between a conventional narrative structure that allows readers to comprehend the represented other and jolting literary techniques that highlight that one's understanding of someone else's pain is always incomplete. The novel's conventional narrative triggers readers' empathy for the manual laborer Valdivino by telling his story, expressing his emotions, and using thick description. Yet, it simultaneously uses disruptive literary methods to acknowledge the limits of the readers' understanding of this character whose death is a mystery that drives the plot.

Via interruptions of the narrative; confluences of author, narrator, and editor; and the guise of a text that is being written collaboratively on a blog, *Cidade Livre* destabilizes authority.⁴ This invites liberating—though limited—possibilities for readers, which engage two seminal essays on this topic: Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author." Barthes, in an attempt to free texts from being interpreted in just one way, advocates for abandoning interpretations based on the author's biography or beliefs and, instead, accepting that a book is about language (a "tissue of signs"). He argues that all readers will bring their own interpretation to it. In addition, Barthes emphasizes that no text is fully original since its author recycles ideas, phrasing, and cultural norms. However, his argument about how to interpret contradicts his argument about originality. How could a reader understand what the author borrows without context of the historical moment and geographic place of the text's author? This contradiction is addressed by Foucault who argues:

⁴ For an analysis of the narrator's desire to keep his identity ambiguous in order to have more freedom—a literary game that inverts the roles of the object and its creator—see Assman Saraiva pp. 202-203 and Zilberman pp. 30-31.

It would be pure romanticism, however, to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure (914).

The novel's questioning of authority, in line with Foucault (as well as decades of Vieira's research on contemporary Brazilian fiction), calls to "re-examine the privileges of the subject" and to question how authors and critics police meaning (Foucault 913). The novel explores the contrast between public figures' published interpretations of Brasília that have influenced public opinion about the city versus the popular classes' interpretations of the capital that go unpublished. Thus, *Cidade Livre* approaches Brasília like a text whose interpretation has been overly policed.

Yet Almino plays with his own subject position, being himself a public figure whose writings on Brasília influence public interpretations. He has, after all, been nicknamed the Novelist of Brasília (Costa Couto; Resende). The many references to author Almino in the novel have the effect of drawing attention to his cultural capital in comparison to the lack thereof of the novel's subject, Valdivino. To have Almino intervene in the narrative as an editor calls attention to the distance between his own reality and that of the characters he makes up. This strategy both emphasizes his place of privilege and his incapacity to fully understand other people's hardship (LaCapra 40).

Almino's Brasília quintet constitutes what literary critic Patricia Waugh refers to as *metafictional novels* capable of a form of social criticism rooted in stylistic interventions. Such novels deviate from the conventions of the realist novel, which like "everyday language," tends to sustain power structures through "a naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently 'innocent' representations" of the "real" world (11). She argues that "metafiction thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism" (11). *Free City's* narration unsettles readers. Its blog commentators become so caught up in small details of Brasília's founding that they fail to see the big picture their accounts

evoke: inequality, a history of land speculation that haunts the capital, and the overwhelming feeling of unregulated violence.

Although Vieira himself has not written on Almino's work, Vieira offers a key for interpreting the disconnections between style and form and the reflections on language and authority found in the Brasília quintet. As Vieira has argued for decades, Brazil's contemporary urban fiction—via its seemingly mismatched content and form—draws attention to language's ability to enforce or contest hegemonic power dynamics. It heightens the readers' consciousness about what types of violence do and do not elicit shock. At best, fiction stirs readers to think about their own place in the world and their own understanding of language. The Brasília quintet's combination of exaggeration (the plots) and familiarity (the dialogues and the interior monologues) leads readers to a heightened consciousness about discourses of power in day-to-day relations in contemporary cities. The interconnectedness of material and imaginary components in literature triggers for readers their own perception of cities. That perception is simultaneously subjective and objective, emotional and detached, fragmented and unified, continuously in flux, and full of stories. Brazilian contemporary urban literature exposes the discourses of power inherent in shaping the image of the city and the possibility of imagining new types of cities to inhabit.

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Sophia Beal is the author of *The Art of Brasília: 2000-2019* (forthcoming in 2020 with Palgrave Macmillan), *Brazil under Construction: Fiction and Public Works* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and co-editor (along with Bruce Robbins and Michael Rubenstein) of *Infrastructuralism* (2015), a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*. Her 2013 book was published in Portuguese translation (Editora Zouk, 2017) with the title *Brasil em construção: as obras públicas na literatura do século XX*. She is an Associate Professor of Portuguese in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Artigo convidado.