

Fragments, Patterns, and the Modernization of the City through the Crônicas of João do Rio

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For the journalist and *cronista* João do Rio (1881–1921), the changing role of the writer in *belle époque* Rio de Janeiro was fused into the kaleidoscope of the city itself. The project of modernization was one of both destruction and renovation. Through João do Rio's *crônicas*, we see the city broken into fragments, and the pieces rearranged in new and unexpected ways. Likewise, we see the writer trying to redefine his role in society through innovative artistic forms of expression. João do Rio chose the *crônica* as his preferred literary genre, but in a way, it was the *crônica* that chose him, influencing him as a writer. Paying special attention to all things non-traditional, he would explore the meaning of everyday activities, help to disseminate new ideas, and document changes in a city eager to become modern. He would come across a variety of characters and places, including adolescents who made a living by collecting and selling used rags, opium dens full of naked Chinese immigrants, obsessed window shoppers with no money, and cruel policemen who made fun of homeless orphans before arresting them for vagrancy. He would often bring these marginal characters into the center of his writings as he theorized about the space of the city. Fascinated by the creative ways in which the most destitute of people managed to survive while simultaneously aware of his own relation to the marketplace as a wage-earning specialist, he would publish his findings about the city and its people in *crônicas* in order to make a living for himself as a journalist. Much of what he would come across while strolling about would have a dizzying effect on him, prompting him to refer to the city as a “cosmopolis num kaleidoscopio” (*Alma* 98).¹

1. THE RECASTING OF LITERARY FORMS

João do Rio was not a mere reporter of facts, but instead an artist who actively inserted himself in the changing role of writing. Traditional conceptions of literary forms and genres had been called into question in the late nineteenth century, due in large part to the explosion of journalistic writing. This trend continued into the twentieth century, leading Walter Benjamin to note that “we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force” (“Author” 224). Literary genres such as the novel or the tragedy, for example, have not always existed, and there is no reason to believe that they will necessarily persist in the future. The *crônica*, as a new genre in the early twentieth century, reflected the changing role of writing in society.

Benjamin argued that the newspaper indiscriminately assimilated the facts. The result is a literary confusion that would seem to lead to the decline of writing. While this may have happened in many cases, it could also be the formula for the revival in writing. In his study “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin gives what was perhaps the clearest example of this during his time, which was that of the Soviet Union:

For as writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the conventional distinction between author and public, which is upheld by the bourgeois press, begins in the Soviet press to disappear. For the reader is at all times ready to become a writer, that is, a describer, but also a prescriber. As an expert—even if not on a subject but only on the post he occupies—he gains access to authorship. Work itself has its turn to speak. (225)

While João do Rio did not subordinate his art to politics, the comparison is nonetheless valid in that he served as a bridge between the literary elite and the general public. His social positioning gave him insight to both the perspective of the author as well as that of the reader. He was a *reader turned author*. The function of his work far outweighed its intention in importance. As Benjamin points out in the same article, it is common to ask what the *attitude* of a work is to relations of production (in the Marxist sense), but what really matters is not its attitude but instead what the *position* is in them (222). In other words, the degree to which a literary work can be considered

revolutionary or reactionary is less important than the work's function within the relations of production. Thus, the "mighty process of recasting" that Benjamin talks about affects not only the traditional distinctions between genres, but also the traditional distinctions made between writer and poet, and between author and reader. The press is perhaps the best example of this, and therefore, must be included in any discussion about the writer as producer.

Aware of his ambiguous identity as a writer, journalist, ordinary citizen, and profit-making vendor concerned with innovative literary forms, João do Rio was proud to be recognized by the Academia Brasileira de Letras. He was accepted in 1910 at 29 years of age, the youngest member to ever have been admitted. This was an exceptional achievement, especially considering that he was recognized not as a novelist, but rather as a journalist. He insisted that any writer could be a diplomat, while not every diplomat could be a writer: "Arte não póde estar ao alcance de qualquer, mesmo ministro plenipotenciario" ("Resposta" 190). Of course, a eulogy of the Academia from within that institution is perhaps not the most objective opinion, as is obvious when he suggests that "A Academia é, entretanto, a alta esphera de onde deve irradiar a chamma conductora do bem da patria" (192). Still, his words reflect his esteem for writing, which he believed was undermined by journalists and other writers who lacked literary talent. He resented the fact that many people had ended up in the profession of writing due not to any particular abilities, but rather due to having failed at everything else, which is the topic of one crônica in *Cinematographo*:

Um cidadão qualquer fracassou em todas as profissões, quebrou, foi posto fóra de um club de jogo. Que faz? É jornalista. Aquelle moço bonito, cuja bolsa parca só se compara á opulencia de vontade de frequentar as rodas chics, vê-se a beira do abismo? Não ha hesitações. Faz-se jornalista. O idiota que quer gastar dinheiro, o industrial esperto, o politico com appetites de chefe, estão em crise? Surge imediatamente o jornal para lançal-os, lançado por elles. (261–62)

He complained that, in Brazil, one does not need to have any particular qualities, such as style, good grammar, experience, or even common sense in order to be a journalist.

João do Rio's praise for the prestigious Academia Brasileira de Letras and his disdain for untalented journalists might seem to suggest an elitist perspective of the role of literature in society, but in fact, it is just the opposite. He was accepted by the literary elite of Rio de Janeiro and attempted to utilize his prominence to question traditional ideas of literary genres while at the same time distance himself from those who used writing merely as a means to earn money. Furthermore, he used his writing to communicate both with the common people and with the socially elite.

The genres João do Rio adopted for writing, such as the *crônica* and reportage, were chosen, in no small part, because of the facility with which these styles of writing could find an audience by way of the newspaper. Even when he deviated from his writing of articles and *crônicas*, his journalistic style would persist, as is clear when reading his novels. Jacques Pedreira, the protagonist of his first novel, *A profissão de Jacques Pedreira* (1911), and arguably one of his greatest literary inventions, is a transparent, two-dimensional character that, as Flora Süssekind points out, "seems to have stepped right out of an illustrated magazine" (55). He embodies the fashion styles and the frivolousness of the *carioca* elite, and leads the life of a dandy. Many aspects of the sort of lifestyle led by Jacques Pedreira would be explored by João do Rio in his *crônicas*. For example, in the *crônica* "Flirt," João do Rio explains how flirting has in large part taken the place of love in modern society. It is explained in terms of a novelty, of something new that the older generation would likely not understand. It is also described as an urban phenomenon, happening quickly and spontaneously. For these reasons, it has much in common with the *crônica*, which is written and read quickly, unlike the longer, more cumbersome novel, which was more suitable for a slower lifestyle: "O Flirt corresponde a electricidade, e a rapidez contemporaneas, e literalmente assim como o romance correspondia á fatal paixão—hoje reflecte o unico genero de literatura lido—a chronica" (*Psicologia* 138). Through the fictitious character of Jacques Pedreira, João do Rio writes a continuation of his *crônica* on the phenomenon of flirting. These are examples of how João do Rio's fiction was intertwined with his journalism, and how he attempted to elevate the *crônica* to the status of a literary genre.

Süssekind refers to the "mimetic relationship with journalistic language" in the fiction of João do Rio (7). The clearest example of this

is perhaps *A correspondência de uma estação de cura* (1918), a novel that consists solely of a series of letters written by guests in a resort town. There is no narrator, which forces the reader to link the letters in order to create a coherent whole. This absence of a narrator highlights the novel's relation to journalistic writings. The letters are juxtaposed in a seemingly arbitrary way but, due to the content of the letters, one could argue there is a newspaper-like organization, including a literary section, an opinion column, and other such parts determined by each writer's area of interest. It is as if each letter writer were a columnist for a certain section of a newspaper. This is an example not only of the relation between literature and journalism in João do Rio, but also of the relation between author and reader: the reader must actively engage with the written text in order to construct a novel lacking a narrator.

While João do Rio enjoyed much professional success during his lifetime, future generations have been somewhat less kind to him. The crossing of literary boundaries is perhaps one of the main reasons that he has often been excluded from histories of Brazilian literature. Crediting him with having been a great journalist but a poor writer of other genres, Lúcia Miguel Pereira insisted in 1950 in the *História da literatura brasileira* that João do Rio “pertence inegavelmente à sub-literatura, no que toca à ficção—novela, conto, ou teatro” (277). While he has been more highly regarded by recent critics, he continues to be seen as marginal to the canon.

2. THE MODERNIZATION OF RIO DE JANEIRO

José Luis Romero demonstrates in *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* how the combination of being both a port city and a capital city proved to be an optimal condition for the project of modernity in Latin America: Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro being the best examples. Through their ports, they received the latest news, ideas, and styles from Europe. They were furthermore the destination of the majority of European immigrants, who brought with them not only their labor power, but also their cultures. While the geographical location of Rio de Janeiro contributed to the flourishing of modernity, it also led to some undesired consequences in the early twentieth century. As João do Rio explains:

[S]ão ruas da proximidade do mar, ruas viajadas, com
a visão de outros horisontes. Abri uma dessas posilgas

que são a parte do seu organismo. Haveis de ver chineses bebados de opio, marinheiros embrutecidos pelo alcool, feiticeiros ululando canções sinistras, toda a estranha vida dos portos de mar. E esses beccos, essas betesgas têm a perfidia dos oceanos, a miseria das emigrações, e o vicio, o grande vicio do mar e das colonias [. . .]. (*Alma* 15)

Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century was economically dependent on countries of the North Atlantic, primarily France and England. The tremendous influence that these countries had on Brazil went far beyond the realm of economics. They were the role models for “civilization” and “progress.” Brazil sought to reinvent its capital city of Rio de Janeiro based on nineteenth-century Paris, focusing on the massive urban projects of demolition and reconstruction carried out there from 1853 to 1870, dreamed of and realized by Napoleon III and the administrator Georges Eugene Haussmann. During that period, Haussmann oversaw the construction and demolition of overcrowded, slum ridden, working class neighborhoods. Huge monuments and modern buildings replaced dilapidated houses. Paris became both a symbolic and a practical city, and would come to serve as a model for Rio de Janeiro and other Latin American cities in the twentieth century.

The most significant modernization projects in Rio de Janeiro took place under the impetus of Rio’s mayor Pereira Passos, working first under President Campos Sales (1898–1902), and then under President Rodriquez Alves (1902–1906). This administration widened the dark and narrow streets of the *cidade velha*, which allowed for better movement through the city, more light, and better circulation of air. They renovated and modernized the old port. They tore down old buildings and built new streets, including the new avenues, which connected the *cidade velha* to the port, to Zona Sul, and to Zona Norte. The streets were paved, and sidewalks were constructed. Pereira Passos also used his influence to implement new city ordinances in his general attack on traditional *carioca* life. It became prohibited to do many things in the streets, such as sell pigs, fresh milk, and other food, or leave meat hanging in the doorways of butcher shops. He also banned stray dogs and ordered the façades of buildings to be repainted regularly.

Symbolic proof that Brazil was becoming “civilized” and “modern” appeared almost immediately. Some 590 buildings were

torn down in an 18-month period between 1904 and 1905, as well as chunks of the *morros* of São Bento and Castelo, in the construction of the new Avenida Central that would divide the *cidade velha* in North and South. Once completed, *façades* clearly modeled after Haussmann and France's Beaux-Arts lined the avenues. The latest fashions in clothing and goods were displayed in shop windows, accentuating the importance of the expanding consumer economy. Monumental constructions such as the Teatro Municipal and the Biblioteca Nacional reflected the grandeur of European culture. This was a metaphor for a new era. A rupture with the past symbolized the optimism for the future (Needell 127–9).²

João do Rio welcomed all things new but, more insightful than many of his contemporaries, he recognized the new as just as ephemeral as the old. In a *crônica* entitled “A pintura das ruas,” he visits some artists painting in the streets, and comes across one painting in particular that gets his attention. It is of the new Avenida Central, which was a symbol and proof of a new, modernized Rio de Janeiro. The city's progress had been captured by this unknown painter, and would thus be preserved forever on the canvas. Of course, “forever” meant merely until the time in which they tore down the street on which the painting was found:

O pintor, naturalmente agitado pelo orgulho que se apossou de todos nós ao vermos a Avenida Central, resolveu pintá-la, torná-la imorredoura, da rua do Ouvidor á Prainha. A concepção era grandiosa, o assumpto era vasto—o advento do nosso progresso estatelava-se alli para todo o sempre, *enquanto não se demolir a rua do Nuncio.* (*Alma* 83–4)
(The italics are mine.)

Clearly, everything was changing, and what was here today might very well be gone tomorrow. João do Rio's *crônicas* are like literary snapshots of modernity that attempt to capture the fleeting moment.

3. RIO DE JANEIRO'S TWENTIETH-CENTURY *FLÂNEUR*

There was an intimate relation between the city and the writer in the case of João do Rio.³ The experience of walking around Rio de Janeiro allowed him to absorb the urban landscape, and continuously deepen his understanding of the city and its inhabitants. This experience of

wandering about the city was, of course, not invented by João do Rio. Raymond Williams notes that “perception of the new qualities of the modern city had been associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets” (233). Out of the context of nineteenth-century Paris came the *flâneur*: the idler and wanderer who is a keen observer of the streets, fashion, professions, personality types, and every other detail of everyday life in the city. Strolling had not been possible in many parts of Paris until Haussmann came along. Widened streets and sidewalks gave the stroller a much safer place to walk. Even more important was the invention of the arcades, which offered lighted passageways, lined with shops through entire complexes of houses. The street then became a sort of dwelling for the stroller, or *flâneur* (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 37). The new boulevards, cafés, and arcades combined public and private spaces. These spaces became voyeuristic zones for the *flâneur*, who is most at home in the midst of the crowds. Well versed in the French literary traditions of the nineteenth century, João do Rio assumed the role of the *flâneur*, wandering about the city with a watchful eye, observing the people and the streets of Rio de Janeiro. His wandering was reminiscent of that of Charles Baudelaire’s poem “The Sun”: “I walk alone, absorbed in my curious exercise / Dueling with words that dodge in corners and byways” (5–6). As Baudelaire strolled the streets of nineteenth-century Paris, João do Rio would do the same in twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro.⁴

João do Rio’s *crônicas* bear witness to the evolving role of the writer in society. The writer would have to fight for an artistic identity while conforming to the socio-economic demands of the market. The new Rio de Janeiro was open for interpretation. João do Rio would construct a particular vision of the city for his readers that allowed for a special place for the writer. Not wanting to be reduced to the status of a mere wage-earning specialist, he sought to emphasize the social importance of the work of the *cronista*, which necessarily required wandering about the city. As Benjamin explains, “Basic to *flânerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor” (*Arcades* 453).

João do Rio’s first step was to insert himself into the city as a pedestrian. The presence of pedestrians is perhaps the first criterion for a city to be able to exist as a social system comprised of spacial and human elements. “The act of walking,” according to Michel de

Certeau, “is to the urban system what the act of speaking, the *Speech Act*, is to language or to spoken utterance” (106). The pedestrian appropriates the topographic system, realizes its spatial dimensions, and relates distinct positions through movement. This is akin to the way in which a speaker appropriates language, puts it into use through sound waves, and establishes communication with other speakers. “A first definition of walking thus seems to be a space of uttering” (Certeau 106).

Rio de Janeiro in the early twentieth century had much in common with Paris of the mid-nineteenth century. The urban reforms of Paris that created both a physical and literary space for the *flâneur* inspired the modernization of Rio de Janeiro, which had similar consequences. The new Rio was an unwritten book, and João do Rio would become one of its most insightful authors as he wandered throughout the city, relating his experiences in fragments. *Flanar*, the Portuguese word for playing the role of the *flâneur*, is referred to as a sport and as an art by João do Rio. But it is also a form of identification, a way of inserting himself into his own narration. It is what gives him access to what he calls the soul of the street, and it is a way of creating a place for himself as a writer in society. João do Rio explains:

Flanar! Ahi está um verbo universal sem entrada nos dicionários, que não pertence a nenhuma língua! Que significa flanar? Flanar é ser vagabundo e reflectir, é ser basbaque e commentar, ter o virus da observação ligado ao da vadiagem. (*Alma* 7)

It involves wandering, observing, and mixing with everyone and everything, including the most diverse and outrageous elements of the population. The *flâneur* always has a head full of ideas, and constantly speculates on the professions, concerns, and crimes of the people in the streets. He goes about indiscriminately, content with all he finds:

O *flâneur* é o *bonhomme* possuidor de uma alma igualitaria e risonha, fallando aos notaveis e aos humildes com doçura, porque de ambos conhece a face misteriosa, e cada vez mais se convence da inutilidade da colera e da necessidade do perdão [. . .]. (*Alma* 8)

João do Rio wants to see himself as a *flâneur*, and indeed has much in common with this nineteenth-century social and literary figure. Yet, his relationship to the crowds is different from that of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Literary representations of an individual overtaken by the sensation of being amidst a big-city crowd go back at least as far as Poe's classic "The Man of the Crowd," in which the protagonist is compelled to follow a stranger through the crowded streets of London in order to study his behavior. The protagonist, however, is an external observer in this story, going unnoticed by the crowds and by the man he is following: "Never once turning his head to look back, he did not observe me" (312). Even when the protagonist allows himself to be seen, he goes unnoticed, as the other man sees him as an anonymous face in the crowd: "I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation" (314). For the *flâneur*, the possibility of seeing without being seen was an essential part of wandering. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire comments on this aspect of *flânerie*:

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (9)

By João do Rio's time, something profound had occurred in the composition of Western cities. As they became modernized, the crowds grew to such an extent that the multitude ceased to be something external, and became intrinsic: the observer had come to recognize himself as a part of the multitude which, in some ways, negated his privileged perspective as a *flâneur*, who was a marginalized character that remained largely unaffected by all that went on around him.

As with the pre-Hausmann Parisian *flâneur*, the twentieth-century *Carioca flâneur* would not have had a very extensive space for

strolling before the city became modernized. And even with Pereira Passos's great effort to adapt Hausmann's project in Paris to Rio de Janeiro, turning Rio into the Paris of South America would prove difficult for many reasons. Its colonial past was not easy to overcome. Furthermore, it was in the tropics, and some things, such as London-style public gardens, made little sense there. Also, the technology had changed drastically by the beginning of the twentieth century. The invention of the automobile alone would have a huge influence on how streets were designed. Pereira Passos's modernization project could never really imitate that of Paris, but it could certainly adapt it to a new place and time.

Likewise, João do Rio would have to reinvent the *flâneur* to a new, Brazilian reality. The time of the classic Baudelairian *flâneur* had long since passed. The arcades went out of style, which meant the demise of the stroller. Furthermore, where that other, nineteenth-century *flâneur* could offer comforting remedies for the social problems of the era, urbanization in João do Rio's time was taking on a less positive connotation as cities became overcrowded. The view of the city as the optimal place for progress and social ascension was turning into a vision of the menacing dangers of the big city. The leisurely stroller of the nineteenth century would eventually turn into more of a detective in the crime-ridden metropolis of the twentieth century. As Julio Ramos puts it, "The rhetoric of strolling, previously formalized in the *crônica*, becomes a paradigmatic mode of representation for the dangers of a new urban life" (136).

In Baudelaire's time, the *flâneur* liked to consider himself a bohemian gentleman, not a wage-earning worker in a capitalist society. As Benjamin explains: "His leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists. It is also his protest against their industriousness" (*Charles Baudelaire* 54). This would seemingly make the *flâneur* of the twentieth century, now fully aware of his position as a wage-earning specialist, an anachronism. Or even worse: as the writer is stripped of his elevated social status as an intellectual and ultimately reduced to his labor power, his condition comes to resemble that of the prostitute. Ramos asks: "[I]s not the *crônica* precisely an incorporation of art into the market, into the emergent culture industry? And was not mercantilization, following the idealism professed by many modernists, a form of prostitution?" (139).

We witness João do Rio not wanting to see himself as a mere commodity in “Os mercadores de livros e a leitura das ruas,” in which a “chusma incontável” of book vendors spreads out in the streets every morning with cheap editions of prayers pamphlets, collections of popular songs, love stories, and other publications of little literary merit (*Alma* 74). Turning a huge profit, these book vendors are completely uninterested in literature, and are merely trying to sell a product. He refers to the trade as:

[E]ssa prospera profissão da miséria, que todas as cidades têm, avida e lamentável, num arregimentar de pobres propagandistas do Evangelho e do Espiritismo, de homens que a sorte deixou de proteger, de malandros cynicos, de rapazes vadios [. . .]. (*Alma* 75-6)

He watches others as if he were looking through a mirror, perhaps afraid of being identified with either the vendors or the low-brow literature circulating in the streets. Like these vendors, he too was a seller of the written word, writing for newspapers in exchange for money. The literary field is not only a field of forces, but also a field of struggles, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued (312). João do Rio struggled to redefine his role as a writer before the cultural industry had been established in Brazil, but with the realization that writing was increasingly linked to the marketplace. Shocked at seeing something of his own reflection in the street vendors’ trade, he tries desperately to distance himself as a writer as much as possible. Once the *flâneur* recognizes himself in the marketplace, he certainly loses his innocence, if not his entire reason of being. Ramos explains this identity crisis that the *flâneur* experiences:

Once the writer—his protective veil broken—recognizes his reflection in the glass showcase, he begins to see himself as an other, at times as a prostitute. Among other things, the decorative assemblage of beauty becomes complicated. Beginning with this moment, the *literato*, even the chronicler, ceases to be a compliant *flâneur*. (140)

It was not possible for João do Rio to overlook his labor power as a commodity. He was undeniably integrated into the marketplace.

His originality lies in that he went out of his way to redefine himself as a *flâneur*, not out of self-denial or ignorance, but rather out of a keen awareness of his situation. While the Baudelairian *flâneur* created a space for himself in society by resisting the division of labor that would have turned him into a specialist, João do Rio would create a space for himself as a prevailing *flâneur* in spite of his wage-earning status. If the streets were a “transformadora de línguas” (*Alma* 5), then the unique streets of Rio could certainly provide João do Rio with a particular definition of the word *flâneur*. He sought to embrace everything that the new city of masses had to offer, good and bad, and from within the vortex of modernity, find a place for himself as a writer.

João do Rio parts from the traditional role of the *flâneur* in other ways as well. Whereas the traditional *flâneur* is a pedestrian, this is not the case in “Como se ouve a missa do ‘gallo.’” Hoping to see several midnight masses (not out of any sort of religious devotion, but rather out of his relentless curiosity about human behavior), he travels by car, and instructs the driver where to go. In this *crônica*, we are able to catch a glimpse of the chaos brought about by the new, overcrowded city, combined with the presence of the automobile competing for space, in streets that were not intended for such modern inventions. All this occurs in the context of the midnight mass on Christmas Eve, a popular occasion attracting people from the most diverse backgrounds. João do Rio’s first destination is Copacabana, and the trip begins peacefully as they travel down the newly constructed Beira-Mar Avenue, now fully illuminated by electric lighting. Other cars are on the road, and the passengers are the wealthy elite of Rio, proud to show off their wealth, and see others of their class do the same. Everything is going fine until they reach the end of the avenue and must enter the old streets:

Quando, no fim da avenida, os automoveis seguiram pelas antigas ruas, cada encontro de bonde era uma catastrophe. Os *tramways*, apesar de comboiarem tres carros, iam com gente até nos tejadilhos, e essa gente furiosa, numa furia que lembrava bem a vertigem de Dionysios, berrava, apostrophava, atirava bengaladas num despejo de corpos e de conveniencias. Entretanto, pelas mesmas ruas, a corrida augmentava e era uma disparada louca entre vociferações, sons de corneta, *tren-ten-tems* de bondes, estalar de chicote.

Quando passámos o tunnel num fracasso de metralha e demos nos campos de Copacabana, a velocidade foi vertiginosa [. . .]. (*Alma* 136)

This sort of high-paced, whirlwind description of Rio de Janeiro can also be seen in João do Rio's novel *A profissão de Jacques Pedreira*. As in the novel, João do Rio describes in the above citation the clash of the old with the new in a rapidly modernizing Rio de Janeiro. One of the most salient characteristics of the *new* was the speed of it all: the speed of social and physical transformation of the city, and the speed of the automobile from which João do Rio liked to observe his surroundings. This is in sharp contrast to literary works of the same period such as Godofredo Rangel's *Vida ociosa*, which takes place on a farm, and most of the events occur within a single day. It is as if the present were intentionally slowed down to highlight the difference between country and city life in this novel. Conversely, there seems to be an acceleration of time in João do Rio's writings. As Sússekind explains, "While the *cronista* attempts to incorporate into his own writing the haste that is characteristic of urban life, the regionalist writer tries to reconstruct the unhurried pace of the backwoods" (64). The new metropolitan culture of Rio was a world in and of itself, and João do Rio, like many writers from the city, was largely detached from the countryside. This is a twentieth-century phenomenon, as Williams explains:

City experience was now becoming so widespread, and writers, disproportionately, were so deeply involved in it, that there seemed little reality in any other mode of life; all sources of perception seemed to begin and end in the city, and if there was anything beyond it, it was also beyond life. (235)

In "Como se ouve a missa do 'gallo,'" João do Rio's description of the chaos he encounters upon arriving at the church captures the essence of the *mass* (not the religious ceremony of the Catholic Church, but rather *mass* in the sense of an aggregation of many people):

Cerca de tres mil pessoas—pessoas de todas as classes, desde a mais alta e a mais rica á mais pobre e á mais baixa, enchia

aquelle trecho, subia promontorio acima. E o aspecto era edificante. Grupos de rapazes apostavam em altos berros subir á igreja pela rocha; mulheres em desvario galgavam a correr por outro lado, patinhando a lama viscosa. Todos os trajes, todas as cores se confundiam num amalgama formidavel, todos os temperamentos, todas as taras, todos os excessos, todas as perversões se entrelaçavam. [. . .] Todo esse pessoal gritava. (*Alma* 136-7)

João do Rio is clearly fascinated by this mass culture and compelled to participate, which he does by attending such events, and then writing down his experiences and impressions, and publishing them in the form of *crônicas*.

The actual midnight mass is of little, if any importance to him. His only real interest is in the experience of going from church to church in search of crowds of people to observe. The crowds are his true interest, but moving about by car in search of the crowds is certainly another interest and pleasure. He arrives by car, leaves by car, and in this way is able to see not one, but many midnight masses in the same night. It effectively allows him to be in many places at the same time, analogous to the way in which the newspaper, so much a part of João do Rio's existence, allowed readers to experience many different places at once. The automobile has given him a sense of freedom that would have been unknown to the previous generation. It is a metaphor for the rapid transformations that occurred both on the physical level of the city, as buildings were torn down and streets were widened, as well as on the social level, as Brazilians became aware that they were embarking on a journey into an uncertain future. In another *crônica*, João do Rio comments on this most modern of inventions: "E, subitamente, é a era do Automovel. O monstro transformador irrompeu, bufando, por entre os descombros da cidade velha, e como nas magicas e na natureza, asperrima educadora, tudo transformou com apparencias novas e novas aspirações" (Vida 3).

4. THEORIZING THE STREETS

While the differences between the rich and the poor were perhaps as apparent in João do Rio's time as they are today, the spirit of modernity lent itself well to a general feeling of optimism. The street is a public space, heterogeneous by definition. It can be a space of conflict, but

most importantly, it is a point of contact. If streets did not make the injustices go away, it was thought, they at least offered a space in which people of diverse backgrounds and their corresponding ideas could come into contact with one another and dispute, challenge, agree, or disagree. It is this sort of optimism about modernity that can be seen in much of João do Rio's writing, and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in his detailed explanations of the real and symbolic meaning of the street. His insightful observations of the continuously changing nature of the streets can be seen as a precursor to a theory of the city. Certeau would later argue that the concept of the city functions as "a site of transformations and appropriations, the object of interventions, but also a subject continually being enriched with new attributes: simultaneously the plant and the hero of modernity" (104). This concept was clear to João do Rio many years before it was articulated by Certeau.

Perhaps his most noteworthy analysis of the importance of the street is a *crônica* appropriately entitled "A rua." Far more than a mere physical space through which people pass, a street, for João do Rio, is a living entity which has a soul and a personality, as suggested by the title of the book in which the *crônica* was published in 1908: *A alma encantadora das ruas*. The *cronista* is the keen observer of the street, but the reader also plays an important role in the discovery of the soul of the street, as Renato Cordeiro Gomes has noted: "A alma encantadora, contudo, não está aí previamente dada: é construção do flâneur e, colado a ele, do leitor" (69).

João do Rio believes in the streets' ability to bring people together: "Nós somos irmãos, nós nos sentimos parecidos e iguaes, nas cidades, nas aldeias, nos povoados, não porque sofframos, com a dor e os desprazeres, a lei e a policia, mas porque nos une, nivela e agremia o amor da rua" (*Alma* 3). He says that every house was built with human sweat, and the street, which encompasses the buildings that line it, feels the pain and effort of all those who contributed to it: "A rua sente nos nervos essa miseria da criação, e por isso é a mais igualitaria, a mais socialista, a mais niveladora das obras humanas" (*Alma* 5). João do Rio's view of the street as an egalitarian space challenges the traditional dichotomy of public and private spaces. He sees Brazil as a gigantic house whose inhabitants are all linked by a general sense of solidarity.⁵ Within this house, the residents move seamlessly from room to room through doorways that serve less as barriers than thresholds.

The street is not limited to the strict dictionary meaning. It constantly escapes definition due to its continuously transforming nature. Furthermore, it has the power to change languages. The dictionary is conservative by nature, in that, it attempts to fix the meanings of words, and only reluctantly acknowledges new words or new meanings of words. On the other hand, the street, as a heterogeneous social space, is a vehicle through which words can freely mutate without having to conform to fixed meanings:

A rua é a transformadora das linguas. [. . .] A rua contínua, matando substantivos, transformando a significação dos termos, impondo aos dicionarios as palavras que inventa, criando o calão que é o patrimonio classico dos lexicons futuros. (*Alma* 5)

The street defies the logic of the dictionary, and subverts the authority of it. According to João do Rio, a dictionary will define a street as a mere thoroughfare, yet it is that and much more. It is also a public space, and it is precisely in that space that new words are invented and existing words take on new meanings. New slang is invented, foreign words are adopted, and common words are used in new contexts, as people search for new forms of expression. As Raúl Antelo explains, the street “transforma as normas e a gramática, tudo acolhe e até consagra o medíocre” (13).

João do Rio claims that streets are living entities. Each one has its own personality. The Rua do Ouvidor, for example, is the braggart: “É a fanfarronada em pessoa, exaggerando, mentindo, tomando parte em tudo, mas desertando, correndo os taipaes das montras á mais leve sombra de perigo” (*Alma* 11). The Rua da Misericórdia, on the other hand, is described as “perpetuamente lamentavel,” with its dilapidated buildings and dingy lodging houses (*Alma* 11). This street is symbolic of the origin of the city, and a constant reminder of the horrors of the colonial past, which Brazil as a country was desperately trying to forget by the early twentieth century.

João do Rio was somewhat of a paradox. He was clearly fascinated by the more marginal sectors of society, as can easily be noted by his indiscriminate wandering through the streets of Rio de Janeiro, and his mixing with people of all walks of life. At the same time, he was accepted by the *Carioca* elite and found a way to portray them

more or less the way they wanted to see themselves. With a keen sense of his surroundings, he was able to actively insert himself into society as a writer, and disseminate both his own ideas as well as those of others. Furthermore, he was able to make timeless the ephemeral by chronicling the events of a rapidly transforming world in a highly unique literary language. He clearly represented the fragments of society rather than the whole, and yet those fragments came from such a wide range of places, and were so vividly portrayed in his writings, that it is as if the streets and the people in them molded together, along with the very pages on which they were described, forming an inseparable unity of author, characters, and city.

Notes

1. The original orthography has been carefully maintained in this and other citations from early editions.

2. Some other public works overseen by Pereira Passos besides the ones already mentioned include: the Leme Tunnel, the Avenida Atlântica de Copacabana (connecting Flamengo and Botafogo), the construction of a new *mercado municipal*, and the construction and embellishment of many plazas, such as the Praça XV, Praça 11 de Junho, Praça Tiradentes, Praça Glória, el Largo do Machado, the Passeio Público, and Campo de Santana (Needell 127–9).

3. João do Rio was born João Paulo Alberto Coelho Barreto. He used many different pseudonyms of which the most famous was João do Rio.

4. There are striking similarities between Charles Baudelaire and João do Rio, especially in their identification with the literary and social figures of the *flâneur* and the dandy. In reality, Baudelaire died in Paris in 1867, some fourteen years before João do Rio was born. However, the parallels between the two inspired the historical novel by Iterbio Galiano Aldrighti entitled *Doidas conversas: João do Rio, o anfitrião de Charles Baudelaire* (2001). The novel takes place in Rio de Janeiro, shortly after the construction of the Avenida Central. Baudelaire visits the Brazilian capital, and becomes friends with João do Rio. Turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro is brought to life with the conversations between the two *flâneurs*, which include many passages from João do Rio's *crônicas*.

5. A similar argument is made by Roberto Da Matta in *A casa e a rua: espaço, cidadania, mulher e morte no Brasil*.

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