



The vast cityscape of São Paulo.
(Photo by Ana Paula Hirama.)

On the Impossibility of Narrating

by Luiz Ruffato (translated by Deborah Meacham)

I'm from Brazil, a third-world country on the edge of capitalism, a nation rooted in violence:
violence against Indians, decimated in the early days of discovery;
violence against blacks, enslaved and exiled forever;
violence against poor Europeans and Japanese, who landed there, always an ocean away from their ancestors;
violence against those from the Northeast and Minas Gerais, cheap labor segregated into tenements and slums.

I come from São Paulo, the sixth-largest urban area in the world, with nearly 20 million inhabitants. A metropolis where the second-largest fleet of private helicopters in the world soars above buses, trains, and subways that spew out workers into overcrowded stations;
wealthy traffickers sit entrenched in their mansions, reading the news about poor traffickers hunted down by a corrupt and violent police force;
politicians steal at the municipal, state and federal levels;
the picture windows of chic restaurants reflect the hungry, dressed in rags;
rivers rotten with sewage, mud, poison;
slums entwined with futuristic buildings;
universities of the highest caliber groom the next generation of the political and economic elite, while at the margin, schools with underpaid, poorly trained and unprotected teachers crank out new employees;
the most advanced medical technology in Latin America impassively watches the queue of those condemned to death: men as victims of violence, women as victims of the complications of childbirth, men and women as victims of tuberculosis, children as victims of diarrhea;
walls hide the ebb and flow of the tiny lives outside.

And that is São Paulo; Canaan fertilized by the indigenous, black, mixed-race and immigrant sweat — more than half the population has Italian surnames, and descendants of Portuguese, Spaniards, Arabs, Jews, Armenians, Lithuanians, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Bolivians, and more than 50 other nationalities fill the avenues, streets, and alleyways.

How does one translate the chaos of this city to the pages of a book?

I think that a writer should be like a physicist who studies Nature in order to understand the mechanisms by which the Universe works. Each step in the direction of this knowledge results in significant changes to one's worldview and, therefore, an immediate need to develop new tools to continue the search.

The novelist's object of study is the Human Being immersed in the World. And, just as Nature, the Human Being is an endless mystery — what we have are descriptions, some better than others, of life during certain historical periods. And as the objective conditions change, the novelist — like a physicist — feels the need to create tools to delve more deeply into human nature, often making use of advances in other fields of knowledge.

As the heirs of the 20th century, we have experienced tremendous change firsthand: Einstein and Heisenberg deconstructed our ideas of time and space; Freud and Lacan mangled our sense of self, Marx and Ford blasted the foundations of the ancient world of work, directly impacting our daily routine; Nazism brought back our barbarism; Baudelaire and Poe, by way of Benjamin,

showed us the Man in the masses — and we then had Kafka, Proust, Pirandello, Joyce, Faulkner, Breton, the *nouveau roman*, Oulipo... Now, the 21st century unveils our uncertainties: superstring theory, neuroscience, industrial robotics, the Internet, megacities...

However, if external events can modify our condition as human beings (for example, the crisis of formal employment that rocks our psychological security), then we must admit that we are forced to devise new ways to understand ourselves, immersed in this world full of multiple meanings. It is anachronistic, at the very least, to continue to conceive of the novel as an action taking place within a given space and time, as an attempt at being an authentic account of real, individual experiences.

Let's take a closer look. Economic inequality, which infects and rots the social fabric, pervades human nature itself. Time and space, for example, are experienced differently by someone who lives in the comfort of a mansion in a wealthy neighborhood rather than surrounded by the foul stench of sewage from a slum. While time is elastic for some — those who have vehicles speeding through the streets and avenues — for others, time is compressed into train cars packed with people or at a near standstill in eternal traffic jams. And if a space is infinite for some, since distant destinations like the United States or Europe can be reached in a few hours, for others, it is barely the space that the body occupies.

Furthermore, when a person leaves his homeland — and this is always a worst-case scenario, when absolutely no other option exists — he is forced to abandon not only his language, customs, and setting

but, above all, the bones of his loved ones, proof that he belongs to a place, to a family that has, in short, a past. When he settles somewhere else, the immigrant has to invent himself from scratch, launching out with each new day.

How do we write biographical stories if we are dealing with characters who have no history?

These are the dilemmas that I faced when I began to reflect on how to make the city of São Paulo a fictional space, how to translate all of its complexity onto the pages of a book. Then I remembered an art installation at the 1996 Bienal Internacional de Artes de São Paulo, “Ritos de Passagem” (Rites of Passage) by Roberto Evangelista: hundreds of shoes previously worn by men and women, adults and children, tennis shoes and dress shoes, flip-flops and slippers, boots and sandals, crocheted baby booties and combat boots, jumbled together and piled up in a corner... Every shoe was engrained with the story of the feet that used them, engrained with the dirt of the roads they had traveled.

I realized that instead of trying to organize chaos — which is, more or less, the objective of the traditional novel — I just had to incorporate it into the process of making fiction: exposing my body to the smells, voices, colors, flavors, and collisions of the megapolis, transforming the collective sensations into individual memory.

Strolling by the bus stops and funerals, the sites of massacres and supermarkets, evangelical churches and low-income housing, slums and prisons, hospitals and bars, football stadiums and boxing clubs, mansions and hotels, factories and shops, shopping centers and





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Rua Libero Badaró, São Paulo.
(Photo by Jurandir Lima.)

schools, restaurants and motels, bars and trains...

Picking through the trash for books and appliances, toys and menus, saints and calendars, old newspapers and old photographs, sympathy ads and advertisements for services that fix financial problems.

Understanding that time is not gradual and sequential in São Paulo but successive and simultaneous.

Embracing fragmentation as a technique (the stories make up the Story) and understanding instability as a symptom — the unstable architecture of the novel, the unstable architecture of urban space.

The violence of invisibility, the violence of not belonging, the violence endured by those who must construct subjectivity in a world that wants us to be homogeneously anonymous.

The impossibility of narrating: school books, radio broadcasts, overheard conversations, crime stories, short stories, poems, newspaper stories, classified ads, bland descriptions, high-tech communications (messaging on cell phones, online dating sites), religious sermons, collages, letters... Everything: movies, television, literature, visual arts, music, theater... A “literary performance”...

And language accompanies this turmoil — not composition, but decomposition.

The city — my body’s map of scars.

Luiz Ruffato is an award-winning Brazilian author. He served as the Distinguished Brazilian Writer in Residence at UC Berkeley in spring 2012 and spoke for CLAS on April 20, 2012.