

ITINERANCY AND IDENTITY IN *QUINCAS BORBA*

Laurie Lomask

Borough of Manhattan Community College (CUNY)

Abstract: This paper examines the literary trope of itinerancy in Machado de Assis' novel *Quincas Borba*, with a particular focus on the movements of the protagonist, Rubião, through the upper-class neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. By tracing Rubião's physical and psychological journey across these elite urban spaces, Machado constructs a narrative of movement that mirrors a deeper sense of instability and social flux. The protagonist's agony of self has points of contact with the political period in which the novel was serialized, from 1886 and 1891, including the abolition of slavery and the proclamation of the First Republic. Machado de Assis offers a complex vision of modernity—one that is able to analyze the realities of a rapidly evolving society without divisiveness.

Keywords: walking, itinerancy, abolition, First Republic

Quincas Borba as a novel is unique in the oeuvre of Machado de Assis in several aspects. As David Jackson points out, it is the only novel of the quintet of later works that is narrated in the third person. Published serially between 1886 and 1891, and integrally the following year, it spans the tumultuous political movements that realized the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 and the final ousting of the monarchy with the proclamation of the First Republic. It is also what I would call a novel of itinerancy, as the narrative documents almost constant traveling from place to place, as we follow Rubião from Barbacena, Minas Gerais, to Rio de Janeiro, his frequent outings, visits, and strolls across the imperial capital, and his eventual return to his city of origin. The main character of the novel is doubly itinerant in the sense of a figure in a role that is treated as easily replaceable, almost commodified. Both of these meanings will help to interpret the delirium and demise of the novel's protagonist through an analysis

of the physical movement described in the text, through a cartography of the plot, and through a discussion of its original publication history in the context of Rio de Janeiro in the late years of the Second Empire.

Before advancing the discussion, a caveat is necessary to explain what this paper is not doing, which is that it does not analyze Rubião as a kind of “carioca flâneur.” The points of contact are apparent. The critic Natasha Belfort Palmeira does a wonderful job of showing the connections between Machado and Baudelaire in the novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) and documents Machado’s reading of the French poet (527). In *Quincas Borba*, one sees that when Rubião is alone he feels an emptiness in Rio de Janeiro, not unlike “l’ennui” of Baudelaire. Take, for example, the character’s musings when he finds himself without visitors for an afternoon: “Em Minas não se aborrecia tanto, por quê? Não achou solução ao enigma, uma vez que o Rio de Janeiro tinha mais em que se distrair, e que o distraía deveras; mas havia aqui horas de um tédio mortal” (LXXXV, 199). Like the flâneur, Rubião does perambulate about the city, however he does not find the fascination for the crowds that one associates with the flâneur. As Walter Benjamin, who characterizes the francophone metropole in the title of his unfinished essay, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” explains, the flâneur is the perfect fit for Paris, uniquely suited to its particular architecture, rhythm, and economy. The chthonic elements of the city—its topographical formation, the old abandoned bed of the Seine—have indeed found in him a mold. (Benjamin 85). For Baudelaire, Paris was a play-scape, full of fascination, excitement, and even alienation against the shifting city skyline undergoing the brunt of the Haussmanian urban renewal projects. It would be disingenuous to extricate a figure from its natural habitat and attempt to interpret him directly on the streets of another city.

As a counterpoint, Rubião’s walking helps him (and the readers) to discover Rio de Janeiro authentically, both in its sweetness and its cruelty, two seemingly contradictory sensations that find home in the complex carioca society. His outings allow him to find significance and identity that are absent in the otherwise irritating encounters with people whom Rubião naively considers his friends. To combat his anguish, in the scene quoted above, Rubião sets out to Praia Formosa to visit the ill and dying Freitas. On the way home, he is so enamored with the neighborhood that he asks the horse buggy driver to stop and let him stroll along, ending up walking for more than two hours. Rubião is deeply moved by the natural splendor of the neighborhood as well as the tender familiarity of the people he observes. “Aqueles grandes braçadas de mato, brotando de lôdo, e postas ali ao pé da cara do Rubião, davam-lhe vontade de ir ter com elas. Tão perto da rua!” (LXXXVI 120). “Fôsse o mar

todo uma coisa daquele feitio, alastrado de terras e verduras, e valia a pena navegar. Para lá daquilo ficava a Praia dos Lázaros e a de S. Cristóvão... Dobrava para o Saco de Alferes, vinham as casas edificadas do lado do mar.”

Praia Formosa offers a different character of Rio de Janeiro than the high-falutin bourgeoisie that Rubião had become familiar with. Here he sees not only a beach that he finds truly beautiful, but also a different social class, one that is more mixed, more humble, an area that, as an important port, was home to laborers and dock-workers, freed Black and gypsy people, recent immigrants and migrants from other parts of Brazil. It was also one of the first neighborhoods to be “remodeled”, so to speak, under the reforms of Pereira Passos. If you have a hard time locating Praia Formosa today, it would be because it does not exist anymore.

Figure 1 shows a map of Rio de Janeiro from 1867, which would represent the time period in which the action of the novel takes place. The second map (Figure 2) from 1885, is reflective of the period just before the novel began to be published. Along the coast of both one can see Praia Formosa, Saco de Alferes, and Saco de Gamboa, Campo de Santanna, Rua Mata Porcos (which lead to the royal residency in São Cristóvão), and Morro do Livramento. Already in the latter, there are clear differences in urban development: the city had expanded greatly from the center outwards with streets sprawling into areas of Botafogo and Santa Teresa, and reforms beginning in the area along the port.

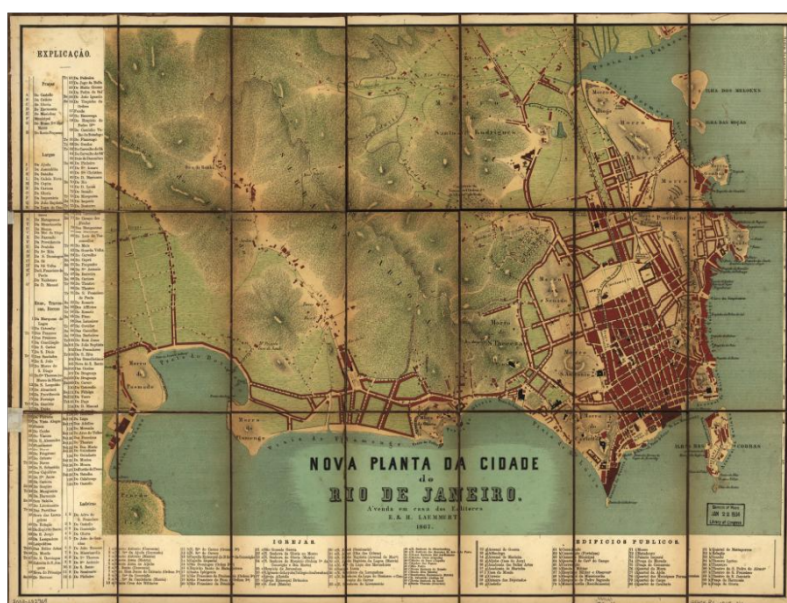


Figure 1: Nova planta da cidade do Rio de Janeiro. 1867. Library of Congress (imagineRio).



Figure 2: Planta da cidade do Rio de Janeiro e uma parte dos subúrbios. 1885.

Brazilian National Archive.

As Bruno Carvalho points out in his excellent cultural history of Rio de Janeiro, *Porous City*, the area around what came to be called Cidade Nova has always been a site of transformation and cultural capital. Originally swamp land, the royal family ordered it to be filled in order to accommodate the burgeoning population growth. They moved the royal residence to São Cristóvão and had to build a road, which became known as the rua Mata Porcos, later Caminho do Aterrado and Avenida Estácio de Sá. It later became a thriving community of freed Black Brazilians and Jewish immigrants, and in the early 20th century suffered the reforms of Pereira Passos and the Bota Abaixo (Carvalho 38).

When Rubião takes his long passeio through the outskirts of the center he enters the area of Rio de Janeiro where Machado himself was born and raised in the Morro do Livramento, situated at the end of Rua da Saúde, atop a series of stairs along what is today known as Ladeira do Livramento, in the neighborhood of Gamboa. It is easy to read in the nostalgia that Rubião feels upon watching a man playing in the street with neighborhood children – “Ao pé de uma dessas canoas viu meninos brincando, e camisa e descalços, em volta de um homem que estava de barriga para baixo. Todos eles riam; um ria mais que os outros porque não acabava de fixar o pé do homem no chão” (LXXXVI 121) – an autobiographical touch of sentimentality where Machado’s own voice breaks through in the narration. However, it is not a lasting feeling in Rubião, who cannot discern anything, “via tudo

confusamente” at the same time that he does feel a longing “do farrapo, da vida escassa, acalcanhada e sem vexame”. He snaps back to his senses and exclaims, “Era tão bom não ser pobre” (122).

The scene is ironic because he has just described such marvel and appreciation for the humble people he sees along his walk, yet he immediately returns to the mentality of the nouveau-riche. Rubião is play-acting in defense of a capitalist system that he is playing at, but cannot embrace, condone, or successfully execute. And yet, in an even greater stroke of irony, his rationalizing most likely reflects the socio-economic status of Machado’s readership at the time.

This leads to the second vertex of this article: the way *Quincas Borba* would have been first read. The publication of the novel began on June 15, 1886, in the bi-monthly periodical *A Estação*, and continued with few gaps until September 15, 1891. *A Estação: Jornal ilustrado para a família* was a carioca version of the French journal, *La Saison*, edited by *Jean Baptiste Lombaerts and his son Henri Gustave*, headquarters at Rua dos Ourives, number 7 (modern day Rua Miguel Couto), which itself was a translation of the highly successful German publication, *Die Modenwelt*, dedicated to spreading Parisian fashion and aimed at mothers and female heads of household (da Silva 68). This German magazine was so popular that it was translated and distributed in fifteen] languages, including French, where it took the title “La Saison, journal illustré des dames” (Saraiva and Kupssinskü 32). Curiously enough, Parisian fashion was being sold by German publishers back to Parisians. Even when the journal was re-released in Brasil, it maintained its French flavor, showcasing French fashions, dress patterns, embroidery and upholstery, and European scenes and destinations. This would have been very much of interest to aspiring Brazilian upper middle class, although a bit impractical and removed from their lived reality. Some of the most hilarious examples are reporting of winter sports and fashion, such as the example shown in Figure 3, from the cover of the January 15, 1888 issue, where we see two women in very elegant wear. The caption says one is an outfit for walking about (“Costume para passeio”) and the other is an outfit for ice skating, with a lovely damsel on ice skates. What could be farther away from the reality of Rio de Janeiro, one might ask, with its sweltering summer heat in the month of January, than an advertisement for bundling up to go ice skating? Nor was this a unique example. There are, in fact, frequent references to ice skating and winter diversions in the journal.



Figure 3: *A Estação*, *Jornal ilustrado para a família*. January 15, 1888.

Biblioteca Nacional Digital do Brasil.

A Estação was, nevertheless, a very popular magazine and the Brazilian edition was distinguished for its literary supplement that featured prose, poetry, theater reviews, and editorials. Machado was a frequent contributor to the literary section of this magazine, so beloved that in the April 30, 1888, edition, there is a pause in the publication of *Quincas Borba*, with a note announcing Machado's nomination to the Ordem da Rosa, which he received in honor of his work at the Conservatório Dramático: "O nosso ilustre collaborador e amigo Machado de Assis acaba de ser agraciado com o officialato da Ordem da Rosa. Congratulamo-nos com o Governo Imperial por esse acto, que o honra ainda mais do que ao fino inexcédível prosador e poeta, cujo nome há tanto tempo enobrece o supplemento litterario da *Estação*" (29). Signed H.L. (Henri Lombaerts) and company.

The next issue, from May 15, 1888, is also blank in the serialization of *Quincas Borba*, but it does contain a brief note congratulating Princesa Isabel on her declaration of the end of slavery in Brasil. “A gente empobrece sem os escravos? Pois que empobreça. Deve ser consoladora a miséria nos braços da liberdade” (33). More tellingly, the subsequent number, from May 31, 1888, resumes the narration of *Quincas Borba*, with chapter 94 (XCIV), which is chapter 90 (XC) in the final published version. Here begins the three chapters from Machado that correlate to the scenes immediately following the walks along Praia Formosa and Gamboa, previously discussed. These are also the scenes where Rubião is in a fit of denial after hearing gossip from the coachman that leads him to believe Sofia and Carlos Maria are having an affair. Immediately below Machado’s contribution, there is a longer editorial piece celebrating the official declaration of the Lei Áurea, abolishing slavery in Brazil. In an almost naive tone, the journal explains that it is not geared towards reporting politics, the editors felt it necessary to address and commemorate this momentous occasion: “A Estação congratula-se especialmente com as suas leitoras pelo grande acto de treze de maio, a lei que aboliu a escravidão no Brasil. Essa lei de justiça implica também um sentimento de caridade, e a caridade é o característico da alma feminina, mormente na brasileira” (38). Note here that the writer addresses only female readers, although men would have certainly read the literary supplement as well.

In contrast, in the issue from November 30, 1889, directly following the proclamation of the Republic, the journal shows a more hesitant reflection on the political declaration. In an article signed by Eloy o herói (Artur Azevedo) we read paragraphs hoping for the best for the nation, but also a bit of apprehension for what is to come. “Durante os dois primeiros dias da República, notava-se em muitos semblantes a consternação e mesmo o terror; a população, caminhando vagarosa, melancolicamente, parecia oprimida por um peso moral [...] Decididamente há uma estrela que protege a nossa pátria!” (87-88)

The almost nervous tone of the editorial contrasts sharply with the ambiguity and sarcasm of the text from Machado that appears in this issue, which correlates to the publication of chapters CVI, opening one of the most provocative meta-literary moments in the novel. Machado’s narrator comments on the fictional structure of the text, interrupting the plot to introduce a segment with a short phrase that serves as subtitle, “...ou, mais propriamente, capítulo em que o leitor, desorientado, não pode combinar as tristezas de Sofia com a anedota do cocheiro.” The confusion is not only ours as readers, but that of Rubião. Machado further links the protagonist to the reader, affirming, “Calúnia do leitor e do Rubião.” (142). And it is precisely because of Rubião’s unfirm identity, his moldability

and his itinerancy – both in the way that he seems to absorb from his surroundings and his replaceability – that the narrator can link the fictional character with the real-life readers, transgressing the window of the novel's world, as it were, in an act of great modernism. This section of the plot ends, ironically, in a scene where Rubião dreams that Sofia is the Empress Eugenia, wife of Napoleon III, who reigned until 1870. In the dream she and her cousin Maria Benedita are beaten by Cristiano, Sofia's husband, and Rubião, who imagines himself to be none other than Napoleon III, saves them and gallops off in a carriage full of flowers. He quotes from Hamlet, “Desvario embora, lá tem seu método,” (Though this be madness, yet there is method in't) (CIX 147). The question remains, is this also Machado asking the reader to look deeper to see the methods to this madness, to take a leap of faith and believe in the possibilities of true change in Brazilian society?

It is clear that Machado heavily revised these chapters between the original publication and subsequent editions, and it is not within the limits of this article to analyze the minutiae of these edits. Nor can one allege what lines of text the author wrote when. There is a significant delay between composing a text, submitting, and publishing that make it hard to tell when Machado actually put words on paper. Yes these observations give some context to an idea of how the novel advanced intimately entwined with these defining historical events in Brazilian history.

Furthermore, Machado's wit and irony can be seen as a desire to provoke his readership to look inward to the realities of Rio de Janeiro and the nascent Brazilian society, instead of seeking approval by worshipping French costumes and textiles. Literature and the arts do more than reflect the world we live in. They have an active role in creating the worlds we want to see. While Machado does point out the cruel ironies of living in a capitalist, “slave-ocracy” (*escravocracia*), the novel does not limit itself to exposing this tension. It ridicules the consumerism and folly of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie, and summons the reader to come back to their senses – both in a moral and sensational way. We are reminded of the violent scene of the hanging of a Black man in the middle of the street, a scene that Rubião remembers as he falls asleep in a carriage car. This scene has been the discussion of several critical articles, most notably by André Tadao Kameda, who shows the association of the condemned man with the carriage horses, in a cruel deshumanization and subjugation of the other. Rubião, though he does not wish to bear witness to the execution, cannot look away, and has a completely visceral reaction to it, signaling his simultaneous repulsion as well as presence, sensitivity and connection to place. The result is a scission of self, a doubling of loss that drives him to madness (Tadao Kameda 7).

Rubião's demise illustrates the diagnosis that historian and social critic Morris Berman places on Western culture when he proposes that the only truly ethical way of life is rooted in a reckoning with our bodies as part of the physical world. He explains: "The shift away from ascent, and toward bodily presence in the world, implies certain things that go with the territory [...] The first of these is an end to the binary contrast mode of consciousness and personality structure [...] *all* of life is sacred, not just "heaven." The structure is horizontal rather than vertical, and it has a much greater "feminine" element in it than does our present consciousness" (311). Berman argues that the emphasis on the self as a binary separation from the other is what has led to widespread psychological neuroses in the 20th century and even led to the rise of fascism.

Through walking, the self seeks horizontal expansion, shedding the learned identities of a Capitalist hierarchy and opening the door to possibility. "The central reason why you can't escape your socioeconomic class is that the key to it is training in body language that goes on from infancy" (Berman 57). Rubião has proven that even with the material conditions of the upper middle class, he cannot fake belonging to it, cannot enter this society, cannot establish meaningful relationships, cannot feel himself part of it. His itinerancy shows a searching for self, which he cannot define in the upper middle class circles he is bound to, and leads to his demise. Is he a tragic hero? Not really. Machado's novel does not even bear his name. Yet in the end, this is not the purpose. By detracting from imported European traditions and materialism, ridiculing the hedonistic allegiance to Capitalism, Machado has shown us paths to and encourages the possibility of finding ourselves, both as individuals and as a collective, in our senses.

Laurie Lomask is Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Borough of Manhattan Community College. Her research explores the connections between literature and corporal movement, including walking, theater, and dance. She is co-editor of the personal correspondence of Benito Pérez Galdós and is currently studying the origins of Brazilian samba.

Works Cited

Assman Saraiva, Juracy and Cátia Cilene Kupssinskü. “*A Estação: moda, literatura e difusão ideológica.*” *Acta Scientiarum*. Vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, pp. 31-41.

Belfort Palmeira, Natasha. “Outro Baudelaire: Sobre a forma livre de ‘O spleen de Paris’ e das *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*.” *Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento*, vol 40, no. 3, 2021, pp. 517-31. Accessed 10 Oct 2025. <https://doi.org/10.25091/S01013300202100030004>.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1. Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds. Belknap Press, 1996.

Berman, Morris. *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West*. Simon and Schuster, 1989.

Carvalho, Bruno. *Porous City: A Cultural History of Rio de Janeiro*. Liverpool UP, 2013.

Jackson, K. David. *Machado de Assis: A Literary Life*. Yale UP, 2015.

Laemmert, Eduardo and Henrique Laemmer. *Nova planta da cidade do Rio de Janeiro*. 1867, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. imagineRio, Spatial Studies Lab, Rice University. Accessed 10 Oct 2025. www.imaginerio.org.

Lombaerts, Jean Baptiste. *A Estação : jornal illustrado para a família*. 1888. Biblioteca Nacional Digital Brasil, Rio de Janeiro. Accessed 10 Oct 2025. <https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/acervodigital>.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Quincas Borba*. Massaud Moisés, ed. Cultrix, 1960.

Maschek, E. *Planta da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro e de uma parte dos suburbios*. 1885, Brazilian National Archive, Rio de Janeiro. imagineRio, Spatial Studies Lab, Rice University. Accessed 10 Oct 2025. www.imaginerio.org.

Silva, Ana Cláudia Suriani. da “From Germany to Brazil: The History of the Fashion Magazine A Estação, an International Enterprise.” In *Books Without Borders*. Vol. I. Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond, eds. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 67-88.

Tadao Kameda, André. “Um mergulho no ‘Coração das trevas’: Leitura da cena do enforcamento em *Quincas Borba*.” *Machado de Assis em Linha*. Universidade de São Paulo. Vol. 17, 2024, pp. 1-12. Accessed 10 Oct 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1983-682120241717>.