

History from below?

Cordel narratives between the imagined center and periphery of Brazil.

This paper examines the phenomenon of „cordel“ in Brazil, a hybrid art form that combines poetry, image and performance. Also referred to as *romanceiro popular nordestino*, *livros do povo* or *foiêtos*, cordel gained popularity in the rural Northeast in the early 20th century, later to spread across Brazil and become an urban phenomenon, too.

The origins of Brazilian cordel date back to the Iberian Peninsula and its balladic tradition of *cordel* in Spain and *folhetos de feira* in Portugal. In the Central European – and specifically Bohemian - context, cordel is related to the broadside ballads and songs of *minnesängers*. While the circulation of these art forms declined as the European societies modernized and diverged from their oral traditions, cordel found a fertile soil in Brazil, especially so in the secluded and underdeveloped region of *sertão* in the Northeast, characterized by latifundism, a considerable share of black and mestizo population and steep social inequalities. The region famously described in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The War at the End of the World (1981)* further shaped existing cordel forms by the metric, motives, and local tradition of improvised narrative duels, as well as by the West African oral traditions and story-teller figures called *griots*.

In my presentation, I argue that Brazilian cordel has served to inform, entertain, and educate its readers on issues ranging from the local and regional history, legends and myths to the national and global affairs. In the context of the 20th century rural Brazil, with high rates of illiteracy, cordel played the role of reporter of local events, archive of regional memory and messenger of distant events.

Inspired in the folklore yet popular in its production and dissemination, cordels cover a wide range of events, protagonists and environments: remote villages of the Brazilian *sertão* alternate with the Amazon and the industrial metropolis of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Daily events in these villages follow events set in New York and the capital, Brasília. The ghosts and mythological characters join the bandits, the revolutionary Che Guevara and the impeached president Dilma Rouseff.

Following interdisciplinary theoretical insights into the study of popular culture and oral history, and especially guided by Mark Ferro (1988) and Néstor García Canclini (1982, 1989), I focus on the analysis of several specific cordel titles dedicated to local, national and international events. My research reveals that cordel accounts are a challenging reminder to the Brazilian political center that the Brazilian periphery has its own historical memory, its heroes and villains, which may be the president or the governor.

Cordel is analyzed as a popular archive of history written from “below,” one that contains narratives that can be deeply subversive of the official history told from “above” by the Brazilian elites. I conclude with an invitation to read and understand cordel as a testimony of tensions and power hierarchies between the imagined center and periphery of Brazil.

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