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Subaltern Voices from the Sertão. Cultural History of Broadside Ballad in Brazil

Kateřina Březinová

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the role of cordel – the Brazilian contribution to the global tradition of the broadside ballad – as a reservoir of cultural memory of the *Nordeste*, the region where cordel took root in Brazil. Cordel is at once perceived as a repertoire of representations, images, and meanings that have shaped messages on social order. The focus here is on transformations that have occurred in cordel titles over time and, in particular, how gender and ethnicity have been represented in cordel texts during different periods and locations in a region that, even now, has been characterized by latifundism, the absence of the state, and abysmal social inequalities. To this end, the examination of cordel titles by José Francisco Borges (1935), Jarid Arraes (1991), and Auritha Tabajara (1980) in this context is grounded in a cultural studies framework. Among other perspectives, we engage with the question posed by Spivak to highlight the cordel as a venue in which the subaltern voices of the colonized and otherwise marginalized segments of Brazil's population have expressed themselves historically until the present. Whereas cordel traditionally represented a space in which the voices and concerns of ordinary Brazilians from the rural hinterland found their way into the public arena, new possibilities of publishing cordel post-2000 have opened it up to new narratives from the otherwise silenced actors of Brazilian society and history, including female authorship, and Afro-Brazilians and the Indigenous as protagonists of their own representation. This paper concludes by pointing to how cordel has been notably successful in accommodating Brazil's diverse social realities. Its narratives now speak in the multiple voices of the *sertão*, thus inviting its readership to rethink Brazil's cultural history, historical memory, and symbolic imaginaries.

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KEYWORDS

Brazil; history; broadside ballad; cordel; popular culture; representation; subaltern; gender; modernity; ethnicity.

CZECH ABSTRACT**Subalterní hlasy v sertão. Kulturní paměť brazilského cordelu**

Tento článek zkoumá cordel – brazilský příspěvek do globální tradice kramářských tisků – coby rezervoár kulturní paměti a historie brazilského severovýchodního regionu zvaného *Nordeste*. Ke cordelu je přístupováno jako k repertoáru reprezentací, obrazů a významů, které po dobu jeho stoleté přítomnosti v Brazílii hrají významnou úlohu v utváření sociálního řádu, zejména s ohledem na gender, rasu a etnicitu.

V reakci na známou otázku kulturní teoretičky Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, zda mohou subalterní aktéři mluvit, analyzujeme cordel jako populární, neelitní prostor, v němž mohly zaznívat i subalterní hlasy těch částí brazilské různorodé společnosti, které zakusily kolonizaci či jiné formy marginalizace na základě rasy, etnicity či genderu. Za tímto účelem zkoumáme tisky z různých historických období a identifikované s různými kulturními a etnickými tradicemi brazilského *Nordeste*, jejichž autory jsou José Francisco Borges (1935), Jarid Arraes (1991) a Auritha Tabajara (1980).

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Brazílie; historie; kramářská píseň; cordel; populární kultura; reprezentace; subalterní; gender; modernita; etnicita.

This paper focuses on an important manifestation of Brazilian popular culture and literature, the *cordel*. Cordel takes form of inexpensively printed booklets with brightly illustrated covers and rhyming text that were traditionally recited live and often accompanied by music. Known in Brazil as *literatura de cordel* – literally, “string literature” – booklets were often seen hanging by string from stands, on sale in marketplaces, bus stations, and along pilgrimage routes.¹ As shown elsewhere, the cordel is an integral part of the global tradition of broadside ballads originating from Europe (BREZINOVA 2022a: 441). However, as societies in Europe and, later, the Iberian Peninsula began to modernize and oral traditions waned, the importance and prevalence of broadside ballads similarly declined. Its tradition crossed the Atlantic to different parts of the Americas. The genre then took strong root in the remote hinterland of north-eastern Brazil, an area that to this day is characterized by latifundism, a signi-

1) They were also known as *romanceiro popular nordestino*, *romance*, and *folhetos de feira* (ALVES DE MELO 2018: 39–40).

ficant Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous population, the absence of the state, and abysmal social inequalities.

These authorial poems have been printed, popularized and actively circulated in Brazil since the end of the 19th century. In the first half of the 20th century, their audience base was most often rural people living in remote farms and villages, for whom cordel titles were an important, if not the only, source of news, entertainment, and instruction. Then, during the second half of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of people left north-eastern Brazil in search of better livelihoods. With that came opportunities to live and work in urban centers, and the tradition of cordel faithfully followed. These little booklets became a nationwide phenomenon, even though more educated, urban Brazilians generally looked on them with disdain, as cheap and unsophisticated entertainment for the uneducated (BREZINOVA 2022a: 445).

In this paper, I present Brazil's cordel as a reservoir of memory of the geographical and cultural region of the *Nordeste*, narrated from below and from the margins. I focus here on transformations that have occurred in these texts over time and, in particular, how gender and ethnicity have been represented in them. Cordel is at once perceived as a repertoire of representations, images, and meanings that have shaped messages on social order. To this end, I analyze several texts appertaining to different periods and locations. First, there is a cordel by José Francisco Borges (1935), a distinguished poet and farmer from the state of Pernambuco whose own life – just as the lives of his audience – has been shaped by the harsh climate and equally harsh economic and racial hierarchies in the countryside.

I have then selected titles written by Jarid Arraes (1991) and Auritha Tabajara (1980), a younger generation of authors coming from *Nordeste* who embody the fundamental changes that have occurred in society (as well as in the world of cordel) in the wake of the digital revolution post-2000. I argue that the cordel continues to play an important role in representations of gender and ethnic hierarchies in Brazil. With poets like Arraes and Tabajara, cordel has opened itself up to the new narratives of the silenced actors of Brazilian society and history: those who are rarely seen, whose roots delve deep into the history of Brazil's colonization process, including those brought from Africa as part of the transatlantic slave trade.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously asked whether the subaltern could speak. I engage with her question to highlight the cordel as a venue where the subaltern voices of the colonized and otherwise marginalized segments

of Brazil's population have expressed themselves, both historically and today. In line with Stuart Hall (HALL – MORLEY 2019: 18) and Griselda Pollock (POLLOCK 1977, 2003), I further propose cordel be studied as a repertoire of images that shape messages on social order, and function as a normative image of reality, simultaneously shaping its meaning in the process of representation. My analysis is based on Hall's and Pollock's theoretical assumption of the constructed nature of representation: both authors view it as a result of a process of negotiation of power. Attention to power hierarchies and the reproduction of power, therefore, provides the theoretical underpinning to this study (GARCÍA CANCLINI 1990).

In the century of its presence in Brazil, both cordel and its readership have undergone a series of fundamental transformations. They continue to evolve and intertextually respond to the world around them, as well as to new methods of communication, including mass media and social networks (BREZINOVA 2022b: 96). This study aims to investigate the extent to which these changes in the creation and distribution of cordel reflect how gender and ethnicity are presented in Brazilian cordel: Whose stories and perspectives are depicted in these texts? Who might the authors be? And whose perspectives are left out?

The two Brazils

The cultural and geographical space of the *Nordeste*, comprised of Brazil's arid states in the north-east, is understood more in a symbolic than geographical manner. It has been a defining factor for both the cordel genre and the cordel authors discussed in this paper. This multi-ethnic region – also known as the *sertão* – has been shaped by processes of colonization, genocide, the slave trade, the plantation economic model, as well as immigration. José Francisco Borges, Jarid Arraes, and Auritha Tabajara represent different generations of authors from different locations in this distinct area. Both their situatedness and the specific context to which they respond are crucial to the ways in which ethnicity and gender are represented in the pages of their texts. The *Nordeste* is also the determinant for the cordel's main readership, consisting of millions of ordinary Brazilians living in towns and villages.

Sociologist Gilberto Freyre, native to the region, left a valuable testimony on conditions in the *Nordeste*, the location where cordel took root in Brazil. In his book entitled *Casa-Grande & Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves)*, he discusses

the strict hierarchies of property, race, and gender that were established in the colonial period and which survived until the early 20th century (FREYRE 1995: 339). Freyre identified the model of asymmetric power that arose out of sugarcane plantations as a crucial building block of Brazilian patriarchal society. People in the master's house had absolute power over all others on the plantation. Freyre argued that this was where the hierarchies that combine the racial, gender, and economic stratification of north-eastern society were born and consolidated: the patriarchal figure as absolute, and all the rest as subordinates. This included women who, in the family unit, were expected to be subordinate to their husbands. Those at the bottom of the social ladder included black Africans, the Indigenous, and anyone of mixed race.

At the end of the 19th century the *Nordeste* was greatly impacted by the end of slavery and the monarchy, two institutions that had shaped Brazil's past in highly significant ways. This, in turn, initiated an abrupt period of social, economic and political change that spurred the emergence of the "new", republican Brazil, and further widened the divide between urban and rural traditions. The prevalent notion of national identity that rose out of these changes was then discursively constructed by internal and international migration, with racial mixing placing higher value on the incorporation and appropriation of foreign cultures over the pre-existing Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous patrimony. While the emerging concerns over Brazil's national identity considered, and at least minimally included, the Afro-Brazilian population, the Indigenous were cast aside in space, as much as in time: in space, to the margins, invisible and in isolation; and in time, as a remnant of the past and an obstacle to development and the future.

Historically, the unequal processes of modernization in Brazil took place in the context of power asymmetries between center and periphery. This was true both for the "metropolis-colony" relationship in the colonial period, as well as for the "rural-city" relationship in the period of independence (HALL, MORLEY 2019: 211). They led to the coexistence of Western-style "modernity" promoted by elites in towns, and of what was perceived to be the opposite of this presumed modernity and civility, namely, the traditional features of the countryside and its supposedly backward inhabitants. The conflictual divide between the "two Brazils" – the rural and the urban – was fittingly described in the early 20th century by Euclides da Cunha, a writer, journalist, and eyewitness to the military campaign against the Messianic community of Canudos in Bahia, in his masterpiece *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)*. The tensions arising from

this situation continue to be the greatest source of conflict even today (GARCÍA CANCLINI 1990: 35–37).

To summarize, the vertical racial, gender, and economic stratification in the *Nordeste* has been inscribed in the DNA of inexpensive booklets since their first printed copies appeared in Brazil in the early 20th century. Cordel spoke to the ordinary, humble Brazilians, who – as we shall see – were often critical of ideas about modernity and progress coming from the city. As hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the north-east region – who were often of mixed race, or *mulatto*, and bore with them a range of cultures and customs – came into the industrial cities of the south and coastal regions of Brazil, the cordel expanded its repository of the rural *Nordeste* imaginary. It also started to function as a chronicle of migratory flows and of the complex process of uprooting, adapting, and re-identifying that those migrating from the countryside had to face when transitioning to urban centers.

“Transgressing gender order” – Voices of the *Nordeste* in the cordel of José Francisco Borges

The life and career of author and illustrator José Francisco Borges (1935) from Bezerros, a village in the interior of Pernambuco, reflects the aforementioned characteristics of Brazil’s *Nordeste*. The sugar cane plantations were until recently the mainstay of the state’s economy. The Quilombo de Palmares, an independent community of slaves who had escaped from the plantations, once stretched to the vicinity of Borges’ home.

The author, whom we have studied in detail elsewhere (BREZINOVA 2019: 237–243), likens his journey to cordel authorship to that of a miracle. Like most of the audience of cordel in his youth, he worked in fields and learnt to read and write only at the age of 12. Thereafter he began selling cordel from town to town in marketplaces. Only years later was he able to work his way up to publishing his own texts, and eventually to owning his own printing press (BORGES n.d.: 48). For these reasons alone, I regard Borges as author who is representative of cordel in the second half of the 20th century in rural Brazil. His texts can be read as a repertoire of images and texts that also shaped his messaging on the prevailing social order.

Social norms as reflected in the work of Borges are the topic of a separate study (BREZINOVA 2022b). Nonetheless, they are also evident in the title

“A mulher que botou o Diabo na garrafa” (“The Woman Who Caught the Devil in a Bottle”) (n.d.), which is important for the purpose of this study. This cordel’s title page introduces the protagonists: the beautiful woman from the *sertão*; the devil; the bottle in which the devil ends up being trapped; and the serpent temptress. In the story, a suspicious husband summons the devil to watch over his wife in his absence. The devil’s desire to see the woman naked blinds him so much that he places a bet that he has no chance of winning. Then, while the devil vainly chases his prize, the woman, who had never before given cause for her husband’s jealousy, decides to settle the score. The poem launches into a detailed description of her wild escapades: for a week she roams cabarets and motels; she parties with more than a hundred men; and drinks all liquor within reach – from cognac to wine, liquor, beer, and sugar cane brandy (BORGES n.d.: 6). After having punished her jealous husband, the woman outwits the devil and finally returns to her orderly married life.

The female protagonist, portrayed as a nameless sinner, shows an undeniable amount of intelligence and initiative. As Borges himself notes, her husband deserves no better: it was his jealousy that drove her to such action. However, the cordel also makes clear the author’s condemnation of the wife’s actions. She sins out of a desire for revenge and sheer indulgence. Viewed from a male perspective and Catholic morality, it is worse than if she had prostituted herself out of material need.

Also, the story serves to stigmatize the expression of non-marital sexuality in women, taboo in the dominant patriarchal model of the *sertão*. The young woman’s encounter with the devil charges the text with eroticism and sensuality. The narrative comes to the conclusion that a smart and beautiful woman who acts of her own volition cannot be trusted. Although she eventually returns to the bosom of her family, her actions are viewed as evidence of female cunning and falsity that pose grave danger to her, albeit incompetent, husband, as well as to the patriarchal order of rural Brazil.

Authors such as Borges – for cordel literature in rural contexts during the 20th century was almost exclusively written, printed, and distributed by men – tend to focus on women who have somehow transgressed against established social orders. Their stories illustrate the fate of those who do not live in accordance with tradition, Church teachings, or their parents’ will. Any hint of independent, unruly action is vigorously condemned. In these titles, such women are presented as sinners who have violated the imagined boundaries of domestic space as defined by the gender normativity of the *Nordeste*.

Reflecting on the tensions between the imaginary center and periphery of society, and their diverging notions of modernity, independence for women in these booklets is more often than not associated with a condemnation of susceptibility to unchaste excesses in the context of forms of urban modernity penetrating the countryside. This and other texts by Borges document how dangerously these influences undermine gender order in the Brazilian countryside: they visibly alter the attributes of female fashion, with some girls dressed with their calves or arms visible; others even strip down to swimsuits or are left scantily clad to indulge in dancing at discos; in extreme cases, they arrive topless at church (BREZINOVA 2022b: 86). For the better part of the 20th century, urban types of modernity are portrayed in the rural cordel as obscene, bordering on the apocalyptic.

Finally, it is worth noting that this and other heroines in Borges' cordel from the Brazilian countryside are, like the protagonists of many other titles from the second half of the 20th century, left nameless. Instead of specifying female characters and relaying their stories, women protagonists are silenced, left to mirror certain types of female behavior, always portrayed from the perspective of male authors, and forced to reflect gender norms defined by Catholic morality (LOUREIRO MARINHO BARBOSA 2010: 93–94). Marriage is of paramount concern for women, hence the motif of maidens who sell themselves to the devil for the sake of finding a husband is recurrent in a number of titles. At times, the pact with hell is motivated by the girl's explicit desire for a "white" husband who could, socially speaking, provide her with upward mobility along the lines of ethnicity.

Borges' titles thus mirror the social and human order of the *sertão*. Women who challenge this order are punished without exception. Those heroines who can still be helped are brought salvation by a male figure from the church: sometimes a priest, and sometimes the Holy Trinity. Even unruly rebels, whether consciously or unconsciously, long to be saved by a husband, a priest, Jesus Christ, or by God himself. If Pollock's optic of gender representations is applied to the cordel, Borges' depictions can be seen as one pillar that firmly supports the foundations of a patriarchal order that consists, among other things, in men's control over both the representation of gender and women's sexuality.

“Fight for her people” – Voices of the *Nordeste* in the cordel of Jarid Arraes

The second example of cordel analyzed here is the work of Jarid Arraes (1991), an artist firmly connected to the region of the *Nordeste*, although, unlike Borges, she has lived in São Paulo for several years.

Arraes grew up in Juazeiro do Norte, one of the epicenters of Brazilian cordel production. It was here that she first gained experience as journalist, writer, and activist publishing in regional print media and on blogs such as “Mulher Dialética” (“Dialectic Woman”) and “Blogueiras Negras” (“Black Bloggers”). She may be young, but Arraes is respected as a writer and recipient of several national literary awards.

In many ways, this exceptional author represents a continuous thread in the long tradition of cordel. Arraes is a third-generation writer and woodblock printmaker. Her grandfather, Abraão Batista, and her father, Hamurábi Batista, figure among the important voices of cordel from the *Nordeste*. The region’s distinctive folklore, along with its strong African cultural influences as well as those of Indigenous people, transformed the broadside ballad that originally came from Europe beyond recognition. Cordel was enriched here by West African griot storytellers and with the metrics and motifs of the improvised verbal duel known as *peleja* (OLIVER 1977: 386).

Although Arraes has moved to São Paulo, her work remains strongly linked to the region and its distinctive culture and themes fundamental to Afro-Brazilian communities that enjoy strong female leadership. Her voice can be heard in public campaigns that focus on the LGBT community, as well as in protests against sexually motivated violence.

The cordel “Dandara de Palmares” (“Dandara of Palmares”) published in 2017 relays the story of a valiant warrior and leader of one of the largest *quilombos*, an autonomous “republic” of fugitive slaves who escaped the sugar cane plantations in northeast Brazil. Arraes’ text was born in a different historical, political, and cultural context from that of Borges. This begs the question as to which social norms this cordel addresses, as well as how gender and ethnic hierarchies are represented.

The Quilombo of Palmares, the most significant community independent of colonial administration in Brazilian territory, grew to a population of nearly twenty thousand during the 17th century. In what are now known as the states of Alagoas and Pernambuco, the population base living in this difficult terrain



Figure 1. Jarid Arraes with her cordel titles. Arraes is a third-generation writer from Juazeiro do Norte. *Jarid Arraes* [online], São Paulo, 2023. URL: <https://jaridarraes.com/>

of the interior Northeast was predominantly black African. Armed with its own dynastic government and military, for almost a century Palmares managed to resist the Portuguese. The colonists, described in the cordel as “malicious whites” (“os brancos despeitados”), feared precisely what the *quilombo* symbolized, a viable alternative to colonialism and slavery.

This cordel presents Dandara as a bold, unjustly forgotten warrior of freedom. It acknowledges that for much of her life there is no credible evidence. She is remembered solely as the wife of the last leader of Palmares, Zumbi, with whom she had three sons. Even so, Arraes describes Dandara as identifying more as a warrior (“uma forte guerreira”) than a caring mother and housewife (“a mãe que cozinava / tendo um perfil cuidador”).

She and her husband defied the pact made between the Portuguese and Zumbi’s predecessor, at that time the head of Palmares. This agreement was supposed to bring certain benefits to the existing inhabitants of Quilombo, but in return they had to commit themselves to turning in those fleeing Portuguese plantations to seek refuge in Palmares. The verses recount Dandara’s uncompromising stance in how she refused to negotiate with racists and slave traders:

“Era o seu radicalismo / Pois não aceitava acordo / Com senhores do racismo” (ARRAES 2017).

Quilombo of Palmares eventually succumbed after a series of military attacks organized by the colonial authorities in the 1690s. Dandara refused to give in and, in the end, committed suicide instead of falling back into slavery. Zumbi died on November 20, 1695. On the anniversary of his death in 2011, a national holiday was established in Brazil to call upon its citizens to reflect on the nation’s legacy of slavery and racism. At the end of the poem, Arraes encourages readers to commemorate not only Zumbi on this important day, but also to remember Dandara, a heroine of the struggle against slavery that persisted in Brazil until 1888.

“Dandara de Palmares” is a part of a collection called *Heroínas negras brasileiras em 15 cordéis* (*Black Heroines of Brazil in 15 cordels*) which was first published in 2017. Through her documentary and poetic practice, Arraes has significantly expanded discussions on the heroes and villains of Brazilian history to include previously silenced segments of society. This is a significant feat, as mixed-race, *mulatto* and black women have so far been largely silenced in Brazilian history as protagonists. Whenever they have entered the historical narrative, it has without exception been in order to stigmatize them as anti-modern, standing in the way of progress and civilization. It is otherwise characteristic of social conditions in the *Nordeste* to have the figure of the devil take on the form of a *negrinho*, literally a “black man”, or as a *negro feio*, an “ugly black man.”

From this perspective, the cordel about Dandara and other subaltern figures in Brazilian history can be considered an important attempt at keeping historical memory alive. By placing Dandara and others from the Afro-Brazilian community amongst other significant figures in national history, Arraes challenges, and meaningfully shifts established elite interpretations of modernity and national identity in Brazil, and reminds of stories often-overlooked, historically and structurally. At the same time, her cordel articulates a radically different approach to gender order than the previously discussed text by Borges. Its underlying message puts a female warrior at the center of attention in the struggle for human dignity in Brazilian society. Lastly, Arraes’ poem is exemplary of the ways the cordel is written and distributed in the early 21st century. Never hesitating to innovate in terms of content and the use of new technologies, she writes and publishes with full awareness of the possibilities of electronic publishing, and her books are today available on Amazon and in Kindle format.

“Rewrite history” – Voices of the *Nordeste* in the cordel of Auritha Tabajara

The third cordel analyzed here is the work of Auritha Tabajara (1980). A native of Ipueiras in the interior of Ceará state in the *Nordeste*, she grew up in the Tabajara Indigenous community, one that today accounts for about three thousand members (ISA 2018). The author left her village for the state capital Fortaleza in her adolescence. Later, she also lived in São Paulo. She is the first author to represent Indigenous themes and authorship in cordel form. Tabajara’s initial experience writing cordel came during the literacy campaign back in her village.

In the cordel “Coração na Aldeia, Pés no Mundo” (“Heart in the Village, Feet in the World”) published in 2018, Tabajara enters into a creative dialogue with the broadside ballad genre, specifically with its longer version, called “romance”, which recounts dramas about love and the suffering of exotic princesses and heroic rulers (BREZINOVA 2022a: 445). Her text is about a different princess, however: she is an Indigenous girl (*indiazinha*) born in Ceará. Moreover, the protagonist bears obvious autobiographical features – including memories of her childhood in the village; her traumatic experience as an inexperienced Indigenous girl in a big city; the end of her marriage and loss of her children; as well as her commitment to her cultural roots alongside her admitted lesbian orientation – written into the narrator/author and protagonist as one person.

To gain a fuller understanding of which social norms this cordel addresses, as well as how gender and ethnic hierarchies are represented, one must start by noting that Brazil throws up considerable challenges when attempting to study the representations of its Indigenous people. While there are almost three hundred Indigenous groups in the country (ISA 2022), they are actually invisible to most Brazilians (BREZINOVA 2013: 234). Written and iconic documentation is scarce, and until recently there was hardly any knowledge of Indigenous intellectuals. According to historian John Manuel Monteiro, however, the greatest challenge to researching Indigenous peoples is not so much filling an historical void; instead, it rather consists of “deconstructing the images and commonplaces in the representation of Brazil’s past” in which Indigenous cultures are inserted into the classic binary opposites of superior/inferior, civilized/barbarian, or even as “poor remainders of a history which is told as a chronicle of disappearance and extinction” (MONTEIRO 1999: 239–247).

Tabajara’s cordel recounts the protagonist’s life from birth to adulthood. The grandmother, the protagonist’s key guidance in life, suggests naming the girl

Auritha in Tupí, an Indigenous language (“Aryrei’ está a vir”). However, this is not possible because it would disrupt the long-established Catholic tradition in Indigenous villages, laments the text, which commands that girls be named after the patron saint from where they were born. The dispute over naming the child refers to the deeper historical and cultural reality of the naming of the conquered land and its colonized inhabitants. As anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha points out, the territories christened as Brazil were not “found” but “occupied”, and renamed. They already had a name in the Tupí language – Pindorama (CARNEIRO DA CUNHA, 2012: 8).

At the age of thirteen, the heroine sets off to the city on her own. Her curiosity and desire to explore the unknown is stronger than her fear. She soon realizes how mistaken her ideas about life in the city were. Like many Indigenous migrants before her, she learns first-hand of the world of evil (“vê no mundo a maldade”) and experiences contempt, prejudice, and xenophobia, not to mention economic hardship. Men flirt with her calling her “moça bonita”, “linda”, and “atraente”. The intended conquest of the girl’s body by men in the city invites a reading through the Foucauldian lens of biopower, since bodies of the Indigenous, and of minorities in general, have been understood from the beginning of European colonization as objects to be controlled and owned, or even killed (VIEIRA DA SILVA FILHO 2022: 104).

Back in the village, the girl tries to move past the trauma she experienced in the city: “Wanting to erase the pains / Thorns of her torment.” She plunges into marriage with a man she hardly knows. She and her unnamed husband have four children, but lose two boys. The protagonist is passionate about raising her children while teaching reading and writing at the school in her village. Her anxieties can never be lessened, however: as a married woman, she understands she does not like men (“Não gostava de meninos”). Fearing rejection, she conceals her other sexual orientation from her community. Instead, she strives to fulfil the role of wife and mother as expected.

Similarly to the cordel by Borges discussed earlier, the determining influence of the established gender order in the *Nordeste* is clearly visible decades later in the behavior of this *indiazinha*: any sexuality other than marital remains strictly taboo for women. Homosexuality is punishable with hell in most cordel titles. The protagonist of Tabajara’s cordel is well aware of this. She only confides her closely guarded secret to her grandmother.

Years pass and her personal dissatisfaction culminates in her escaping the village for São Paulo, leaving behind her husband and adolescent daughters.

In this respect, the protagonist breaks with traditional patriarchal notions of family and motherhood in every possible way. Her marriage breaks down and a bitter trial determines custody of the children. The cordel notes how, in the eyes of the village, the woman is fully to blame: she has sinned by leaving.

Following this turning point in the cordel narrative, Auritha becomes the narrator of her own story. A mature woman, she becomes herself by accepting her cultural roots (“assumi minhas raízes”), as well as her sexuality. With the help of the supreme deity Tupã, Auritha sets out to rewrite history (“refazer a história”).

Auritha as author/protagonist/narrator tells her own story and fictionalizes herself. In doing so, she is empowered with her own voice to represent and rewrite history, and to fight invisibility. Moreover, she acquires her original name – Auritha Tabajara instead of Francisca Aurilene Gomes – in the symbolic act of breaking herself free from the colonized condition characteristic of the Indigenous peoples of Brazil and of women: the physical colonization by the European conquerors; and the spiritual colonization by the Church which commands that women be married and heterosexual.

The cordel “Coração na Aldeia, Pés no Mundo” was published in 2018 by U’KA Editorial, headed by Daniel Munduruku, an acclaimed Brazilian Indigenous writer. The transformation from traditional oral storytelling to writing is, according to Munduruku, one of the most important and recent conquests of Brazil’s Indigenous peoples: “The memory is a fundamental part in formatting a body that resists” (MUNDURUKU 2017: 117). Given the strong collective nature of native knowledge, today’s storytellers and Indigenous writers – such as Auritha Tabajara, Eliane Potiguara, Ailton Krenak, Davi Kopenawa, Julie Dorrico, and Daniel Munduruku himself – are the ones who are keeping historical memory alive. In the 21st century, these authors are passing on the wisdom of their ancestors through books, films, as well as virtual space, not just orally.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the representation of gender and ethnic hierarchies in cordel, the Brazilian branch of the global tradition of broadside ballads. While scholars in Europe search for broadside ballads in archives, cordel remains very much alive and thriving in Brazil. The booklets are available in traditional places such as markets and pilgrimage sites, but they have also expanded into virtual spaces such as YouTube, Amazon, Kindle, and TikTok.

It has been argued that since its emergence in Brazil, cordel has been a venue where the voices and perspectives of ordinary Brazilians have found their way into the public arena. As seen in this survey of rural cordel in the 20th century, its authors, such as José Francisco Borges, are similar to their readers – humble farmers with limited or no formal education. With few exceptions, they have been looked down upon by elites from the city as backward, uncivilized segments of society. It was also observed that rural cordel authorship was exclusively male. Still, these booklets prominently focused on representing women, and especially those who transgress or otherwise challenge the patriarchal order and/or Church authority in the *Nordeste*. Given cordel's popularity and prevalence, the booklets produced in the rural north-east of Brazil contributed significantly to the socialization of conservative social norms. Throughout the 20th century, women had no influence on the ways they were represented in the texts.

In the last two decades, the possibilities associated with electronic publishing have democratized entry into the world of cordel. As a result, booklets have opened up to a multiplicity of new voices, perspectives, subjects, and heroes and heroines, here illustrated by Jarid Arraes and Auritha Tabajara's titles analyzed above. By assuming her own voice and identity through cordel, Tabajara – an author/protagonist who would otherwise be silenced on the grounds of her Indigenous identity and unorthodox sexual orientation – talks back to the historical processes that have made Indigenous Brazilians invisible to the majority in their country. In Jarid Arraes' cordel, the warrior Dandara acts of her own free will, a trait depicted as highly dangerous in the rural cordel of the past. She is shown fighting obstacles imposed by racially and ethnically defined institutions, and laws shaped by slavery and patriarchy. In her writing, Arraes recreates historical memory, beats back oblivion, and fills in voids in the national imaginary.

As proven by the titles examined here, to this day cordel continues to provide a venue for the expression of cultures and identities of the Brazilian *Nordeste* in their multiple forms and manifestations, thus affirmatively responding to Spivak's question whether the subaltern can speak. It can be concluded that cordel remains a time-proven and accessible genre whose continued reinvention into the 21st century shows no sign of slowing. Following the transformations over time in the ethnic and gender order within Brazilian society, as well as the shifts in their representations that have occurred in cordel, this paper shows that cordel has been notably successful in accommodating Brazil's diverse social realities, including female authorship and Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous people as

protagonists of their own representation. In the 21st century, cordel narratives speak in the multiple voices of the *Nordeste* and invite their audience to rethink Brazil's cultural history, historical memory, and symbolic imaginaries.

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