

Brazilian Chapbooks (Cordel) in the Library of Congress



Brazilian chapbooks, known as “literatura de cordel”, offer a window on Brazilian popular culture at the same time they serve as a little-explored source for a greater understanding of Brazil’s history and society as perceived at the grassroots level.

The origins of chapbooks can be traced to the medieval poetry of Europe, which was transmitted orally throughout the continent by troubadors and minstrels. Gradually, as written communications spread, this oral tradition was set to music and came to be reproduced in handwritten chapbooks, often with a woodblock print as cover illustration.

Brought to Brazil by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, this type of folk poetry and song pamphlet took root particularly in the northeast, where African and indigenous influences came to be incorporated. Soon the chapbooks took on the function of a popular journal for getting news. Writings were put together in small pamphlets that were displayed hanging from a string (cordel), hence the name “literatura de cordel”. These grassroots newspapers conveyed the people’s perception of the world – including political and historical events – as well as a presentation of religious concepts, kinship and bizarre happenings. Included were stories that portrayed bandits as folk heroes defending the people; poor but patriotic people standing up for Brazil; and valiant mothers defending their children. Today these chapbooks continue to serve as a conduit for popular opinion.

The American Folklife Center’s Brazilian chapbook collection was established in the 1970s when the Library acquired the Sol Biderman collection. The Rio Office and the Hispanic Division in Washington have worked with AFC over the past 40 years to develop this core collection into one of the largest in the world, comprising more than 11,000 items, some as early as the 1930s. The Rio Office adds 300 to 600 chapbooks annually, acquiring them while on field trips to the northeastern and northern states of Brazil, through book fairs, and in visits to authors (cordelistas) and cordel associations.

Important dates in the history of the Library have been celebrated by adding significant cordel materials to this collection. In 1997, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Rio Office, author Raimundo Santa Helena created a chapbook to honor Thomas Jefferson and the Library of Congress. In 2000, as part of the Library’s Bicentennial, a collection of cordel pamphlets &

posters produced by Brazil’s major cordelista, J. Borges, was donated as a Gift to the Nation. Additional cordel pamphlets, manuscript material, woodcut engravings, sound recordings, and photographs were acquired in 2006 through another purchase of materials from Sol Biderman. In 2011, in conjunction with an international cordel symposium in Washington sponsored by LC, the Library began working with partners in Brazil to standardize bibliographic records and



establish subject headings for cordel literature. Partners include Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro; Academia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel, Rio de Janeiro; Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Campina Grande, Paraíba; and Centro Nacional de Folclore e Cultura Popular, Rio de Janeiro.

The Rio Office commissioned a cordel, 'Colecionando Cordéis nas Bibliotecas', issued in 2012 which focuses on the role of libraries in preserving the genre. Content was provided by Debra McKern, Director of the Rio Office; poetry by Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva; cover illustration by Erivaldo. The illustration shows cordel pamphlets being housed in archival envelopes, then in archival boxes.

Today, many cordelistas are no longer selling their chapbooks on string at street markets, but are creating cordels in 'born

digital' form. These 'e-cordelistas' are hosting blogs and web sites containing and promoting cordel literature. In November 2011, the LC Rio Office held a seminar on web archiving for cordel partners in Rio. In 2012, LC began archiving cordel web sites and blogs as part of the collection *Brazil Cordel Literature Online*. 24 sites are being archived currently.



Thus, the cordel collection at the Library of Congress holds both the 'traditional' paper chapbooks as well as cordel issued only in digital form. Cordelistas have been quick to give permission to archive, as this provides them with a back-up copy of their site.