



RISKY BOOKS, REJECTED AUTHORS

Alfred Knopf and the Screening of Brazilian Literature

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ABSTRACT

As a lifelong editor, Alfred Knopf relentlessly searched Latin America for promising authors. But translating and publishing were not the only ways his firm helped to shape the reception of Latin American literature in the United States. On the flip side, for each Latin American book translated, Knopf and his associate editors rejected many others. This article analyses how the works of Brazilian writers were assessed by the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and discusses the intricate operation of selecting foreign fiction for translation into English.

KEYWORDS: *Brazilian literature in translation; Alfred Knopf; Publishing; Brazil-US cultural relations.*

Livros arriscados, autores rejeitados: Alfred Knopf e a triagem da literatura brasileira

RESUMO

Em sua longa carreira de editor, Alfred Knopf buscou incessantemente autores latino-americanos promissores. Entretanto, traduzir e publicar não foram as únicas maneiras pelas quais sua editora influenciou a recepção da literatura latino-americana nos Estados Unidos. Para cada livro latino-americano traduzido, Knopf e seus editores-assistentes rejeitaram muitos outros. Este artigo analisa como as obras de autores brasileiros foram avaliadas pela editora Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. e discute o intrincado processo de seleção de literatura estrangeira para tradução em inglês.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Literatura brasileira em tradução; Alfred Knopf; editoração; relações culturais Brasil-Estados Unidos.*

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[1] In 1969, an add at *The New York Times Book Review* lists thirty-six Latin American books published by Alfred Knopf, Inc. Among those titles, twenty-two were of Brazilian authors. "Latin American Books from Knopf," *New York Times Book Review*, 28 September 1969, p. 21, at <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/09/28/issue.html>.

Considered by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre to be "an extra-official ambassador" for Latin America, Alfred Knopf (1892–1984) has been justly acclaimed for his pioneering and decisive role in publishing Spanish-American and Brazilian literature in translation in the United States (Freyre, 1965). Indeed, compared to other American publishing companies, Alfred Knopf, Inc. built up a considerable catalog of Latin American titles in the immediate post-WWII years.¹ The firm, established in 1915, maintained the leadership in that rather unprofitable editorial niche until the mid-1960s, with the emergence of new players attracted by funds coming from

translation programs sponsored by official agencies and/or the expectations of a growing market for Latin American cultural goods (Cohn, 2006, pp. 143-50). The translation of Spanish-American and, to a lesser extent, Brazilian titles gained momentum with the expansion of Latin American studies in US academia and the positive critical reception and commercial success in the United States of books such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1969), whose translation was sponsored by the Center for Inter-American Relations.² Even Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, whose first novel translated into English, *Violent Land*, was unable to arouse the interest of the American reader in 1945, eventually triumphed in the 1960s with *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (1962) and *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1969) (Knopf, 1949). The so-called literary boom, which, to a great extent, was a commercial brand that benefited Brazilian authors only marginally, may have shaped the history of the publishing and consumption of Latin American books in the United States into a narrative of success.³ Certainly, best-selling writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, and Jorge Amado secured a significant position in the thin market for translations in that country. However, these successful few can hardly represent the whole picture of the reception of Latin American literature in English. If for no other reason, for each Latin American book translated, many others were rejected in a complex screening process where personal opinions on literary value and profit analysis intertwine with other considerations. As with any complex system, this scrutiny operation is mostly messy yet revealing since rejected books function as missing links in a literary system. Unpublished titles and authors impacted the literary insertion of Spanish-American and Brazilian literature in the book market of the United States as much as the works, sometimes disastrously translated, that could break through to an American readership.

In this article, I address the flip side of the somewhat glamorous reception of Latin American books in the United States. Mostly based on documentation hosted by the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, I focus on the evaluation process of Brazilian books by Alfred Knopf, Inc., especially those cases that resulted in rejection or commercial failure. My ultimate goal is to try to understand how commercial vindication, editorial procedures, explicit and implicit literary criteria, and cultural expectations shape the way Brazilian fiction was scrutinized and selected, or rejected, for translation. I also discuss the influence of cultural diplomacy and Cold War politics on the dynamics of the book trade between Brazil and the United States. I argue that the whole process of editorial approval or rejection of literary work from a peripheral country like Brazil illuminates telling aspects of inter-American cultural negotiation and confirms well-known power imbalances in the global

[2] Cohn, citing Howard Cline, informs that the Ford Foundation provided more than \$11 million in grants to support Latin American studies between 1962 and 1966 alone (Deborah Cohn, 2012, p. 96).

[3] Knopf realized the marginal position Brazilian authors occupied in the caption of Latin American literature in the US: "Our young intellectuals seem to look rather to Chile, Colombia, and Peru" (Knopf, 1972b).

republic of letters. As Johan Heilbron claims, the international translation system is a hierarchical structure based on the relative prestige or “centrality” that a language occupies in the world market of translations (Heilbron, 1999, pp. 433-5).

Alfred Knopf, Inc.’s connection with Latin America, and especially Brazil, dates from the 1940s, when, under the auspices of US cultural diplomacy, Blanche Knopf, Alfred’s first wife, headed for South America (Rostagno, 1997; Sadlier, 2012). Blanche, who was, according to Thomas Mann, the “soul of the firm”, had an eye for recognizing new talents outside the mainstream literary scene (Claridge, 2016, p. 3). In the 1920s, for instance, Blanche played an important role in selecting, publishing and promoting literature of the Harlem Renaissance and was one among the “dollars-and-cents salon Negrotarians” who “combined noble sentiments with keen market analysis” (Lewis, 1981, p. 99). Maybe that same blend of commercial instinct and sociocultural interest lays behind Blanche’s decision to work as an unofficial agent of the US Good Neighbor policy, embarking on a scouting trip to Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil (Claridge, 2016, pp. 214-5). During her time in these countries, Blanche met secret service personnel, was granted official privileges, and sent updates on the local political situation to the American government (Blanche Knopf, 1942). The tour was part of a set of diplomatic initiatives by the Department of State to consolidate an inter-American book market through direct and indirect patronage. In 1941, Lewis Hanke, from the Library of Congress, embarked on a similar trip and spent more than three months visiting nine Latin American countries to set up a project to subsidize the translation of American books into Spanish and Portuguese. On that occasion, Hanke charted the main publishing houses and cultural and scientific institutions in each country and, to consolidate the gains of his trip, suggested that Brazilian publishers be invited to visit the United States (Hanke, 1941). Among them, Hanke lists editor José Olympio and his wife, Vera Pacheco Jordão, a couple who later came to be counted among Alfred Knopf’s closest Brazilian friends. The web of inter-American publishing taking shape at that time would play a central role in the hemispheric cultural diplomacy in the following decades, fostering a transnational “intertraffic of the mind” through books in translation.⁴

In Hanke’s reports, it becomes evident that the main purpose of the translation program was to supply Latin America with information about the United States and gain its “respect and admiration” (Hanke, “Report on the Project”, p. 1). At that point, the need for translating Latin American titles into English was mentioned only marginally and the imbalances in cultural exchanges just occasionally attracted some criticism.⁵ A 1943 document of the Department of State reveals that

[4] The expression comes from a poem by English poet Samuel Daniel. Quoted in Karen Raber (2001, p. 69).

[5] As an example, in a letter to Charles E. Eaton, the Consul General of the United States of America to Rio de Janeiro, American artist Thomas Hart Benton acidly comments on a proposal for a cultural publication program: “I hope, however, that this program may be made reciprocal and that Brazilians will also try to acquaint us with their culture and their ways of expressing it”. Quoted in Eaton (2001, p. 154).

by then more than US\$ 73,000 had been invested in the translation program, and 117 books had been contracted. Of those, only 15 were English translations of Latin American works (“List of Books”, 1943). Sooner or later, even those in charge of the translation programs recognized this as a drawback: “The extent of this south-north cooperation is limited by the ability and desire of US publishers to publish translations of books from the other American republics” (Davis, 1947, p. 5).

Alfred and Blanche Knopf tackled the challenge of presenting Latin American titles to American audiences. Irene Rostagno suggests that their major motivation was to search for new foreign writers for their list during wartime, when traveling to Europe was impracticable (Rostagno, 1997, p. 31). At any rate, since the 1940s Alfred Knopf, Inc. became a key partner in a network of official, semi-official, and private institutions that put forward, in loose and sometimes contradictory ways, the agenda for an inter-American cultural system led by the United States (Barnhisel, 2015, pp. 8-9). In this respect, Alfred and Blanche Knopf participated in what Gilles Scott-Smith called “the politics of apolitical culture”: “the connection between semi-autonomous cultural-intellectual developments and political intentions” (Scott-Smith, 2002, p. 4). Upon her return from South America, Blanche Knopf wrote an article for a special issue of *The Saturday Review of Literature* on Pan-Americanism. In her essay, Blanche shared several interesting considerations on what she had learned about the editorial and literary landscape in South America and endorsed the usual rhetoric of American cultural diplomacy of those days: “they [South Americans] are learning about us through our books; and we, in turn, I think, should do everything we can to learn about them through their books and the work of their outstanding writers” (Knopf, Blanche, 1943, p. 34).

The first fruits of Blanche’s mission were the publication in the United States of Gilberto Freyre’s *The Masters and The Slaves* (1946) and of several other Latin American writers, such as Jorge Amado and Graciliano Ramos from Brazil, Adolfo Costa du Rels from Bolivia; Miguel Covarrubias from Mexico; W. H. Hudson and Eduardo Mallea, from Argentina, and Ricardo Palma from Peru. It is worth noting that both Amado and Ramos were left-wing writers who joined the Communist Party in Brazil, and whose translated novels, *Violent Land* and *Anguish*, respectively, adopted a critical perspective on social class divisions. Therefore, at least in the mid-1940s, when the fight against Nazi-fascism brought together leftists and conservatives, American cultural diplomacy was quite tolerant in terms of the political stances of translated authors.⁶ Apparently, participation in officially sponsored translation programs did not necessarily request to yield to strict ideological constraints. It is also remarkable that, since the beginning,

[6] In contrast, the “ideological purity” of Latin American writers and artists was rigidly inspected if they wished or were invited to visit the United States (Ninkovich, 1981, pp. 43-4).

[7] As late as 1967, Alfred Knopf still trusts on the diplomatic strategy of targeting selected individuals, as described by Frank Ninkovich. Referring to a young left-wing Brazilian intellectual, Knopf assumed that “any proper stay in the US” would “do good him good” (Knopf, *Diaries*, 1964).

[8] The US “culture, education and information war” was part of a global-scale strategy (Barnhisel, 2015, pp. 96-9; Caute, 2003, p. 24; Ninkovich, 1996, pp. 21-2).

the Knopf catalog of translated Latin American titles favored, with few exceptions, contemporary, living writers. Beyond the publishers’ personal literary preferences, that choice may have been induced by the designers of the American cultural diplomacy, in the hope that Latin American artists, writers, journalists, publishers, and librarians could be convinced to play an active intellectual role in the consolidation of the hemispheric “mutual understanding” (Ninkovich, 1991, p. 181).⁷

With the end of World War II, official interest in Latin America on the part of the United States diminished, and several cultural exchange and translation programs were discontinued (Sadlier, 2012, p. 198). European reconstruction was a priority, which explains why between 1945 and 1952 Latin America received less US economic support than Belgium and Luxembourg (Munhoz, 2013, p. 136). The US government was less committed to hemispheric “mutual understanding” than to pragmatically combatting communism through political and economic pressure, while disseminating a positive image of capitalism and American democracy to the rest of the continent (Franco, 2003, pp. 45-6; Barnhisel, 2015, pp. 17-8). The US goal was to flood Latin America with American books, magazines, comics, movies, and newsreels, and to gain a presence in conventions, exhibitions, and universities.⁸ Less attention was paid to the translation of Latin American titles into English. Additionally, the overall commercial performance in the US market of the translations of books from the south of the Rio Grande had been deceiving. Samuel Putnam, the translator of Gilberto Freyre’s sociological study, Jorge Amado’s *Violent Land* (Knopf, 1946) and Euclides da Cunha’s *Rebellion in the Backlands* (University of Chicago Press, 1944), acknowledged that, despite official sponsorship, translations of Latin American novels frequently came at a financial loss to American publishers (Putnam, 1948, p. vii). In the introduction of his *Marvelous Journey: a Survey of Four Centuries of Brazilian Writing*, Putnam offered practical advice on how to increase public interest in Latin American literature, after a “hasty and improvised” “wartime effort of cultural rapprochement”: “Would not the average reader be better prepared for an understanding and enjoyment of Brazilian novels if he had first made a study of such works as those by Freyre and da Cunha? A certain amount of social and historical background would appear to be almost indispensable” (Putnam, 1948, p. ix). Putnam was evidently justifying his own work as a forerunner Brazilianist who, since the beginning of the 1940s, had been propagating Brazilian fiction in American journals, such as *The Inter-American Quarterly* and *Science and Society* (Sadlier, 2010, p. 3). Nevertheless, he rightly noted that the development of a promising market for Latin American literature would require a broader, well-informed audience in America. At that time, though, the cultural and educational apparatus in place in

the United States was not satisfactorily designed to generate a critical mass for debating and consuming Latin American fiction. One may wonder, thus, how American audiences who did not dare read Brazilian novels translated into English could become interested in learning about Brazil's society and culture in the first place. Putnam must have realized the hard way that inter-American book exchanges were a more difficult business: according to an editor at Alfred Knopf, Inc., *Marvelous Journey* represented a "considerable net loss".⁹ Bearing this in mind, it comes as no surprise that Knopf published only one Brazilian and five Spanish American books throughout the 1950s; among those titles, only two were fiction.¹⁰

The scenario changed significantly toward the end of that decade and during the next one, when the Cuban Revolution and its subsequent radicalization brought Latin America to the center stage in Cold War politics and reactivated a more aggressive US economic and cultural intervention in the continent (Cohn, 2015, p. 26; Iber, 2015, pp. 14-5). As Patrick Iber notes, "unlike the rest of the world, Latin America's Cultural Cold War had three international players: the Soviet Union, the United States, and Cuba, which was a small country with the foreign policy ambition of a larger one" (Iber, 2015, p. 10). The urgency to counterbalance intellectual influence on the part of Cuban cultural diplomacy prompted American public and private organizations to invest in programs and centers dedicated to Latin America studies at US universities, engage with Brazilian and Spanish American writers and promote their work in the American literary market.¹¹ The National Defense Education Act Title VI promoted the study of foreign languages and literature in universities and the Fulbright-Hays Act supported the education of American scholars overseas (Sadlier, 2010, p. 8). Not coincidentally, during the 1960s Alfred Knopf resumed his role as a pivotal figure in Brazil-US literary relations. Although his firm then competed with university presses and other commercial publishing houses for the resources of translation programs aimed at Latin America, Knopf stands out for his close and steady relationship with Brazil, which he maintained until he died, in 1984.¹²

Between 1961 and 1969, Knopf traveled four times to Brazil, where he established long-lasting friendships and continuously expanded his network with writers, publishers, booksellers, artists, academics, politicians, bankers, businesspeople, and North American and foreign diplomatic personnel. Knopf's correspondence with officials of the US Department of State and the Inter-American Committee, his frequent meetings at the American Embassy and Consulates in Brazil, as well as with people from the US Information Agency (USIA) indicate some level of interplay between his activities as a publisher and governmental policies regarding inter-American affairs. Knopf

[9] In about one year, the book sold less than 1,500 copies (Weinstock, 1949).

[10] *Amerigo and the New World* (1955), by Germán Arciniegas; *The Kingdom of this World* (1957), by Alejo Carpentier; *The Eagle, the Jaguar, and the Serpent* (1954) and *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (1957), by Miguel Covarrubias; *New World in the Tropics* (1959), by Gilberto Freyre.

[11] Official efforts to publish American books translated into Spanish and Portuguese also continued. In 1962, Reed Harris, from the USIA, anticipated a fund of US\$ 2,000,000 for the following year and a goal of 4,000,000 published books to "target audiences in Latin America" (Harris, 1962).

[12] Among those publishing houses that launched Latin American literature in the United States are Avon Books, New Directions, Ballantine Books, Harper & Row, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux. For more on the translation programs in the 1960s and 70s, see Cohn, 2006.

was deeply interested in the translation program directed by the USIA and he spent time talking about it with Ambassador Lincoln Gordon and Edward R. Murrow, the head of the USIA (Knopf, 1962c). As translator Harriet de Onís puts it, Knopf “has become a one-man Alliance for the Progress” (de Onís, 1965:203). However, Alfred Knopf was no rubber stamp for US policies and programs. In his correspondence, Knopf confessed how dubious he was about the Alliance for the Progress and he criticized the translation program. Also, regarding the 1964 military coup in Brazil, which was backed by the United States, Knopf initially expresses his approval, but later condemns the media censorship and “the social state to which the present government [in Brazil] has brought approximately 50 percent, if not more, of the population. Business, business, business; profits, profits, profits... and the devil takes the poor” (Knopf, 1976). As many have pointed out, participation in US-led programs and general acceptance of American cultural diplomacy did not necessarily mean unreserved adherence, consensus or subjugation. The complexity of governmental structure and bureaucratic management, the coexistence of various agendas, and the vast number of social actors involved complicated the dynamics of inter-American intellectual and artistic exchanges (Barnhisel, 2015, p. 8; Cohn, 2012, pp. 148-9; Iber, 2015, pp. 7, 16). In a 1967 letter, Knopf confirms the labyrinthine nature of official structures by complaining about “the mysterious ‘they’ in Washington who make up that list of titles to be subsidized by USIA” (Knopf, 1967b). Patrick Iber, then, is right to conclude that “the projects of cultural hegemony” were “porous rather than solid”: “They regularly failed to meet their objectives and sometimes acted in a way that was seemingly indifferent to the interests of empire” (Iber, 2015, p. 16).

That may explain why, in spite of the fact that Latin American writers such as Jorge Amado, Pablo Neruda, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez (who have been prey to anti-red hysteria) did not coincide with official U.S. Cold War ideology, their books were nevertheless translated and their works were studied in American universities, under direct or indirect patronage of governmental agencies (Cohn, 2006, p. 143). The permeability of the inter-American literary system also applies to Knopf’s attitude towards his contacts in Brazil, where he related to people across the political spectrum: from conservatives like Gilberto Freyre and economist Roberto Campos, to leftists such as Amado, Antonio Callado, and publisher Enio Silveira. It is also important to acknowledge that Knopf’s vision about the country and his opinions about acquaintances and friends there changed over time. In this regard, Knopf’s relationship with Amado is quite revealing. Their first letters in the 1950s were quite objective and focused mainly on business, but a close friendship evolved and lasted for decades, most

likely due to a combination of factors: Amado's Marxist conviction gradually waned, Knopf visited Brazil, and *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (1962) fared well in the United States (Dimas, 2012, pp. 113-6).

Those same political, emotional, and commercial factors account for Alfred Knopf's interest in Brazil and Brazilian literature. Irene Rostagno, quoting a letter from Knopf to a banker, indicates that the publisher betted on Brazil's future, underlying how much the country would be worth to the United States in the long run (Rostagno, 1997, p. 35). In turn, Harriet de Onís, as did many others, stresses Knopf's "love affair with Brazil, which has all the air of an indissoluble attachment" (de Onís, 1965, p. 203). But Knopf's alleged "fraternal affection" for Brazil—the expression was employed by Gilberto Freyre—can be misleading and may end up obscuring his role as an inter-American cultural agent (Freyre, 1965, p. 208). Affection obviously does not ensure deep understanding or unconditional appraisal of Brazilian culture, *habitus*, or literature. Cultural exchanges and intercultural engagement are much more complex and challenging than what well-intentioned discourses and top-down programs may suggest. Curiosity, openness, and acceptance—when they do exist—usually go hand in hand with distaste, uneasiness, and annoyance. Often, "mutual understanding" is rooted in condescendence, oversimplification, and misrepresentation, and there is no reason to imagine that such factors would not interfere with the reception of a foreign literature and the decision-making of editors and publishers.

Hence, we should take Jorge Amado's account of Knopf's visits to Bahia with a grain of salt. Amado says: "Bahia and Alfred immediately understood each other and loved one another, surrendered to one another" (Amado, 1965, p. 192). Amado then adds that the city of Salvador opened itself in its "old houses", "music of African deities", "Capoeira fighting," and "voodoo rites". Singing the same tune, Gilberto Freyre concludes that, after having enjoyed the Afro-Amerindian celebrations in Brazil, Knopf surrendered to a sense of time "which is not that of 'time is money' of the conventional businessman" (Freyre, 1965, p. 209). But in his travel logs, Knopf reveals a different disposition. He often complains that Brazilians, much to his frustration and perplexity, lacked any sense of time. Regarding the "African deities", the popular festivals and the like, Knopf can hardly hide his boredom and aloofness. About the Bumba Meu Boi festival in Pernambuco, he writes: "long and monotonous, but interesting at first" (Knopf, 1962a, p. 7). By the same token, the Candomblé ritual he attends in Bahia is described as a "monotonous drumming", "followed by equally monotonous dancing" carried out by "women who are physically unattractive and some of them hideously ugly". After enduring the ritual for about one and a half hours, Knopf "finally asked to be taken home"

(Knopf, “Trip Notes”, p. 47). He also found it amazing that people like Jorge Amado, his wife Zélia Gattai, and the Argentinian-Brazilian artist Carybé would be “on their knees prostrate before the figures of their respective [Candomblé] saints to whom they were offering the most uninviting-looking food”. Knopf had a hard time accepting that his valued friends believed in all that (Knopf, “Trip Notes”, pp. 52-3). In his very first visit to Bahia, he describes a “voodoo negro dancing” as “ghastly phony” (Knopf, “Personal Diaries”, p. 12). In his diaries and letters, there are quite a few remarks revealing cultural anxieties: he mentions with dismay the filthy markets and streets, the poor quality of service everywhere and the shabby conditions of hotels. Moreover, Knopf continually expresses annoyance with the big loud parties to which he was invited and deep impatience with the verbose rhetoric, a core linguistic and behavioral protocol in Brazilian culture (and, as for that, a poetic resource of certain Brazilian writers): “[A]ll these Brazilians orate on the least provocation”, he grumbles (Knopf, 1967a).

It is, of course, difficult to measure how such thoughts and feelings toward an overseas culture can influence the reading habits of an individual and the way he or she perceives foreign literary works. Also, publishing decisions are usually a team effort, not a one-person verdict, and they take into consideration an array of aspects beyond the intrinsic textual attributes of a book.¹³ But Alfred Knopf was the first to recognize that the publishing business depends on an editor’s personal feelings and on having “a heart for” books under consideration (Knopf, 1972c). Thus, his observations on Brazil and Brazilians imply a cultural bias that, if shared by a larger group—e.g., the American reading public or the decision-makers in a publishing house—may contribute to the general apathy for and disappointing sales of Brazilian literature in the US. Late in the 1970s, Knopf concluded that North American readers must suffer from an “absolute allergy” where Brazil is concerned (Knopf, 1972a; Knopf, 1972b). Repeated commercial failures did not spare authors like Clarice Lispector and Guimarães Rosa,¹⁴ favored by Brazilian and international academics and critics alike, nor more crowd-pleasing titles like *My Sweet-Orange Tree*, by José Mauro de Vasconcelos, a best-seller in Brazil. Referencing the latter, Knopf comments in his correspondence that, despite their best efforts, the book “sank without leaving a trace within a week of its publication” (Knopf, 1972c).

One can argue that the dismissal of foreign literature in North America does not target only Spanish American or Brazilian books.¹⁵ The rejected files in Alfred Knopf’s archives, for instance, host many European, Asian and African writers as well. Indeed, throughout the 20th century, many American editors pointed out “how difficult it is to get a hearing for translations, to get them reviewed, and to get

[13] “Both the gestation and the reception of the literary work contribute to the production of the cultural object, predicated on a dynamic relation between author and reader, and mediated by everything from publishers’ marketing strategies to abstract elements of influence such as the cultural education, values, and expectations of [an] audience. The text itself merely occupies one position along this axis which might be perceived as a cultural argument to which a variety of persons will adhere or defer” (Armstrong, 1999, p. 13).

[14] About Rosa, editor Wiliam Koshland of Alfred Knopf, Inc. writes, “I’m afraid the picture on Rosa’s *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* has been a fairly bleak one. The sale goes steadily if not too excitingly, and we have now shipped out some 2,600 copies after absorbing the usual rash of return in the months following publication. *Gabriela*, as you know, reached a much wider audience” (Koshland, 1966).

[15] Per Henningsgaard, for instance, studies the limited reception and sales of Australian literature in the contemporary United States (Henningsgaard, 2017).

them sold” (Wolff, 1975). In current times, the situation remains pretty much the same: only about 3 percent of books published in the United States are translations (Hoffman, 2007).¹⁶ This number falls to 0.6 percent when considering fiction alone. Not surprisingly, it is still harder to seduce readers to consume works from a country and a culture they are thoroughly ignorant of. As Elizabeth Lowe and Earl E. Fitz note, “this lack of understanding about a common and deeply intertwined American past, a problem exacerbated by our cultural biases, may well have handicapped the initial reception of Latin American literature in the United States of the 1960s” (Lowe and Fitz, 2007, p. 172). Knopf resentfully complains that the American news media “covers Brazil mostly inadequately” and paid no attention at all to Jorge Amado’s 1972 four-month tour in the US (Knopf, 1972a). In that same year, Knopf also accuses the reception of Antonio Callado’s novel, *Don Juan’s Bar* (1972), of being “insulting to the point of irresponsibility,” because reviewers knew little about the author and were incapable of taking into consideration the political situation in Brazil (Knopf, 1972b). Two years later, Knopf would regret that Dalton Trevisan’s *The Vampire of Curitiba and Other Stories* (1972) “got virtually no publicity in the press and very, very few reviews”. And he adds, “No one I have met who doesn’t work for Knopf has even mentioned his [Trevisan’s] name to me” (Knopf, 1974).

Unfamiliarity can easily open the way for stereotypes and often results in disdain. In 1980, a public opinion survey found that 34 percent of Americans considered Latin Americans ignorant, 41 percent said they were lazy, and only 15 percent thought they were intelligent (Skidmore et al., 2014, p. 4). From such a standpoint, how could the intellectual work produced by the southern neighbors—and written in languages “not regarded as worthy of serious scholarship”—inspire any sympathy? (Lowe and Fitz, 2007: 6). If there were indeed an allergy to Brazilian and Spanish American literature, not even Knopf himself was immune to it. In an ironic retort to translator James L. Taylor’s statement that there are “other Brazilian writers who deserve publication in English”, Knopf answered “please, feel free to make any suggestions to me at any time”, with implied disbelief (Knopf, 1962b). Years later, Knopf would be even more sarcastic about the positive image Latin Americans have of their writers: “Every time I go to a party where many Latin Americans are I come away with the feeling that there are at least two dozen of immortal masterpieces lurking all over the continent” (Knopf, 1966). Readers and editors who worked for Alfred Knopf, Inc. could not hold Latin American literature in high regard, either. In 1978, a semi-retired Knopf lamented that at that point probably none of those in charge at his company would “share his interest in Latin America and its writers” (Knopf, 1978b). Jorge

[16] Johan Heilbron points out that international translation statistics are not very reliable and should be taken “as an indicative manner to highlight structural patterns” (Heilbron, 1999, p. 433).

Amado expressed the same opinion, saying that from a certain point on, people at Alfred Knopf, Inc. did not keep the same commitment to his books (Amado, 1990, p. 192). Writer Elizabeth Bishop, who met Knopf in Brazil in 1967 and who became an informal adviser on Brazilian literature for the publisher, confessed, “One always hopes to find something really good, but in general my reading in Brazilian contemporary writing is sheer drudgery” (Bishop, 1963). When reviewing a Brazilian piece of literature in 1966, translator Patrick Gregory saw no artistic value in the book, but then bluntly added, “I admit to a general lack of sympathy—that amounts to blindness—for most South American fiction” (Gregory, 1966).

As a matter of fact, Alfred Knopf detected the negative attitude some readers and translators had toward Brazilian books. For example, Knopf sounds discouraged by a commentary on João Guimarães Rosa’s collection of short stories: “What would be the point of asking him [George Reed] to do *Corpo de baile* when he describes the stories as ‘not interesting enough in themselves to justify wading through the dense, impressionistic text with its mass of regionalism’” (Knopf, 1965b). One may rightly ask why, then, Knopf relied on such contributors. The truth is that the publisher did not have too many choices. That few Americans and US residents speak Portuguese to this day both explains and aggravates the peripheral position of Brazilian literature in the US. In his correspondence and diaries, Knopf repeatedly complains about the strain of finding “sound and dependable readers” or a “really satisfactory translator” of Portuguese (Knopf, 1962d; Knopf, 1964c).

In some cases, the bad quality of translations became evident before publication, and remedial actions had to be taken. That was the case with two valued Brazilian titles, Amado’s *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* and Guimarães Rosa’s *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. Knopf observes that James L. Taylor, a dictionary-maker, handed in manuscripts “with no literary quality whatever” and the translation “virtually [had] to be done over again by a different translator” (Knopf, 1965c).¹⁷ This kind of solution not only increased costs but also failed to prevent disastrous results. The contribution of prolific translators such as Gregory Rabassa and Harriet de Onís, who some years later would become widely known for some acclaimed translations of stellar writers of the Spanish-American boom, was in some cases of little avail. Knopf had some criticism for Rabassa (“He has not [...] made a tremendously favorable impression on me”), and Elizabeth Bishop deplored the awkward use of English slang and contemporary expressions in *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (Knopf, 1964b; Bishop, 1965). Years later this book gave rise to controversy when its translators were accused of “translational atrocities” and “erecting between Rosa and

[17] Ultimately, Harriet de Onís co-translated Rosa’s novel, and William L. Grossman co-translated *Gabriela*.

the reader a barrier even more insurmountable than the Portuguese language” (Congrat-Butlar, 1978).¹⁸ Accordingly, extra-textual conditions—the lack of good translators—led to textual flaws that in many cases jeopardized the chances of editorial success. Indeed, many scholars understand that the poor quality of translations is responsible for the cool reception of many Brazilian authors in the United States (Lowe and Fitz, 2007, pp. 55-6; Krause, 2010, pp. 149-95; Armstrong, 1999, pp. 114-28).

The role of professional readers and translators was even more crucial since neither Knopf nor any of his assistants could read in Portuguese. At best, editors at Alfred Knopf, Inc. had to place their trust in synopses and critical assessments written by someone who could understand the original language. But some of those commissioned readers also based their literary judgment on sample translations, whose potential defects could generate questionable evaluations of a book and risks its rejection. It is true, though, that typically more than one reader would report on a potential new release. The issue is, as André Lefevere argues, that

whether they produce translations, literary histories or their more compact spin-offs, reference works, anthologies, criticism, or edition, rewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make it fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time. (Lefevere, 1992, p. 8)

Therefore, what the reports of these editors and readers reveal varies greatly depending not only on personal preferences, scholarship, and familiarity with Brazil, but also on individual motivations. Sometimes, the reviewer is a prospective translator or a formal or informal broker, and his or her evaluation may tend to highlight the merits of a book no matter what. The rejection of Pedro Nava’s lengthy memoirs serves as an example. Professor Carleton Sprague-Smith, the co-founder of the Brazilian Institute of New York University, was quite enthusiastic about Nava’s massive autobiographic account. Brazilian historian and diplomat Sérgio Corrêa da Costa also sent Alfred Knopf an enthusiastic account on Pedro Nava’s work, sustaining that it was “one of the most important books printed in the Portuguese language”. He also says, “This is one of those books that becomes more universal the more it dwells on trivialities” (da Costa, 1978). Translator Barbara Shelby praised the author’s style and his “extraordinary candor and humorous asides”. Charity Cole, a frequent reader for Knopf, emphasized the importance of the work as a source of information on Brazil. Nevertheless, both Shelby and Cole recognized that the rich vocabulary and the volume of historical, cultural and sociologi-

[18] In that same letter, Congrat-Butlar quotes Brazilian critic Leo Gilson Ribeiro, who censures the “viciousness of Mrs. de Onís’ translation” and urges American publishers not to commission translations of Portuguese from “the first person who comes around claiming he/she knows Brazil and its capital, Buenos Aires”.

cal references could be an obstacle for non-Brazilian readers. Regardless of this, they were clearly in favor of publishing it in the United States: “Other authors might use fewer words than Pedro Nava, but few would have so much to say”, concludes Charity Cole. But editors at Knopf were convinced that Nava’s books would not repay translation into English. So, after more than five years under consideration—and to Knopf’s disappointment—Pedro Nava’s work was turned down.

What is most striking about the story behind the rejection of Nava’s work is the way editor Bob Gottlieb drew a line under the debate. He was convinced that the book “simply belongs in its own language and own culture, and can’t reach beyond” (Gottlieb, 1975). Whereas the commercial worries of publishing such long memoirs are quite understandable, Gottlieb’s statement is profoundly disturbing because it contradicts the very idea and purpose of translating, that is, to render a text—and for that matter, a particular culture—intelligible to foreign readers. It is also grounded in a truism—a book belongs to a language and a culture—unless it implies that some books—and some cultures—are universal and therefore can “naturally” attract the interest of a global audience. In fact, the verdict that a Brazilian book “belongs to its [own] culture and can’t reach beyond” is not grounded solely on its intrinsic attributes, but also on its relative position in the global field of economic and political power. Although universality is clearly not a valid cultural concept, it has cultural and literary implications, since it creates asymmetric expectations according to place and origin. So when Harriet de Onís writes about Clarice Lispector’s novel *Perto do coração selvagem* (*Near to the Wild Heart*), “One would never dream that the author is Brazilian,” she unintentionally goes to the heart of the problem. De Onís gets even more explicit by saying that that kind of literature had been written “so many times in English and French” (Knopf, 1965a). Gregory Rabassa uses the same type of argument in his appraisal of Erico Verissimo’s *O prisioneiro* (*The Prisoner*). The book discusses the war in Vietnam, and according to Rabassa, “the whole thing has been done so much better by American authors” (Rabassa). He also notes that the novel does not bring a unique Brazilian perspective to the problem “as it is remarkably American as it turns out” (Rabassa). Both *Perto do coração selvagem* and *O prisioneiro* were rejected by Alfred Knopf, Inc.

The remarks made by de Onís and Rabassa translate the difficult situation of a peripheral author who faces a paradox. On the one hand, if a writer explores the specificity of his/her culture, he can’t reach beyond unless he pushes the right buttons and delivers the right amount of exoticism and sexiness to fulfill stereotyped expectations of a foreign audience, as occurred in the case of Amado’s *Gabriela* and *Dona Flor*. Additionally, in the context of the Cold

War, literary and artistic nationalism were at odds with the idea of universality and cosmopolitanism promoted by the United States to consolidate American hegemony and combat leftist resistance to American cultural invasion in Latin American countries (Franco, 2003, pp. 53-7). On the other hand, if the peripheral writer aspires to universality, why would readers in the center dare read his or her books when they have direct access to Melville, Woolf, Faulkner, and Morrison? Of course, the negotiation between national roots and international expectations can be shaped in any number of ways, including the time-worn adage about reaching the universal through the particular. At any rate, documents at the Alfred Knopf, Inc.'s archives call to mind that, at least regarding Brazilian literature, official programs sponsoring translations or a publisher's "love affair with Brazil" are not enough to radically transform reading habits and cultural bias. That many Latin American books released in the US which have never been reprinted or retranslated in English may suggest a commercial failure. Graciliano Ramos's *Anguish*, Dalton Trevisan's *The Vampire of Curitiba and Other Stories*, José Lins do Rego's *Plantation Boy*, and Antonio Callado's *Quarup* may serve as examples here. The case of *Vampiro* sums the whole situation: "The failure of Vampire is so resounding—1,456 copies sold against which we spent \$1,375.00 on advertising and promotion and gave away free and review copies to the tune of over 550—that it is hard for me to see how we can repeat this experience" (Knopf, 1974). Also, in some cases, the impact of translated Latin American writers must have been limited, since many of them had to wait years before having a second book published in the United States, while others have never accomplished such a feat (e.g., Autran Dourado and, again, Dalton Trevisan). Finally, because important titles and writers from Latin America have been largely ignored or rejected by North American editors, those in the US who do not read in Spanish or Portuguese have extremely restricted access to and consequently an impaired understanding of Latin American literature.¹⁹

Deborah Cohn makes a salient point in concluding that "publishing Latin American literature remained a process of trial and error [...] of battles against the odds" (Cohn, 2012, p. 14). Is it not puzzling that Pedro Nava's memoirs and even Jorge Amado's books were frequently criticized for being lengthy and overloaded with cultural information whereas Dalton Trevisan's "marvelous economy of words" made Knopf doubt that the volume with his outstandingly brief short stories would be "too small to be published all by itself in English" (Cole, 1972; Knopf, 1972d)? It is unfortunate that Knopf, after years of engagement with Brazil, had lost money "on everything Brazilian that [he] touched, with the single exception of Amado and Freyre" (Knopf,

[19] Alfred Knopf, for instance, was only interested in the younger generation of Latin American writers and did not even bother translating any Brazilian modernist fictionist of the 1920s. Other publishing houses followed the same trend and Machado de Assis, the acclaimed Brazilian author of the nineteenth century, was basically the only exception.

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1972a). In Knopf's opinion, even the success of Amado's *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* did not "scratch the surface" of what he thought the author deserved (Knopf, 1978a). Commercial misfortune may explain the number of rejected Brazilian titles by Alfred Knopf, Inc. between the 1960s and 1980s. More importantly, all the losses in the translation and publishing processes of Brazilian literature in the United States may account for a less optimistic narrative of cultural exchanges in times of a globalized market.

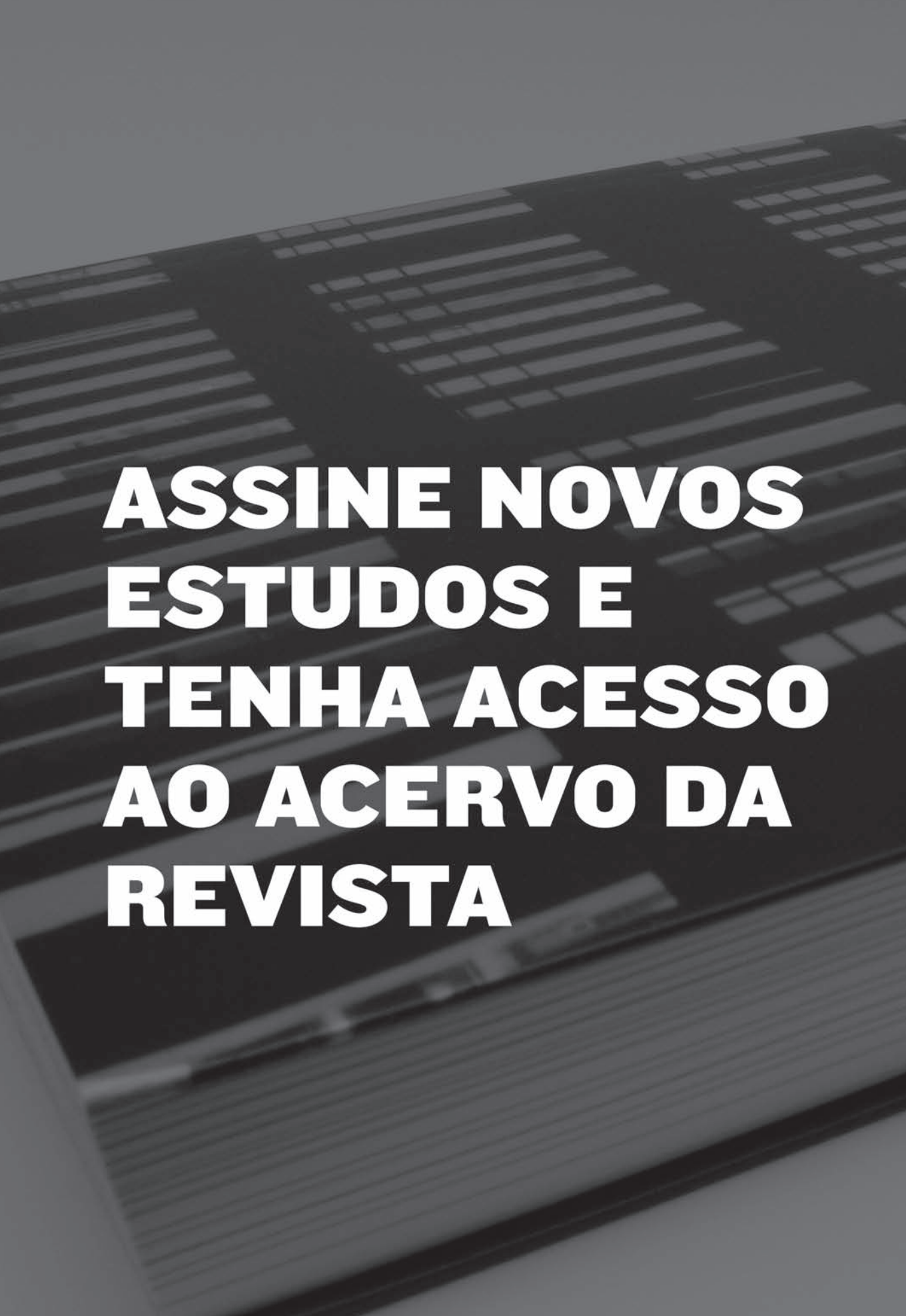
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**ASSINE NOVOS
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DESDE O INÍCIO DOS ANOS 1980, NOVOS ESTUDOS TEM PUBLICADO ARTIGOS, DEBATES, ENTREVISTAS, RESENHAS E DOSSIÊS QUE SE TORNARAM REFERÊNCIA OBRIGATÓRIA PARA DIVERSAS DISCIPLINAS NO ÂMBITO DAS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS, DAS ARTES E DA LITERATURA. A EXEMPLO DAS PUBLICAÇÕES MAIS EXPRESSIVAS DO MEIO, A REVISTA DISPÕE AGORA DE SEU ACERVO EM FORMATO ELETRÔNICO. OS VOLUMES — MUITOS DELES ESGOTADOS HÁ MAIS DE UMA DÉCADA — ENCONTRAM-SE FACILMENTE ACESSÍVEIS NO SITE DO CEBRAP. PARA TER ACESSO A ESSE MATERIAL SEM EQUIVALENTE NOS ARQUIVOS DE PERIÓDICOS CIENTÍFICOS BRASILEIROS, BASTA FAZER UMA ASSINATURA DA REVISTA. ASSINE NOVOS ESTUDOS. CUSTA POUCO ESTAR CONECTADO COM A PRODUÇÃO MAIS SOFISTICADA DAS HUMANIDADES NO BRASIL.

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