

TERROR IN THE TWIN TOWERS:  
The Events of September 11 in the Brazilian  
*Literatura de Cordel*

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*Abstract: Brought to the New World by the first Portuguese colonists and, with time, increasingly associated with the Northeast's vast, dry interior, the pamphlet stories in verse known as folhetos or as literatura de cordel have continued to change along with Brazil. Long associated with semi-literate poets who composed for the Northeastern masses, these "stories on a string" have become increasingly popular among middle-class writers and consumers. Today, contemporary compositions by educated authors who rely on the Internet mingle with folheto classics—love and adventure tales with names such as The Mysterious Peacock, Lampião in Hell, and Green Coconut and Watermelon. This article explores one cordel author's vision of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the subsequent U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. Terror in the Twin Towers (Terror nas Torres Gêmeas) by Azulão—the nickname of Rio-based author João José dos Santos—is noteworthy not just for its immediate subject matter but also for its clear mingling of time-honored cordel elements with other features foreign to most earlier stories. These less traditional aspects of the folheto reflect both the particularities of the events about which the poet is writing and a number of larger changes that have taken place since the late 1950s in Brazilian folk and popular culture.*

Broadcast immediately around the world, news of the September 11 attack on New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., did not take long to reach people in the most remote corners of Brazil. In the Amazon, small boats fresh with reports from satellite televisions in the larger ports where they had loaded cargoes of fish hooks or Coca Cola relayed reports of the assault up tiny tributaries. In makeshift huts and well-appointed living rooms, factories, and office buildings, people stopped what they were doing to watch television. Newspapers throughout Brazil ran headlines about the fiery collapse of the Twin Towers. In the backlands of the Northeast and large southern cities that have become home to millions of Northeastern migrants, the

events quickly found their way into the pamphlet stories in verse known as *folhetos* or as *literatura de cordel*.<sup>1</sup>

The Brazilian *literatura de cordel* (*cordel* refers to the string on which the booklets were suspended for display in open-air fairs) is the descendant of a ballad and broadside tradition that once spanned much of Europe. With the advent of the printing press in the late fifteenth century, cheap paper pamphlets and broadsides began to be sold by peddlers (often blind men) in city streets and country lanes. Varied in form as well as content, these booklets or *folhetos* quickly made their way to the New World.

Imported from Portugal until Brazil declared its independence in 1822, *cordel* stories might be in either prose or poetry—usually quatrains. Initially found in many different parts of the country, early *cordel* was closely associated with Rio de Janeiro and the Livraria Garnier literary import house. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the market for *cordel* literature shifted to the Northeastern backlands. This shift reflected relatively isolated backlanders' need for a cheap source of news, entertainment, and moral counsel. It was also one of the consequences of the windfall profits from cotton during the U.S. Civil War which made possible the entry into the Northeast of a number of secondhand printing presses.

Northeastern *cordel* writers, who were often also poet-improvisers, or *repentistas* introduced into their stories a number of metrical forms rarely found in southern or Portuguese *cordel* compositions. Moreover, even while they revamped a number of long-familiar stories of the Princess Magalona, the long-suffering Genoveva, and various Carolingian heroes, they also wrote about specifically Northeastern themes including outlaws, cowmen, droughts, and messianic movements.

1. The bibliography on the Brazilian *literatura de cordel* is extensive. For a summary introduction see Gilmar de Carvalho with Sylvie Debs' "Dossiê Cordel," *Revista Brasileira de Literatura* 5, no. 54 (2002): 43–48. For more complete overviews see *Literatura popular em verso: estudos*, ed. Manuel Cavalcanti de Proença (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa/MEC, 1973); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Vaqueiros e cantadores* (Porto Alegre: Livraria do Globo, 1939); Mark J. Curran, *Literatura de cordel* (Recife: Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 1973); Mark Dinneen, *Listening to the People's Voice: Erudite and Popular Literature in North East Brazil* (New York: Kegan Paul, 1996); Candace Slater, *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, c1982); Márcia Abreu, *Histórias de folhetos* (Campinas: Mercado das Letras, 1999); and Ana Maria de Oliveira Galvão, *Cordel: leitores e ouvintes* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2001). In addition, various studies of individual authors are: Gilmar de Carvalho, *Patativa do Assaré: pássaro liberto* (Fortaleza: Museu do Ceará, Secult, 2002), and Mark J. Curran, *A presença de Rodolfo Coelho Cavalcante na moderna literatura de cordel* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1987), also the new Biblioteca do Cordel collection of the Editora Hedra in São Paulo. The number of books, theses, and articles on the *cordel* is growing steadily.

Some of the greatest poets of the early twentieth century—such as Leandro Gomes de Barros and João Martins de Ataíde—were often also the owners of *cordel* presses that bought up the work of lesser-known and poorer authors. Located in Recife and various smaller cities throughout the interior, these presses furnished *folhetos* to the author-vendors who then traveled from fair to fair. Attracted by these vendors' oral performances as well as by eye-catching block prints (and, somewhat later, photos from silent movies), the often illiterate buyers would take home their purchases to be re-performed by someone—a rancher, a priest, a relative, or neighbor—who could read.

Never wholly uniform, early *cordel* stories attested to local as well as regional particularities. They also mirrored their authors' varying temperaments, thematic preferences, poetic skills, and educational background. The level of diversity increased dramatically following the exodus of Northeastern migrants to the South following World War II and the accompanying rise of an urban *cordel* that responded to its readers' new lives in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Other sorts of changes have made today's *literatura de cordel* both an ongoing affirmation of the past and a reflection of contemporary social, economic, and political transformations.

These "stories on a string" are not as popular among their traditional public—poor, often illiterate or semi-literate Northeasterners—as they were forty or fifty years ago. Since the *cordel* no longer offers poets and vendors the same sort of economic alternative to subsistence agriculture or construction work that it once did, the number of new *cordel* stories by older poets steeped in oral tradition that appears each year is far smaller than in the past.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, both these contemporary compositions as well as a number of *folheto* classics—love and adventure tales with names such as *O Pavão Misterioso* (The Mysterious Peacock), *Lampião no inferno* (Lampião in hell), and *Côco Verde e Melancia* (Green Coconut and Watermelon)—continue to be read by members of the *cordel*'s traditional public as well as by a growing number of middle-class teachers, students, and collectors.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the number of middle-class, often university-educated, authors who disseminate their work

2. These older poets often had little formal education and might even be illiterate, composing stories in their head which a literate son or daughter then wrote down. The most successful stories went through multiple editions of as many as ten thousand *folhetos*. At its height in the early part of the twentieth century, a large and effective network of *cordel* publishers and distributors existed across the Northeast.

3. *O Pavão Misterioso* by João Melquíades Ferreira is the story of a pair of lovers who manage to escape an angry father in an airplane-like giant peacock. *Lampião no inferno* by José Pacheco tells the story of the celebrated backlands bandit. *Côco Verde e Melancia* by José Camelo de Melo Resende tells of a couple nicknamed Green Coconut and Watermelon. While exact dates are hard to ascertain in the *literatura de cordel*, most of the

## TERROR NAS TORRES GÊMEAS

Como poeta repórter  
Nordestino Brasileiro  
Descrevo neste cordel  
Um lamentável roteiro  
Do mais cruel fanatismo  
Num ato de terrorismo  
Que abalou o mundo inteiro

Uma môça americana  
Muito educada e gentil  
Veio até a minha casa  
Fez-me um convite febril  
Para ir ao Cite Lore  
Entre cordel e folclore  
Representar o Brasil

Candace disse, Azulão  
Venho convidar você  
Para ir a Nova York  
Não se aflija porque  
Pagamos suas passagens  
Refeições e hospedagens  
E também um bom cachê

Então mandaram as passagens  
Dentro dum prazo fiel  
Arrumei minha bagagem  
Roupa, viola e cordel  
Voei com todo conforto  
E lá do aeroporto  
Fui conduzido ao hotel

01

No festival eu cantei  
Declamei e fiz sucesso  
Traduziram meus poemas  
Para inglês. eu confesso  
Depois eu fui passear  
Na cidade e aguardar  
O dia do meu regresso

Foi no dia dez de Abril  
De noventa e nove o ano  
Eu andando em Nova York  
Isento de qualquer dano  
Subi até o terraço  
Daquele monstro de aço  
E orgulho americano

Foi no World Trade Center  
Com seus centro e dez andares  
Eu contemplando a altura  
Avistei muitos lugares  
Dando até a impressão  
Que estava de avião  
Ou flutuando nos ares

Do seu enorme terraço  
Olhei a imensidão  
Eu vi que de Nova Jersey  
Vindo em nossa direção  
Um pouco se desviando  
Passava de vez em quando  
Velozmente um avião

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Figure 1 Terror nas Torres Gêmeas de autoria de José João dos Santos, Mestre Azulão

stories that continue to be reprinted today date from the end of the nineteenth century into the early 1970s. For some of the many anthologies of *cordel* stories see Átila de Almeida and José Alves Sobrinho, *Dicionário bio-bibliográfico de repentistas e poetas de bancada*, 2 vols. (João Pessoa/Campina Grande: Editora Universitária/Centro de Ciências e Tecnologia, 1978); Sebastião Nunes Batista, *Antologia da literatura de cordel* (Natal: Fundação José Augusto, 1977); Manuel Florentino Duarte et al., *Literatura de cordel: antologia*, 2 vols. (São Paulo: Global Editora, 1976); and Manoel Cavalcanti Proença, ed., *Literatura popular em verso: antologia*, 4 vols. (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa/MEC, 1964–78).

Eu pensei naquela hora  
 Refletindo em minha mente  
 Deus defenda um avião  
 Se chocar por acidente  
 Nestes prédios e explodir  
 Além de se destruir  
 Pode matar muita gente

Dois anos e cinco meses  
 Depois da minha visita  
 Terroristas portadores  
 De crueldade esquisita  
 Entre vinganças e tédios  
 Explodiram aqueles prédios  
 Ação cruel e maldita

Milhares de inocentes  
 Que estão lá soterrados  
 Famílias inconsoláveis  
 Vendo os ferros destroçados  
 Onde seus entes queridos  
 Entre gritos e gemidos  
 Morreram carbonizados

É covarde é desumano  
 Quem faz atos de terror  
 Vingar-se de quem não fez  
 Maldade ou crime de horror  
 Uma ação injustamente  
 Fazer que o inocente  
 Pague pelo o traidor

03

O Pentágono em Washington  
 Centro do militarismo  
 Também foi alvo da fúria  
 Da morte e do cataclismo  
 Causando destruição  
 Pela criminosa mão  
 Do infernal terrorismo

Culpam Osama Bin Laden  
 E todos seus comandados  
 Terroristas suicidas  
 Fanáticos endemoninhados  
 Para esses insensatos  
 Prestarem contas dos atos  
 No mundo são procurados

George Bush e seu império  
 Que quase o mundo governa  
 Com seus mísséis bombardeiros  
 Mata, destroi e inferna  
 Para Bin Laden encontrar  
 E sem perdão lhe matar  
 Com todos numa caverna

Mas só tem gastado armas  
 Helicóptero e avião  
 Bombardeando cidades  
 Mulher, criança, ancião  
 Toda aquela pobre gente  
 Indefesa e inocente  
 Porém o Bin Laden não

04

via the Internet as well as (or instead of) in print form is on the rise.<sup>4</sup> Both the *cordel's* deep roots in a distinctive regional folk culture and its

4. Prof. Gilmar de Carvalho estimates that there are some fifty *cordel* poets and three major *cordel* associations (CECODEL of Fortaleza, the Academia dos Cordelistas in Crato, and the Sociedade dos Cordelistas Mauditos in Juazeiro do Norte) living in the state of Ceará. Many of these poets have high school or university educations—a striking change from the not-so-distant past (e-mail communication, Prof. Gilmar de Carvalho, 16 February 2003.) For an excellent overview, see José Erivan Bezerra de Oliveira, *Literatura de cordel no novo espaço urbano* (Master's thesis, Universidade Federal do Ceará, 2001).

O pobre americano  
 Com o dinheiro e a fama  
 Lá no Afeganistão  
 Milhões de bombas derrama  
 Deixa cidade em ruína  
 Com choro e carnificina  
 Mas não atinge o Osama

George Bush irredutível  
 Na vingança permanece  
 Destruindo o Oriente  
 E um povo que padece  
 Fome e jogado na rua  
 Mas a guerra continua  
 Matando quem não merece

Bin Laden está bem guardado  
 Em caverna ou fortaleza  
 Cercado por homens fortes  
 Com armas para defesa  
 Não sofre nem vai ser morto  
 Gozando o maior conforto  
 Porque tem muita riqueza

Seus colegas terroristas  
 Estão no mundo espalhados  
 Esperam cessar os ânimos  
 Fingidos e disfarçados  
 De loucos e paraplégicos  
 Pra nos pontos estratégicos  
 Fazer novos atentados

Essa raça terrorista  
 É um fogo de monturo  
 Que finge está apagado  
 Mas por baixo está seguro  
 E num descuido do povo  
 Ele explode de novo  
 E destrói todo futuro

A ação dos terroristas  
 É uma maldade estranha  
 Faz nos Estados Unidos  
 Faz na França, na Espanha  
 São fieis ao chefe deles  
 Nem ligam quem contra eles  
 Fazem protesto e campanha

É o grupo Taliban  
 Que vive fazendo o mal  
 Misterioso e secreto  
 De comando universal  
 Que age em qualquer país  
 Fincando sua raiz  
 Criminosa e infernal

Quem não tiver de acordo  
 Com sua lei de rigor  
 E combater veemente  
 Seu ato destruidor  
 Não pense que está salvo  
 Que poderá ser um alvo  
 De sua ação de terror

05

06

ability to adapt to ongoing changes within Brazil make it a particularly noteworthy form of literary expression.<sup>5</sup>

The following pages explore one *cordel* author's vision of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the subsequent U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. I am interested in *Terror nas Torres Gêmeas* (Terror in

5. Scholars have long debated the differences between "folk" and "popular" culture—the *cordel*, by most definitions, is both since it is a hybrid oral/written art form found in both rural and urban locations. The shifting identities of both the poets and their buyers make it difficult to establish any single set of narrative or social parameters today.

Também usam sua ira  
 Ao trustee e ao poderoso  
 Que explora e que oprime  
 Com seu poder orgulhoso  
 Eles promovem castigo  
 Pelo seu grupo-inimigo  
 Muito oculto e perigoso

O mundo inteiro é completo  
 De leigo e de cientista  
 De vândalo depredador  
 De pacífico e progressista  
 Entre todos no entanto  
 Tem uns com cara de santo  
 E coração terrorista

Não dou razão a Bin Laden  
 E nem o povo seu fã  
 Nem me adapto ao estilo  
 De religião pagã  
 Mas entre a paz e amor  
 Tem o povo do terror  
 No comando Taliban

Mas todos os criminosos  
 Terrorista e presidente  
 Um faz terror na América  
 O outro no Oriente  
 Nestes atos de vigância  
 Matam ancião e criança  
 Indefesa e inocente

07

Não sou favor do terror  
 Da morte e destruição  
 Mas quem fez ou faz maldade  
 Recebe a compensação  
 Não lembram os americanos  
 Que há cinquenta e seis anos  
 Bombardearam o Japão

Nagasaki e Hiroshima  
 Destruíram e arrasaram  
 Ninguém sabe dos milhões  
 De inocentes que mataram  
 Agora em perdas e lutos  
 Se acham colhendo os frutos  
 Das sementes que plantaram

Mas a promessa de Deus  
 É verdadeira e não erra  
 Vai acabar a maldade  
 Fome, pranto, dor e guerra  
 Lamentações e gemidos  
 E os maus serão varridos  
 De toda a face da terra

Milhares perderam as vidas  
 Ali num ato tirano  
 Zuada, grito e lamento  
 Um desastre desumano  
 Logo o fogo consumiu  
 Agonizou e feriu  
 O país americano.

**AUTOR:** José João dos Santos  
**( Mestre Azulão )**

08

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the Twin Towers) by Rio-based author João José dos Santos—known by the nickname, *Azulão*—because of the particularly clear ways in which his account mingles time-honored *cordel* elements with other features foreign to most earlier stories.<sup>6</sup> I argue that these less traditional aspects of the *folheto* reflect both the particularities of the events about which the poet is writing and a number of larger changes that have taken place

6. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. For a complete translation of the *folheto*, see <http://larr.lanic.utexas.edu/slater.htm>. I thank *Azulão* for his permission to reprint the Portuguese original in this article.

since the late 1950s in Brazilian folk and popular culture.<sup>7</sup> Although this mix of old and new is readily apparent in the other *cordel* accounts of September 11 that I have managed to obtain, the juxtapositions in Azulão's *folheto* are particularly striking.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, while the poet's basic perspective on the events resembles that of these other authors—almost all of whom denounce both the terrorists and the U.S. response to them—his attempt to fit the details into an existing moral and rhythmic framework is particularly apparent.<sup>9</sup>

#### TERROR IN THE TWIN TOWERS AS A "TRADITIONAL" FOLHETO

At first glance, Azulão's account looks a great deal like the tens of thousands of other *folhetos* in *cordel* collections and archives within and outside of Brazil.<sup>10</sup> An eight-page booklet created by folding, then

7. *Folheto* or the more colloquial *folhete* was the term used by *cordel* poets until the 1970s, when growing interest in these stories on the part of scholars led these poets to start using the more erudite *cordel* or *literatura de cordel*. Today, *folheto* often applies to a single published story while *cordel* is used for the tradition as a whole. By "traditional" *folhetos* I mean stories that conform to the metrical patterns and thematic conventions of the *cordel* classics. For a fuller discussion of these patterns and conventions see Slater, *Stories on a String*.

8. The other *folhetos* I have obtained are Arievaldo and Klévisson Viana's *O sangrento ataque que abalou os EUA* (Fortaleza: Tupynanquim Editora, 2001); Zé Antonio's *O Terror do taleban contra Bush do Terror* (Art'Silva, n.p., 2001); Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva, *Reação americana ao atentado terrorista* (Rio de Janeiro: Academia Brasileira da Literatura de Cordel, 2001); Olegário Fernandes, *O atentado terrorista e o nosso sofrimento* (Caruaru: typeset by poet, 2001); Pedro Américo de Farias, *A dolorosa peleja de Osama Bin contra Bush* (Recife: Língua de Poeta, 2001); Marcelo Soares, *A guerra do fim do mundo entre o povo talibã e os Estados Unidos que para eles são tidos como o "Grande Satã"* (Recife: Língua de Poeta, 2001); Jair Moraes, *O cachorro bucho e o peba Ozama Bin* (Fortaleza: Centro Cultural dos Cordelistas do Nordeste, 2001); João Pedro C. Neto, *Besta do horror* (Fortaleza: n.p., 2001); Paulo de Tarso, *Da ficção a realidade: Nova York em chamas* (Fortaleza: Centro Cultural dos Cordelistas do Nordeste, 2001); Guaipuan Vieira, *A visita de Bin Laden ao inferno* (Fortaleza: Centro Cultural dos Cordelistas do Nordeste, 2001), and Vânia Freitas, *O mundo abalado pela tragédia da guerra e do terror* (Fortaleza: Centro Cultural dos Cordelistas do Nordeste). I thank Azulão, Roberto Benjamin, Maria Alice Amorim, Sarah Portnoy, and Gilmar de Carvalho for their help in obtaining copies of these texts.

9. The accounts were composed at different points during the days and months following the attack on the United States. (The Vianas, for instance, write on September 13; Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva on October 11; and Zé Antônio, almost certainly sometime in October, after the anthrax scare made international headlines.) In addition, their authors vary in terms of regional provenance and education. Zé Antônio, for instance, is a history teacher in Sergipe. Olegário Fernandes was a long-time *cordel* vendor who lived all his life in the Pernambucan market town of Caruaru, Marcelo Soares is the son of a well-known *cordel* poet, and the Vianas are younger, middle-class authors who live in Fortaleza where they run a *cordel* printing press. Nonetheless, the similarities in outlook that mark these *folhetos* are at least as striking as their various differences.

10. The single biggest *cordel* collection open to the public is that of the Fundação Casa

refolding two large sheets of paper, it bears an unmistakable physical resemblance to the myriad of booklets of eight, sixteen, or thirty-two pages that a new collection of second-hand printing presses began churning out during the latter half of the nineteenth century in the Northeastern backlands.<sup>11</sup> The block print on the cover also links the *folheto* to much older *cordel* narratives.<sup>12</sup> So does the text's division into stanzas that immediately identify it as poetry rather than prose.<sup>13</sup> This verse identity underscores the *cordel*'s ties to the Northeastern poet-improvisers called *repentistas* or *cantadores* who introduced their own distinctive oral poetic forms into stories of romance and adventure that they began to publish in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Although all of the September 11 accounts are in verse, Azulão's *folheto* makes particularly obvious use of poetic conventions long associated with the *literatura de cordel*. Azulão is the only one of the authors to make use of a concluding acrostic, in which the first letter of each line spells out the name of the author ("Milhares perderam as vidas/ Ali num ato tirano/ Zuada, grito e lamento/ Um desastre desumano/ Logo o fogo consumiu/ Agonizou e feriu/ O país Americano").<sup>15</sup> In the past, this acrostic identified the writer, who might sell the publication rights to his work to the owner of a printing press who would then often attempt to pass off the story as his own. Today, the need for such protection is minimal if only because there are few remaining *cordel* publishers who might

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de Rui Barbosa in Rio de Janeiro, which also has published a number of studies and anthologies of *cordel*. Other important collections include that of the Museu do Folclore e Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros of the Universidade de São Paulo, the Fonds Ramond Cantel in Poitiers, and the collections of Átila de Almeida (Campina Grande) and Joseph Luyten (São Paulo). In the United States, smaller *cordel* collections can be found at the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Texas at Austin, and the Library of Congress.

11. *Cordel* stories are almost always in multiples of four. Some classic love and adventure tales reached sixty-four pages and were printed as two *folhetos*.

12. For an overview of the history of the *cordel* blockprint, see Mário Souto Maior, "A xilogravura popular na expressão gráfica da literatura de cordel nordestina," *Remag: Revista Métodos de Arte Gráficas* 15 (Rio de Janeiro) (1965): 19–23.

13. A number of early European chapbook compositions are in prose. For a discussion of some of the principal differences between the Portuguese and the Brazilian *cordel*, see Slater, "Why One Evil King Could Not Be Brazilian: A Comparative Study of the Brazilian Literatura de Cordel," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 18 (1981): 279–94.

14. Verbal duels in verse date back to the Greeks and Romans, and the *repentista/cantador* tradition has or had parallels throughout much of Latin America. For an introduction to Northeast Brazilian poet-singers see Gustavo Barroso, *Ao som das violas* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Editora Leite Ribeiro, 1923); Francisco das Chagas Batista, *Cantadores e poetas populares* (João Pessoa: Editora F.C. Batista Irmão, 1929); and Leonardo Mota, *Cantadores*, 2d ed. (Fortaleza: Imprensa Universitária do Ceará, 1961).

15. The first letters of each line spell out MAZULÃO, for M. [Mestre] Azulão. "Mestre," or "master," is a popular term used for a skilled practitioner of a craft such as carpentry or violin-making.

attempt to lay claim to a *folheto*.<sup>16</sup> However, the acrostic remains a stylistic flourish which marks the author as an accomplished poet—indeed, a professional—who takes pride in his work.

Azulão's mastery of traditional forms is yet more apparent in his choice of a seven- as opposed to six-line stanza, and his use of a double as opposed to single rhyme scheme—an ABCBDD pattern instead of the simpler, far more common ABCBDB.<sup>17</sup> This metrical dexterity belies his own identity as a long-time *repentista* as well as a *cordel* author. (The nickname "Azulão," which refers to a blue songbird, was also the name of a poet-improviser whom he admired as a child and who encouraged his first forays into verse.) The ability to work with this considerably more complicated and demanding metrical form also attests to long years of experience as a *cordel* vendor accustomed to chanting parts of well-known *folhetos* as well as inventing on-the-spot verses in open-air markets for potential buyers attracted in good part by the performance and the cover illustrations.

The actual language of *Terror in the Twin Towers* is typical of a long line of *cordel* classics, almost all of which incorporate numerous elements of everyday popular speech. Hints of colloquial Portuguese are readily visible in apparent spelling errors (*niguém* where one would expect *ninguém*, *vigança* in place of *vingança*, *desfesa* for *defesa*, *zuada* for *zoada*, *carverna* for *caverna* and *está* instead of *estar*.) The use of nouns such as *cachê* for "honorarium" or "payment" and of non-standard verbs such as *infernar*, meaning "to raise hell" are other indications of colloquial speech. While an even high number of distinctively colloquial terms appears in Olegário Fernandes' *O atentado terrorista e o nosso sofrimento* (The terrorist attack and our suffering), the contrast provided by more erudite words such as *carnificina* (slaughter) and *depredador* (plundering) in *Terror in the Twin Towers* underscores their presence.

At the same time that it employs numerous elements of everyday speech, *Terror in the Twin Towers* resembles any number of earlier *folhetos* in its hyperbolic quality. The poet's initial description of his work as "*Um lamentável roteiro/Do mais cruel fanatismo/Num ato de terrorismo/Que abalou o*

16. The large *cordel* presses of the past—including those owned by Leandro Gomes de Barros (later João Martins de Ataíde) in Recife, José Bernardo da Silva in Juazeiro do Norte, and Francisco Lopes in Belém have long since vanished. (José Bernardo da Silva's press, now called the Lira Nordestina, was acquired by the government of Ceará in 1980, but produces little.) Contemporary *cordel* publishers include Luzeiro (formerly Prelúdio) of São Paulo, which publishes primarily *cordel* classics in both comic book form and traditional *folheto* guise; Tupynanquim in Fortaleza, and Editora Coqueiro in Recife.

17. For a good discussion of these, see Ariano Suassuna, "Notas sobre o romanceiro popular do Nordeste," in *Suassuna: seleta em prosa e verso*, ed. Silviano Santiago (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio/Instituto Nacional do Livro/Ministério da Cultura, 1974), 162–90.

*mundo inteiro*" (An unhappy account/Of the cruelest fanaticism/In an act of terrorism/That shook the world) and his reference to *um convite febril* (an impassioned invitation) that convinces him to make the long journey to New York City set a tone sustained throughout the succeeding pages.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, his penchant for overtly extravagant rhymes (*paraplégicos* and *estratégicos*, *ruína* and *carnificina*) is entirely typical of the Brazilian *literatura de cordel*. So, for that matter, is the apocalyptic language which he employs in the second-to-last stanza. Azulão is not the only one of the September 11 poets to call for divine intervention. Olegário Fernandes, for example, urges his readers to pray to the Virgin Mary, while Arievaldo and Klévisson Viana devote a sizable portion of their account to a review of Christian teachings about the need for forgiveness and harmony among the Earth's peoples. Nonetheless, his concluding promise that God will one day sweep away "evil/hunger, weeping, pain and war/lamentations, moans of distress and all ills" from the face of the earth carries a hint of cataclysmic transformation far more characteristic of the *cordel* than are impassioned calls for mutual understanding.

The author's fondness for metaphors based on everyday experience also gives *Terror in the Twin Towers* an unmistakably "traditional" flavor. In this sense, Azulão is like a number of the other poets—Marcelo Soares, for instance, describes George Bush and Osama bin Laden as "*farinha do mesmo saco*" (flour from the same sack) while Pedro Américo de Farias calls them "*cobras da mesma ninhada*" (snakes from the same nest). Azulão, however, goes beyond these sorts of standard, if colorful expressions to create his own extended similes and metaphors. At one point in the *folheto*, for instance, he compares the terrorists to

*Esta raça terrorista/É um fogo de monturo/Que finge está apagado/Mas por baixo está seguro/E num descuido do povo/Ele explode de novo/E destroi todo futuro.*

A fire in a rubbish heap/Which appears to be extinguished/But which continues to burn beneath the surface/Til, in a moment of inattention/It flares up again/And consumes the future.

The traditional quality suggested by *Terror in the Twin Towers*'s basic physical appearance, complex metrical framework, and distinctive mixture of popular and literary language finds further confirmation in its underlying conceptual framework. Although *cordel* stories vary considerably in terms of theme (adventure, romance, news, satires, regional themes involving folk saints, cowhands, and bandits) as well as tone

18. Azulão's choice of the word *roteiro* or "script" for his account underscores the effect of television and movies on the *folhetos*, not just in terms of content, but also of the poet's conception of the *folheto*'s purpose and form. The "impassioned invitation" which Azulão mentions was on the part of Steven Zeitlin, who had asked me to find a *cordel* poet who could perform at the City Lore Poetry Festival in April 1999.

(lyric, satiric, didactic, and so on), they tend—at least on the surface—to depict an immediately recognizable moral universe that would appear, at least at first glance, to be fully present in Azulão's account.<sup>19</sup>

In line with most journalistic *folhetos*, *Terror in the Twin Towers* is ultimately less a recital of the events in question than a commentary on these.<sup>20</sup> Much like the other accounts of September 11 which I have cited, the *folheto* is essentially an editorial in which the author denounces both the calamitous attack on the World Trade Center and the ensuing U.S. attack on Afghanistan. While expressing horror at the suffering of the innocent people buried or burnt to ash in the Twin Towers explosion, the poet finds the American response to be equally senseless and unjust.

The presentation of news events as real life contests between two powerful opponents—in this case Osama bin Laden with his “enraged fanatics” and “George Bush and his empire which governs the entire world”—is entirely typical of the *literatura de cordel*. Indeed, a number of the *folhetos* in my possession actually have titles that suggest formal battles in verse or *pelejas*.<sup>21</sup> Pedro Américo de Farias' account of the September 11 events is entitled *A dolorosa peleja de Osama Bin contra Bush* (The sorrowful battle of Osama Bin against Bush) while Zé Antônio pits the “terror of the Taliban” against “the terrible Bush” in his *folheto*. Marcelo Soares poses a similar opposition in his *A guerra do fim do mundo entre o povo talibã e os Estados Unidos que para eles são tidos como o Grande Satã* (The War of the End of the World between the Taliban People and the United States whom they consider to be the Great Satan).

The tidy division of the world's population into rich and poor and the poet's ironic description of the former are characteristic of the *literatura de cordel*. It is the very immensity of Bush's fame and fortune that makes him look ridiculous when he goes rushing after bin Laden with his “millions of bombs that ruin whole cities but don't so much as

19. Various authors have attempted to catalogue the themes of the *cordel*. See, for example, Liêdo Maranhão de Souza, *Classificação popular da literatura de cordel* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1976). For an excellent example of how poets rework existing material to fit a particular moral framework, see João Martins de Ataíde's transformation of Shakespeare's play in Slater, “Romeo and Juliet in the Brazilian Backlands,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, no. 1 (1983): 35–53.

20. Journalistic *folhetos* go back to the beginnings of the *literatura de cordel*. The early poet Leandro Barros de Gomes, who did much to commercialize and disseminate *cordel* stories, wrote on themes including the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910 and the problems with English-manufactured trains. For an introduction to the journalistic *folheto* see Raymond Cantel, *Temas da atualidade na literatura de cordel* (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, Escola de Comunicações e Artes, 1972) and Joseph Maria Luyten, *A notícia na literatura de cordel* (São Paulo: Estação Liberdade, 1992).

21. An English translation of one *cordel* version of a poetic duel appears in *The Warriors: Peleja between Joaquim Jaqueira and Manoel Barra Mansa*, trans. Ernest J. Barge and Jan Feidel (New York: Grossman, 1972).

touch his foe." Bin Laden, for his part, uses his money to shield himself from the sorts of actions that decimate the lives of those more vulnerable than he. Guarded by well-armed bodyguards in some remote cave or fortress, he "doesn't suffer nor will he be killed," but instead continues to enjoy "the greatest of comfort because he has great wealth." ("*Bin Laden está bem guardado/Em caverna ou fortaleza/Cercado por homens fortes/Com armas para desfesa/Não sofre nem vai ser morto/Goçando o maior conforto/ Porque tem muita riqueza.*")

As these last lines suggest, Azulão's problem with both Bush and bin Laden is not simply (or even primarily) their privileged economic status. *Cordel* poets have nothing against wealth per se—indeed, their customary enthusiasm for it is evident in innumerable glowing descriptions of the rich possessions and lavish life style of particular kind-hearted ranchers and law-abiding kings. Moreover, the *cordel* is not always a celebration of poor people (who can be either heroes or villains), let alone poverty—which poets see as no dishonor but which they definitely do not romanticize. Here, the two leaders' *orgulho* or "arrogance" (a word that appears in almost all of the *folhetos*), desire for *vingança* or "vengeance," and above all, total indifference to the sufferings of innocent, defenseless people (present again in virtually every case) convert them into prime examples of that particular sort of bad behavior that the *cordel* calls *falsidade*.

Not simply deceitful in their dealings with others, persons guilty of *falsidade* are untrue above all to their moral obligations. These obligations, unsurprisingly, vary somewhat with the person's social class. At least in principle, everybody in the world of the *cordel* has a duty to uphold the values of honesty, loyalty, courage, and generosity to those in need. These qualities form a positive moral constellation known as *firmeza*. However, those in positions of power have a particular responsibility to protect those who cannot defend themselves while those beneath them on the social scale have a corresponding duty to accept the authority of the just patron even when this may not be to their own immediate advantage. Although the details of individual stories vary, these unequal dyadic contracts are a near constant in Northeastern *cordel* classics.<sup>22</sup>

Bin Laden's impeccable credentials as a *cordel* villain are immediately obvious in Azulão's presentation of the Taliban (who appear as his followers in the *folheto*). Significantly, the underhanded manner in which the terrorists operate is as abhorrent to the poet as their actual misdeeds. "Mys-

22. The patron-client relationships in the *literatura de cordel* are clearly idealized versions of actual social relationships that prevailed in the Northeastern backlands throughout much of its history. For an introduction see Shepard Forman, *The Brazilian Peasantry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975) and Allen Johnson, *Sharecroppers of the Sertão* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).

terious and secretive," "disguised and deceitful," they reveal not only a "strange cruelty" in their indiscriminate fury at the United States, but also a resounding lack of courage in the refusal to confront their enemies in the direct fashion dictated by the honor code of the Northeastern interior.<sup>23</sup>

Vengeance in and of itself is rarely a problem in the *literatura de cordel*. The authors of most *cordel* classics see nothing wrong with acts of Old Testament-style retribution directed at a specific perpetrator of past injustice. Indeed, they may describe fairly heinous actions on the part of the avenger with considerable gusto. The problem in the case of *Terror in the Twin Towers* is not the fury of the attack itself, but rather the personal blamelessness of the victims. Azulão's denunciation of the terrorists' disregard for the suffering of innocents could easily find a place in any number of earlier *folhetos*. The poet states firmly near the beginning of his account

*É covarde é desumano/Quem faz atos de terror/Vingar-se de quem não fez/Maldade ou crime de horror/Uma ação injustamente/Fazer que o inocente/Pague pelo o traidor.*

(It's cowardly, it's inhuman/For the person who commits acts of terror/To avenge himself on someone who didn't commit/Any sort of evil action or monstrous crime/An action unjustly/Forces the innocent person/To pay for the traitor's deeds).

Azulão does not accuse George Bush of the same sort of cowardice which so disturbs him in bin Laden. He does, however, see the American president's wounded pride as spurring him to actions that reveal a similar lack of disregard for the well-being of "women, children, the elderly—all those poor, defenseless and innocent people" who ought, in the moral terms of the *cordel*, to be his prime concern. The suffering that bin Laden's followers inflict upon the occupants of the Twin Towers finds an unhappy counterweight in the "weeping and slaughter" that millions of American bombs "rain down" upon Afghan cities.

*George Bush irreduzível/Na vingança permanece/Destruindo o Oriente/E um povo que padece/Fome e jogado na rua/Mas a guerra continua/Matando quem não merece.*

(George Bush remains/Bent on vengeance, on destroying the East/And a people who suffer hunger/And are thrown homeless into the street./But the war continues./Killing those who don't deserve to die.)

True acts of vengeance in the *cordel* always have prior causes, and *Terror in the Twin Towers* is no exception to the rule. Although the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center are not guilty of any wrong, Azulão—

23. Some writers have seen this code as a variant on the Mediterranean honor code laid out in the essays in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. Jean G. Péristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association 22, 1987).

like a number of the other authors of these *folhetos*—concludes with a reference to the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in which the death of millions of Japanese civilians becomes a delayed trigger for the September 11 attack. Startling and deeply unconvincing to many American readers, this link between the dropping of the atomic bomb and the attack on the Twin Towers means that even while the events in New York remain “inhuman” in their horror, they are nonetheless comprehensible within the framework of the *cordel*. The reader can take grim consolation in the underlying logic of a scene in which the citizens of a wounded nation “now in loss and mourning/find themselves reaping the fruits/of the seeds that they themselves planted.” More than anything else in the *folheto*, the reiteration of this moral framework in which evil always begets evil and vengeance often trumps forgiveness makes *Terror in the Twin Towers* part of a larger corpus with deep roots in social as well as poetic structures closely associated with the Brazilian Northeast.<sup>24</sup>

#### DEPARTURES FROM TRADITION IN *TERROR IN THE TWIN TOWERS*

At the same time that *Terror in the Twin Towers* can and should be seen as a contemporary descendant of a time-honored regional literature, the *folheto* is not so firmly “traditional” as might first appear. For instance, even while its physical form and verse identity immediately link it to a long line of *cordel* stories, Azulão’s account of September 11 reveals features that underscore its contemporary nature.

The most immediately apparent of these less traditional features relate to the *folheto*’s physical appearance. To begin with, the paper from which the booklet has been fashioned is of far better quality than are the brittle brownish sheets used in the great majority of earlier *cordel* stories. Clearly not typeset by hand, but rather the work of a computer and printer, the clear, black letters of the text contrast with the smudged, often uneven print of older *folhetos*. The smooth right-hand edges of the booklet provide a further contrast to the ragged edges of the pages that buyers formerly found themselves required to separate with a knife. The prominent identification of the text as “*Literatura de Cordel*” on the front cover is another immediate departure from tradition—if only because this erudite term was rarely employed by *cordel* authors before the 1970s.

Even the presence of the poet’s name—let alone the honorific “Mestre Azulão” which follows—represents an innovation.<sup>25</sup> Many *folhetos* of the

24. See Alícia Mitika Koshiyama, *Análise de conteúdo da literatura de cordel: presença de valores religiosos* (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, Escola de Comunicação e de Artes, 1972).

25. See note 15.

past carried only the name of the publisher on the cover, leaving the actual author to be identified on the first page, if at all.<sup>26</sup> The acknowledgment of financial aid emblazoned on the back page of *Terror in the Twin Towers*—“This *cordel* story was sponsored by the Mayor of Japeri, Dr. Carlos Moraes Costa, in homage to Northeastern culture”—is similarly uncharacteristic of earlier *cordel* stories.<sup>27</sup> Although these sometimes had wealthy sponsors—often politicians eager to garner votes among semi-literate buyers—the idea that *cordel* stories possess an intrinsic cultural worth which the state has a duty to recognize is definitely new.

The cover illustration represents another obvious departure from tradition. At the same time that the presence of a block print connects the booklet to a long line of earlier *folhetos*, the artist’s use of partial perspective in the buildings and the self-consciously naïf quality that pervades the design suggest at least a modicum of formal artistic training. Rare in *folhetos* from before the 1960s, the signature within the block print also represents a departure from tradition and bespeaks a newfound status for a once lowly art form.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of language, even though *Terror in the Twin Towers* draws heavily on colloquial speech patterns, it is not particularly regional in terms of its vocabulary, let alone in theme. Despite Azulão’s pointed identification of himself as a “Northeastern poet-reporter” in the second line of the first stanza, there is almost nothing in subsequent pages that follow which would recall his childhood in the little town of Sapé in the interior of Paraíba.<sup>29</sup> The poet’s more than fifty years in Rio de Janeiro are evident in a varied vocabulary that reflects his extensive dealings with the television reporters, heads of cultural institutes, scholars, tourists, and filmmakers who regularly seek him out.<sup>30</sup> The relative richness of his language also suggests greater access to newspapers, books,

26. The back cover usually sported various announcements of new or previous titles, as well as the addresses of *cordel* distributors.

27. Japeri is a community within the Baixada Fluminense, in the gritty industrial outskirts of Rio de Janeiro where large numbers of Northeastern migrants reside.

28. The two *cordel* authors and popular artists who have long signed their block prints—J. Borges and Dila (José Soares da Silva)—have had exhibitions in major international museums, including the Louvre. Today, the sons and grandsons of *cordel* poets often enroll in municipal art courses and make a living or partial living from their work.

29. Two of the best-known *cordel* authors to use the term “poet-reporter” were Cuíca de Santo Amaro of Bahia and Zé Soares of Recife. See Mark J. Curran, *Cuíca de Santo Amaro: poeta-repórter da Bahia* (Salvador, Bahia: Fundação Casa de Jorge Amado, 1990) and Maria Edileuza Borges, “A história do poeta-repórter que não foi agricultor, não deu para pedreiro e vive feliz escrevendo cordel,” *Jornal de Commercio* (Recife, 1 February 1978), sec. C, p. 8.

30. Some of Azulão’s other *folhetos* make heavy use of urban slang. See, for instance, his “Zé Matuto no Rio de Janeiro,” which reappears in Slater, “Joe Bumpkin in the Wilds of Rio de Janeiro,” *Journal of Latin American Lore* 6 (1980): 5–53. For two illuminating

recordings, and television, made possible in large part by the money he earns as a *repentista* accustomed to performing at private parties, folklore festivals, and municipal schools.<sup>31</sup>

The contents of *Terror in the Twin Towers* present a similar challenge to tradition. Even the most cursory comparison between Azulão's account and a number of earlier journalistic *cordel* stories reveals a more explicit personal presence than that found in most *folhetos*. This personal presence takes various forms. One is the atypically long preface to the actual events of September 11. While it is common for poets to begin their narratives with a first-person appeal to God or to a muse for inspiration, followed by a summation of the ensuing story, the customary brevity of these introductions contrasts with the nine-stanza description of Azulão's trip to New York and his triumphant performance before an English-speaking audience—experiences unthinkable in a not-so-distant past. The poet's recapitulation of his ascent to the top of the Twin Towers and his premonition of disaster as he gazes out over the city spread beneath him provide a unique lead-in to his ensuing account of the terrorist attack. By presenting the World Trade Center as a part of his own experience, the poet converts the story of an otherwise distant tragedy into something far more immediate. This personalizing strategy makes his account very different from the great majority of *cordel* voyages in which the poet's journey to a faraway location turns out to be only a dream.<sup>32</sup>

Azulão's willingness to offer his own judgment of the events compounds the personal quality of the *folheto*. Although his authorial presence is considerably less conspicuous than that of a writer such as Zé Antônio, who offers a didactic summary of human history from the Neolithic era until today, he is nonetheless far quicker than most poets of the past to speak his own mind.<sup>33</sup> He says flatly at one point, "*Não sou [a] favor do terror/Da morte e destruição/Mas quem fez ou faz maldade/Recebe a compensação*" (I'm not in favor of terror, of death and destruction, / but

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though quite different studies of urban *folhetos*, see Joseph Maria Luyten, *A literatura de cordel em São Paulo: saudosismo e agressividade* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1981), and José Erivan Bezerra de Oliveira, *Literatura de cordel no novo espaço urbano*.

31. Azulão also makes money giving classes to grade school and high school students about the *literatura de cordel*. The *cordel* itself, however, presently accounts for only a small part of his income which, though modest, far outstrips that of a vendor and subsistence farmer such as Olegário Fernandes. Today, there is far more money in improvised poetry than in *cordel* sales. Successful *repentistas* who succeed in making CDs or who have their own radio and television programs can make considerable incomes.

32. The single most famous of all of these dream-journeys is almost certainly Manuel Camilo dos Santos' *Viagem a São Saruê* (Campina Grande: Estrela da Poesia, 1956), based on the erudite poet Manuel Bandeira's "Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada."

33. Zé Antônio, the pen name of José Antônio dos Santos, is one of the founders of the Workers' Party in that state. Among his other *folhetos* are *500 anos de história da dominação do Brasil*, *O Manifesto Comunista em cordel*, and *A violência legal no contexto social*.

he who does evil/receives recompense for his action), and later on, in equally clear fashion, “*Não dou razão a Bin Laden/E nem o povo seu fã/Nem me adapto ao estilo/De religião pagã*” (I don’t agree with bin Laden/and the people who like him/nor do I embrace the style/of a pagan religion). This willingness to use the “I” form (as opposed to the “we” or the omniscient narrator) makes the *folheto* appear to be the voice of a particular individual even though the opinions which its author expresses turn out to be really very close in content to those in other September 11 accounts.

The absence of a well-developed story line reinforces the individual quality of the speaking voice in *Terror in the Twin Towers*. Although, as already mentioned, the majority of journalistic *folhetos* are ultimately more interpretations than actual descriptions of noteworthy occurrences, the heavy preponderance of opinion over fact distinguishes Azulão’s account from earlier and more robust *cordel* descriptions of international events such as the trial of the Italian-born anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the first space expeditions.<sup>34</sup> His uncharacteristically skeletal treatment of the events in question has a great deal to do with their wide familiarity: “If I went on and on about things that have been on the TV at least a hundred times now,” Azulão says, “the reader would be asking, ‘What’s wrong with this guy? Why is he just repeating things that everybody knows?’”<sup>35</sup>

Above all else, *Terror in the Twin Towers* stands apart from a large number of earlier *folhetos* in its failure to offer a model of *firmeza* which could provide a suitable counterweight to the twin proponents of *falsidade*. Although Azulão’s account is like countless others in its portrayal of a contest between two powerful opponents, its lack of resolution sets it apart. The moral failings of both Bush and bin Laden result in a narrative deadlock only partially allayed by the poet’s promise of God’s future intervention.

In the great majority of *folhetos* found in *cordel* archives, the moral imbalance and accompanying social distress caused by an evildoer or evildoers are eventually righted by the story’s end. Sometimes, this return to equilibrium is accomplished in an extremely ambivalent fashion—as in stories about prostitutes who lead lives of tantalizing luxury for many pages, only to suddenly meet disaster and moral opprobrium in the last few stanzas of the tale. In the *cordel*, as in much erudite literature, the villains are often more compelling figures than are the heroes and heroines. Nonetheless, even in those cases in which the poet undercuts his own moral proclamations by making the embodiments of *falsidade* uncomfortably attractive, it is rare to find a story in which virtue does not—at least ostensibly—prevail.

34. See Cantel, *Temas da atualidade*.

35. Azulão (José João dos Santos), personal interview, New York City, 9 April 1999.

The events of September 11 leave the author of *Terror in the Twin Towers* little room in which to maneuver. Whereas a virtuous Bush would be the obvious antidote to a villainous bin Laden, the poet's negative outlook on the events precludes this narrative option. While a popular poet in the U.S. might be able to find a silver lining in the actions of the firefighters who risked their lives to save the victims, the *cordel* writers' real concern is the threat of a larger confrontation that could spread the devastation to Brazil. The title of Olegário Fernandes' *folheto*—"The Terrorist Attack and *Our Suffering*" (my italics)—highlights these larger fears.<sup>36</sup>

The best that Azulão can do with the material available to him is to hold out the promise that a God who remains above human pride and human folly will restore an order which no earthly leader appears willing or able to impose. The need to offer his readers some hope that *firmeza* may yet triumph forces the poet to portray the divinity as atypically forgiving—at least for the pages of the *literatura de cordel*. As a result, even while Azulão presents the attack on the Twin Towers as a terrible punishment for past offenses, the *folheto* lacks the vivid references to impending fire and brimstone so common in *cordel* accounts of other sorts of catastrophes.<sup>37</sup>

#### TERROR IN THE TWIN TOWERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PRESENT-DAY CORDEL

Compared to the *folheto* classics which Azulão can—and often does—recite by heart, *Terror in the Twin Towers* is both readily familiar and profoundly different.<sup>38</sup> In its deft use of metrical forms tied to an oral tradition that no longer directly informs much of the present-day *cordel*, his account of the attack on the World Trade Center is decidedly traditional. The popular quality of the poetic language and the author's concern for the unjust sufferings of poor people link his work to that of those great *cordel* poets of the whom he is quick to quote. However, *Terror in the Twin Towers* stands apart from the deeply lyrical accounts of love and adventure that are Azulão's personal favorites in its far more individual accent. The poet's inability to achieve the moral closure towards which he strives also sets it apart.

36. A similar sentiment is expressed by Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva when he states that Afghanistan is "not a war/that will end in a week/but rather months, years, decades/and this insane battle/may be the beginning/of the end of the human race."

37. These catastrophes include a host of natural disasters, which are routinely viewed as divine punishment for human misbehavior. Often, these include passages that hark back to the "Oh, tempora! Oh, mores!" diatribes of classical antiquity.

38. During the poetry festival, in the intervals between Azulão's appearance on stage, he would amuse himself and everyone around us by reciting whole *folhetos* stories to guitar accompaniment, including *O mal em paga do bem ou Rosa e Lino de Alencar* by Leandro Gomes de Barros (Juazeiro do Norte: Tipografia São Francisco, 1950) and *A princesa Maricruz e o cavaleiro do ar* by Severino Borges Silva (Recife: Luzeiro do Norte, n.d.).

The sustained ambiguity of *Terror in the Twin Towers* reflects in large part the nature of the events which Azulão has chosen to describe. The attack on the World Trade Center and the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan are obviously not fictions which he can embellish or rewrite at will.<sup>39</sup> Yet the *folheto's* non-traditional aspects owe much to the peculiar nature of the events that the poet has chosen to interpret. They also reflect the shifting circumstances of the *cordel*. The decline in the open-air market system, increasing urbanization, the widespread introduction of transistor radios and television, and the rising cost of printing and of transportation have led to a fall-off in the demand for *cordel* stories within their traditional public over the past thirty or forty years.<sup>40</sup> The growth in literacy which had made the ability to read and write appear less special to *cordel* buyers than it did in the past has also helped diminish the *cordel's* popularity among its traditional public. Although the ensuing decline in *cordel* sales has hurt poets, the fact that today few, if any, now depend primarily on the *cordel* for a living means that they have considerably less at risk if they voice their beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time that the number of traditional *cordel* buyers has fallen, the growing institutionalization of folk and popular culture that took place under the military dictatorship of the 1960s has helped to create a new middle-class readership as well as new institutional sponsors for the *cordel*.<sup>42</sup> This middle-class public's expectations of the poet are quite different from those of his traditional audience. Accustomed to a vision of the artist as an individual seeking self-expression, Azulão's new admirers find nothing odd about the fact that a *cordel* poet would speak for

39. As such, the events of September 11 are very unlike other, more local news events which the poet shows no compunction about radically altering. See, for instance, Apolônio Alves dos Santos' reworking of the story of an infamous kidnapping of a small boy named Serginho as discussed in Slater, *Stories on a String*, 112–40.

40. The creation in the late 1950s of the SUDENE, a governmental development agency for the Northeast, signals a multi-faceted push towards progress and modernization in which the *folhetos* began to appear increasingly archaic in the eyes of many longtime buyers. The SUDENE did not destroy the *folhetos*, any more than did radio or television, but the deeper social and economic transformations which it heralded could not help but affect regional folk culture.

41. For one perspective on the present-day *literatura de cordel* see Alda Maria Siqueira Campos, *Literatura de cordel e difusão de inovações* (Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, Ed. Massangana, 1998).

42. One could argue that the middle classes have been interested in the *cordel* since the nineteenth century, when traces of it began appearing in the work of writers such as Celso Magalhães, José de Alencar, and Sílvio Romeiro. This interest intensified in the second part of the twentieth century with the establishment of the first National Folklore Congress organized under the Vargas dictatorship in 1951, and the creation of the Campaign for the Defense of Folklore by Juscelino Kubitschek seven years later. The military governments of the 1960s and 1970s then sanitized and commodified folk forms in a systematic fashion that went far beyond earlier attempts.

himself.<sup>43</sup> The redefinition of the *cordel* as “Culture” signals an important valorization of a form once largely dismissed as a curiosity or a rustic imitation of “real” literature. With its newly privileged status, however, have come expectations and desires quite different from those of earlier buyers for whom the poet’s command of poetic forms within the *folheto* and the quality of his oral performance of these verses in the market setting were often as important as the story proper. Although unquestionably pleased at the emergence of a new source of money, longtime poets may nonetheless express frustration at this new public’s apparent lack of esthetic judgment. “A collector,” Azulão once observed succinctly, “is someone who will buy one of any story, no matter how good or how bad.”<sup>44</sup>

Traditional *cordel* buyers saw the poet as a spokesman whose job was to express a collective vision.<sup>45</sup> Poets prided themselves on their ability to know what people were thinking before they themselves became aware of their own thoughts.<sup>46</sup> Overt ambiguity of the sort that marks *Terror in the Twin Towers* almost always meant poor sales that represented not only economic hardship but an affront to the poet’s self-image. Although *cordel* authors were rarely ingenuous about the ways in which the world worked, they recognized that their customers wanted to see good triumph over evil in the pages of their stories. “There’s enough injustice in life, why would someone want yet more of it in a *folheto*?” the *cordel* poet Manuel d’Almeida Filho once demanded with a shrug. “A story that does not show the defeat of *falsidade* and the triumph of *firmeza* will end up in a heap of little pieces beneath the nearest bush.”<sup>47</sup>

In the past, personal opinions within the *folheto* often were either disguised as the musings of a *cordel* personage or else were confined to compositions that the poet expected to distribute free of charge. Even, however, when these accounts were offered as a bonus, buyers might reject them as inappropriately personal. “Why would someone want to know what I think? Why would it matter?” Manuel Camilo dos Santos asked.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, expressing one’s own feelings could be downright dangerous. Dur-

43. Virtually all early *cordel* poets were male; however, women sometimes published *folhetos* under pseudonyms. See, for instance, Maristela Barbosa de Mendonça’s *Uma voz feminina no mundo do folheto* (Brasília: Thesaurus, 1993), a study of a *folheto* which Maria das Neves Batista Pimentel, a member of the Chagas Batista family, known for its large number of poets and *repentistas*, published under the name of “Altino Alagoano.” Today, a growing minority of *cordel* authors are women: note the September 11 *folheto* by Vânia Freitas (*O mundo abalado pela tragédia da guerra e do terror*).

44. Azulão (José João dos Santos), personal interview, Rio de Janeiro, 27 July 1997.

45. See the chapter on “The Poet Sings to Please Us” in Slater, *Stories on a String*, 187–205.

46. Slater, “I Sing for Everyone,” in *Stories* 164–86.

47. Manuel d’Almeida Filho, personal interview, Aracaju, Sergipe, 7 June 1978.

48. Manuel Camilo dos Santos, personal interview, Campina Grande, Paraíba, 6 March 1978.

ing the years of the military dictatorship, fears of the terrible consequences that might befall dissenting poets reinforced the tendency to steer clear of anything that might be taken as a personal view.

If present-day *cordel* authors who grew up within the oral tradition display considerably greater freedom in expressing their own thoughts than did their forebears (or, for that matter, they themselves in earlier moments), it is not certain that they could speak for their traditional audience even if this were their paramount objective. The increasing fragmentation of a once relatively homogeneous *cordel* public and the emergence of increasingly sophisticated, urban buyers makes it harder for a writer such as Azulão to gauge popular sentiment. Not only must he write for buyers with varied literary expectations, but he must increasingly divine the thoughts of people whom he no longer has the opportunity to encounter face-to-face. Those traditional buyers who seek out *cordel* stories often turn out to be less interested in contemporary compositions than they are in the classics that they associate with their own past and a more morally transparent world. "People today are no longer innocent, but they are nostalgic for those innocent times," Azulão declares.

They buy my stories because they recognize in them a piece of their own lives, but they also buy *O Pavão Misterioso* because it reminds them of a world in which the only terrorists whom anyone had ever heard of were those backlands bandits like Lampião with the police hot on their trail."<sup>49</sup>

*Terror in the Twin Towers* bears witness to one *cordel* poet's vision of an event with global coordinates and international ramifications. The world which it evokes for readers is not the dusty backlands of folk saints and outlaws or even the bustling streets and sunny, if increasingly polluted beaches of Rio de Janeiro, but an almost mythic metropolis that provides a stage for "cruel-hearted terrorists" as well as for the *cordel* poet who jets off to perform verses that find their way into the *New York Times*.<sup>50</sup> Clearly influenced by television and newspaper reports, the *folheto* attests to the increasingly direct integration of Northeasterners and Northeastern migrants into social, political, and economic networks which always existed but whose presence is far more obvious and immediate today.<sup>51</sup>

49. Azulão (José João dos Santos), personal interview, New York City, 10 April 1999.

50. Kathryn Shattuck, "Oral Traditions Converge as Poets go out for a Drink," *The New York Times*, 12 April 1999, sec. E, 1, 4. The article makes specific reference to Azulão.

51. Writers such as Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz (*O campesinato brasileiro: ensaios sobre civilização e grupos rústicos no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973) have shown convincingly that the myth of the remote "medieval" backlands unconnected from the rest of Brazil was always a fantasy. If, however, the interior was always part of larger political and economic frameworks, its insertion within these has become increasingly apparent over time.

Yet, if it is important to see just how profoundly the *cordel* has changed over the last few decades, it is equally important to acknowledge its power to endure. A significant number of the *folhetos* about September 11 are by authors who did not grow up in the *cordel* tradition, but who have adopted its poetic forms and language as their own. Moreover, in an age in which there is relatively little money in *folhetos*, a number of the children and grandchildren of the great *cordel* poets continue to write for pleasure even as a new generation of often university-educated authors with no prior ties to the *cordel* embrace it as their own. For every story that gets published, there are at least ten sitting in a drawer—or on a diskette. The mixture of urban elements with classic *cordel* themes not just in *folhetos*, but in full-size block prints points toward an increasingly hybrid world of the imagination in which Lampião does battle with the drug lords in São Paulo and the Mysterious Peacock dodges the jumbo jets that soar over Guanabara Bay. Increasing access to artistic and technical training and the growing presence of computers and the Internet promise continuing transformations in the *literatura de cordel*.

Ever since the early 1920s, educated writers have been pronouncing the *cordel* to be on its last legs. Movies and radio were supposed to have killed it; transistor radios, then television, were certain to deliver the final, fateful blow. Today, however, new *folhetos* about urban scandals, soccer championships, and AIDS mingle with *cordel* classics about poor but courageous cowhands and princesses whose quick thinking allows them to outmaneuver the most evil giant. If *Terror in the Twin Towers* is the story of a conflict that *cordel* poets see as threatening to the world's future, it is also the tale of a creative spirit that has long defied the promise of impending doom.