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O CASO DO REI DA CASA PRETA (THE CASE OF THE KING OF THE BLACK HOUSE), BY SANTOS DE OLIVEIRA: AN OVERVIEW STUDY ON A BRAZILIAN "ALICE-IN-WONDERLAND-MEETS-CHARLIE-AND-THE-CHOCOLATE-FACTORY" BOOK SILENCED BY ITS OWN PUBLISHING HOUSE DURING BRAZIL'S MILITARY DICTATORSHIP

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Abstract

The present article wants to offer a brief overview on the detective-novel series "A Inspetora / The Inspector", written in Portuguese by Ganymédes José Santos de Oliveira during 1974 and 1988 for Rio de Janeiro-based Tecnoprint publishing house, encompassing a total of 38 books for young readers between 9 and 12 years-old. The stories presented a group of kid detectives, led by the girl Eloísa (*A Patota da Coruja de Papelão / The Cardboard Owl Gang*, which refers to a badge the kids wore whenever a case was on), and revolved around small-time thieves, supernatural mysteries and all kind of injustice.

Upon examination of the very first pressings of the initial volumes of the series, one comes across the title *O Caso do Rei da Casa Preta*, which translates as *The Case of the King of the Black House* (actually, in Portuguese, the chessboard "square" is called "casa" – house –, thus offering an ambiguity that refers, in the story, to Royal Houses and power factions). Although the book was planned as the fifth installment of the series, it never saw the light of day...

During the author's research, most of this lost book's pages (already lay-outed and ready for printing) was recovered in the publishing house's archives, revealing an oneiric story that resembles both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The story is filled with allusions to factions struggling for power, arbitrary arrests, people disappearing and even torture, which makes one suspect that this was the reason for the book to have its publication cancelled by Tecnoprint, its own copyright holder.

We believe this is the first true documented evidence of the effects of Brazil's political atmosphere in the 70's on the circulation of not only books, but ideas, within the child literature universe.

Key-words: Ganymédes José Santos de Oliveira, children literature, crime fiction, censorship, Brazilian military regime

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Perhaps because we are always talking about what should or should not be in children's books, therefore controlling them without second thoughts, we may overlook the matter of censorship motivated by other reasons. Political freedom of speech or the lack of it, for example.

Brazil has been a Republic since 1889. We have had, however, some periods in our history that were non-democratic regimes, and the last of these was not so long ago. 51 years back, on April 1st, a military coup overthrew the rightfully elected president João Goulart and what followed was a period of dictatorship that lasted for 21 years. During this time and until our 1988 Constitution, we had no freedom of speech in Brazil. People would be persecuted for expressing their opinions, arrested, sometimes tortured and even killed in official holding facilities. Writers, musicians, journalists and opposing politicians would have their voices mitigated or totally suppressed by the scissors of official censorship.

Although censorship in Brazil was mostly aimed towards mass culture vehicles that had a broader effect on the population, such as TV, radio, popular music and newspapers and magazines, we had our share of censored books in the 60's and 70's. Even though books were not actively screened by the regime, due to the numbers of Brazilian editorial output at the time and the insufficient personnel the government had for that task, some 500 books were censored (SILVA, 1989), mostly after official procedures starting with some citizen making complains about "improper" content. There were not, however, any registered cases of censored children's books in the official records, differently, for example, from what happened in Argentina, where dozens of books were actually banned by the military rulers.

There are cases of challenging books that had a hard time being published. *Raul da Ferrugem Azul* (MACHADO, 1979), or *Blue Rust Raul*, for example, was allegedly rejected by 9 companies because it was seen as clear provocation against the

government (PAIVA *et al*, 2014). It tells the story of a kid who starts to develop a blue rust every time he doesn't speak up against injustice, be that the threats of bullies, the ill-mannered bus drivers who are impolite to their passengers or even racism-related situations. Every time he silences his voice, much like most of the Brazilian population during the military era, he gets more blue dots on his skin, dots that nobody else can see.

However, *Blue Rust Raul's* publishing history only proves that there was indeed a poisonous atmosphere in Brazil regarding the free circulation of ideas and culture. But this book, emblematic as it was and still is as an example of politically engaged children's literature, in the end it got to be published. Its author, Ana Maria Machado, since then has had a fruitful career and is even one of the Immortals, as we call the members of the Brazilian Literary Academy.

What to say, then, of books that never saw the light of day because of all that fear caused by the state control that was running rampant among TVs, radios and journals? Not because of actual censorship towards the texts but because of an indirect filter that would make publishing houses avoid taking risks with dangerous books (REIMÃO, 2011)?

During our research, we found out what I think to be the first documented example of such circumstances in Brazil: the book's name is *O Caso do Rei da Casa Preta* (OLIVEIRA, 1974) and it should have appeared in 1974 as the 5th installment of a detective series aimed at children of 9-12 years old. This series, *A Inspetora* or *The Inspector*, follows a group of kid detectives, led by the girl Eloísa, called *A Patota da Coruja de Papelão* or *The Cardboard Owl Gang*, which refers to a badge the kids wore whenever a case was on. These 70-to-100-and-some-pages pocket book volumes revolved around small-time thieves, supernatural mysteries and all kinds of injustice. The series ran from 1974 to 1988 and had the impressive number of 38 titles published. It was part of a larger collection entitled *Mister Olho* or *Mister Eye* that encompassed several other mystery or science fiction series, which used both original and translated material from French, German, Danish and North-American authors such as Gertrude Chandler Warner. The Brazilian published material amounts to 202 different books written by 6 authors using 12 pen names.

The Inspector had some 550.000 copies sold, ranging from 3.000 to 50.000 printing runs depending on the title (PACHE DE FARIA, 2015). And this was a rather large number for the Brazilian market at the time. So even though the series as a whole has never been taken very seriously as a corpus for academic purposes, having such

"despicable" traits in the view of part of Brazilian academy like being mass literature for children with deliberate entertaining goals, it had a recognizable impact and influence on the formation of hundreds of thousands of young readers during the 70's and 80's. At the time of its release, Tecnoprint, its publishing house, had already put in place a rather effective alternative distribution scheme for its catalogue that included a chain of proprietary bookstores, mail order sales and even strong newsstand presence, the latter offering visibility for the books in cities where there were no libraries or bookstores available.

We must point out that during our Master's research, which we are expanding now in our doctoral studies, we discovered other unpublished books in other *Mister Eye* series, but these are all later books that seem to have been discarded because of low sales. For example, a series that had already 5 or 10 titles published didn't manage to get new stories printed, stories that had already been written and purchased by the editor company. *The Inspector*, on the other hand, is another case entirely: the discarded, suppressed book, was not at the end of the trail, rather the opposite: book 5 out of 39! And this when the series went from initial 4.000 copies to a staggering 50.000 sales number.

Upon examination of the very first pressings of the initial volumes of the *Inspector* series, we came across the title *O Caso do Rei da Casa Preta*, which translates as *The Case of the King of the Black House* (actually, in Portuguese, the chessboard "square" is called "casa" – house –, thus offering an ambiguity that suggested the story could be about Royal Houses and power factions). Although the book was listed as forthcoming, it never got to be printed... Subsequent pressings of the earlier books were corrected and *The Case of the King of the Black House* disappeared altogether; the title that was originally planned as number 6 (*O Caso dos Anjos da Cidade Fantasma / The Case of the Ghost City's Angels*) was moved to slot 5 and, for 40 years, Santos de Oliveira's text remained untouched and unseen.

So could this be a case of self-censorship, in which the publishing house chose to be on the safe side and not print something that could attract the wrong kind of attention? In order to verify that, the first thing was to confirm that the book really existed at some point and then determine whether any originals had survived after 40 years. For this, we hit both the author's home city, which had a collection of manuscripts, letters and assorted papers donated by the family in 2002, and the editor's headquarters in Rio de Janeiro. No luck in Casa Branca city, sorry to say, but jackpot results in Tecnoprint's archives. There it was, after 4 decades, almost in its entirety... We even found the cover artwork for the book, which depicts the protagonist Bortolina,

the African-American granddaughter of former slaves, overshadowed by a giant black knight, which, with its horse figure, kind of echoes the military police cavalry so common in popular protests repression episodes in the late 60's and early to mid 70's.

But what about the text? Did it in any way reinforce the hypothesis that the book was silenced for political concerns and not for more straightforward economic or editorial reasons?

The 171-pages manuscript (already lay-outed and ready for printing) reveals an oneiric story that resembles both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: one of the child investigators, Bortolina, after abusing on her ingredients while preparing liquor chocolate candies, falls asleep and lives a dreamy adventure involving giant chess pieces made of chocolate (the White House kingdom and the Black House kingdom) that are fighting for the control of the Cardboard Owl Gang's neighborhood. The story is filled with allusions to factions struggling for power, arbitrary arrests, people disappearing and even torture, which makes one suspect that this was the reason for the book to have its publication cancelled by TecnoPrint, its own copyright holder.

The story begins when the kids start making plans for both the birthday party of Eloísa's father, Clóvis, and the visit of one uncle Zico, who calls ahead saying that he will be bringing as a gift a rare chessboard set from the East which is over 500 years old.

In Bortolina's dream, she soon finds out that the chessboard had some spell that made the chess pieces grow in size, come alive and start covering all the farm grounds in black checkered patterns. All the chess references, including this one that says that "the fields, the houses, the trees, the pass ways, everything – really everything – was covered in black checkers"¹ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 42) could be an allusion to the imprisonment of the whole Brazilian society at that time. The Portuguese word for "chess" is "xadrez", which is also a technical term for "prison".

In her first encounter with the strange chess-piece beings, Bortolina also sees at a distance, hanging above the family house, "strange and sinister red flags"² (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 43), which could be a subtle reference to the leftist factions that got into armed fights with the military government since 1968. After reuniting with her detective friends Eloísa, Malu and Zé Luís, the gang starts talking about all those fantastic facts and what they should do about them. Sounding almost like a guerrilla

¹ ...os campos, as casas, as árvores, os caminhos, tudo – tudo mesmo – estava axadrezado de preto. (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 42)

² ...estranhas bandeiras vermelhas, esvoaçantes, compridas, sinistras" (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 43)

strategist leader, the Inspector, Eloísa, says that first they have to figure out what is going on. And that their "first mission is to do some terrain reconnaissance and some data gathering. Because without a good knowledge of who our enemies are, we won't be able to fight them!"³ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 51).

The kids soon find out that the paint being used by the Pawn Painter beings is actually chocolate. And when they run into the black beings counterparts, that is, white giant chocolate chess pieces busy with the same checkers world painting, they realize they are in the middle of some political struggle. That's also when they are arrested without any reason, much like so many people were being arrested those days in Brazil.

When Eloísa tries to ask a question to her White Pawn captors, she gets an answer which pretty much makes clear to the reader what civil rights are about in a society that, like early 70's Brazil, no longer respects or protects them:

– Did you guys seize the plantation grounds next to this one? – the Inspector said.
– You are prisoners, and prisoners have no right to demand explanations – answers the cranky pawn – Let's go to the White House.⁴ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 58.)

The lack of due process is again denounced in a passage where Eloísa inquires the White King about all that was happening:

– I want to know everything – she confirmed. – (...) We have been arrested by Your Majesty's pawns with, so far, no explanations whatsoever on the motives for our arrest. What are we being charged for, anyway? We didn't commit any crimes!⁵ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 67-68.)

The White King, then, will offer the kids a long story about the origins of the chess game, saying that the black and white pieces have always coexisted in a kind of balance that was now broken due to a plan executed by the black pieces. They had stolen the White Queen's crown, the symbol of the royal (institutional...) power.

³ Nossa primeira missão será reconhecer o terreno e descobrir dados. Sem sabermos direito quem são nossos inimigos, não poderemos lutar contra eles! (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 51)

⁴ – Vocês tomaram a fazenda ao lado? – perguntou a Inspetora.
– Vocês são prisioneiros, e prisioneiros não têm direito a exigir explicações – respondeu o peão mal-humorado. – Vamos para a Casa Branca. (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 58)

⁵ – Quero saber tudo – ela confirmou. – (...) Fomos presos pelos peões de Vossa Majestade que, até agora, não nos disseram o motivo pelo qual fomos presos. Afinal, que acusação recai sobre nós? Não cometemos nenhum crime! (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 67-68)

The Lewis Carroll references, already recognizable here, are made more patent when the White King, during an official ball, issues a deadline for the *Cardboard Owl Gang* to solve the mystery of the missing crown and a punishment if they don't succeed:

The king put his index finger to his own throat:
– ZAP! And you get to lose your heads!
Bortolina's eyes almost popped out of their orbits.⁶ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 85)

The plot then thickens with conspiracy twists, more capture episodes and the use of significant terms like "Tower of Silence", to indicate a place where prisoners were kept. The author seems to be sending a very clear message to the Brazilian authorities with this passage where Eloísa confronts Jupô, the black bishop that wanted "to rule them all":

– How do you plan to crown yourself? – says the Inspector.
– That's quite simple: I will arrest everybody and then I'll place the crown on top of my head! (...)
– I think that's a rather bad idea. If you arrest everybody, who you'll be ruling over? A chocolate army?⁷ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 120)

The bishop doesn't like those remarks at all and, after referring to the *coup d'état* he is planning, he says he is going to shut the kid's mouths (or for that matter any kind of opposition) forever (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 121).

What follows are some very strong passages where the children are threatened to be killed and made into robot chocolates. During this tense chapter, there is even a scene of torture, with Bortolina being tied to a chair and being force-fed liquid chocolate with a rubber pacifier.

That said, [the Black Bishop] pulled a chair and made Bortolina sit. Then, using his gun, he tied her feet and hands. When Bortolina opened her mouth to complain, Jupô put a sort of pacifier into her mouth. The pacifier was connected to a long hose that came from the aluminum chair. (...)
– You like chocolate, don't you [Bortolina]? (...) Well, now you can SUCK CHOCOLATE UNTIL YOU EXPLODE, YOU GLUTTON !
And it was no use for Bortolina to try to spit out the pacifier, because Jupô had tied it to a kind of collar around Bortolina's neck. The only thing she could do was to keep swallowing more and more of that warm and sweet chocolate...⁸ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 138-139).

⁶ O rei encostou o indicador na própria garganta:

– ...ZÁS! E vocês ficam sem cabeça! (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 85)

⁷ – Como você pretende coroar-se?

– Muito simples: prendo todo mundo e ponho a coroa em minha cabeça! (...)

– Estou achando sua ideia bem ruizinha. Se você prender todo mundo, rei do que você será? De um exército de chocolate?

⁸ Dizendo aquelas palavras, puxou uma cadeira, fazendo Bortolina sentar-se. Depois, usando a arma, amarrô-lhe os pés e as mãos. Quando a Bortolina quis abrir a boca para reclamar, Jupô enfiou-lhe uma espécie de chupeta na boca. A chupeta prendia-se à extremidade de uma borracha comprida e que provinha da cadeira de alumínio. (...)

Even though the story's resolution involves some violent action (the destruction and explosion of a boiler that was being used to produce the robot chocolate army), the actual message that the author seems to convey is one of peace, mutual respect and coexistence. At one point, Eloísa says that she is willing to be arrested because "violence will not help us in any way"⁹ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 96). And by the end of the book peace is being cherished as "the only path that we must find together, so that we can forever live in peace side by side"¹⁰ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 154). "After all, what have we been doing if not fighting, arguing and even attacking our own brothers?"¹¹ (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 155), sums up the Black Queen, happy to conclude that the conflict was finally averted, a civil war that was pretty much like the one that divided Brazil at that time.

If all this may sound like an exaggeration or a bad attempt at conspiracy theories, it might prove conspicuously enlightening to examine some testimonials from that time.

This first quote is taken from a seminar offered in 1975 by writer and journalist Antonio Callado, who was very active and combative during the military years:

As a journalist and also as a writer – although less as a writer – I feel the ever present oppression of censorship. (...) After 10 years of military dictatorship, censorship nowadays is tacitly imposed on the majority of the newspapers. The agents responsible for censorship frequently call the newsrooms to inform that articles or editorials on a given subject are forbidden, but many times the papers don't even know what they are talking about. By way of that phone call, they are briefed that they shouldn't even try to find out about it. In a way, the news piece is murdered before it was even born. (CALLADO, 2006, p. 28.)¹²

The next one is from a rather recent article by journalist Elio Gaspari, who has a major work of over 1.200 pages on the military regime. It shows how surreal the state control on the communication vehicles could be:

– Gosta de chocolate, não gosta, [Bortolina]? (...) Pois (...) vai MAMAR CHOCOLATE ATÉ ARREBENTAR, SUA GULOSA!

Não adiantava Bortolina querer cuspir a chupeta, porque Jupô a tinha prendido a uma circunferência ao pescoço da Bortolina, como se fosse uma coleira. O único jeito era mesmo Bortolina ir engolindo mais e mais chocolate morno e quente... (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 138-139)

⁹ Violência não nos ajudará em nada, em nada... (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 96)

¹⁰ ...a paz é o único caminho que precisamos encontrar em conjunto, pra vivermos sempre um ao lado do outro... (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 154.)

¹¹ Afinal, o que temos feito senão brigar, discutir ou atacar nossos próprios irmãos? (OLIVEIRA, 1974, p. 155)

¹² Como jornalista, e também na condição de escritor – embora menos como escritor –, sinto o tempo todo o jugo da censura. (...) Depois de dez anos de ditadura militar, a censura é hoje tacitamente exercida na maior parte dos jornais. Os responsáveis pela censura frequentemente telefonam para as redações para informar que estão proibidos editoriais e notícias sobre determinado assunto[, assunto muitas vezes ainda ignorado pelos jornais]. (...) [Estes] sabem, por telefone, que é melhor nem tentar descobrir. Num certo sentido, a notícia é assassinada antes de ter nascido. (CALLADO, 2006, p. 28.)

At all times, the Brazilian government has experienced real horror and aversion towards this word ["recession"]. In 1974, the Censorship Department issued a directive that said that any mentions to "economic recession, even on hypothetical grounds" were "absolutely forbidden". (GASPARI, 2015. *O Globo* newspaper, March 4th, 2015.)¹³

Finally, it's also rather relevant that 1973 and 1974, according to reports by the *Brasil: Nunca Mais* project initiative (*Brazil: Never Again* project), are the years in which the greatest number of politically-related missing persons cases are registered in Brazil.

These supposedly unimportant books, be that because of their crime entertainment fiction nature or because they are just "children's stuff", should be prevented from slipping into oblivion. They are part of an intricate puzzle representing the discursive practices of the Brazilian society during times of both disguised and brutal oppression. We can only imagine how many other books like *The Case of the King of the Black House* have been denied to their potential readers as a result of the failure of our democratic institutions between 1964 and 1985.

Ganymédes José Santos de Oliveira, its author, had over 160 titles published in his 18 years career. His books have sold many millions of copies now, but none of these achievements can clean off the smear, the stain of the violence from this one book that political repression, institutionalized censorship practices and general fear had silenced away.

We would like to end this article with a (still) rather relevant quote by short story Brazilian writer João Antônio on censorship, from an interview he gave in 1975:

I believe that all these censorship criteria are always very dumb. Censorship is stupid. It's very hard to establish any kind of justice for it. I believe that the censors have been less violent towards books than they have been with newspapers. You just need to look at each one's pressing numbers to realize that. And this means that the book is considered as a less dangerous element. But even then the major issue here is that the writer, just like any newsman or even more than them, is an individual who cannot think about censorship when he is working. If there is any advice to pass along it's this one. The author has to convey his message, whatever that is, without any concern about censorship, because censorship is the castration of every single type of creative work. (ANTÔNIO, 2012, p. 167)¹⁴

¹³ Em qualquer época, o Planalto tem horror a essa palavra ["recessão"]. Em 1974, a censura baixou uma ordem tornando "terminantemente proibidas" quaisquer referências "relativas a recessão econômica, ainda que hipotéticas". (GASPARI, 2015. *Jornal O Globo*, 4 de mar. 2015.)

¹⁴ Eu acredito que esses critérios de censura são sempre critérios muito burros. Censura é uma burrice. É muito difícil estabelecer qual o critério de justiça da censura. Eu acredito que sobre o livro a censura tenha agido com menos violência do que sobre os jornais. Basta olhar o número de tiragem de cada um. Então o livro é de certa forma tido e havido como um elemento menos perigoso. Mas ainda assim o grande problema do escritor é que ele, tanto ou mais que o jornalista, é um indivíduo que não pode pensar em censura na hora de produzir. Se existe um recado a dar é esse. O sujeito tem que transmitir sua mensagem, seja qual for, sem olhos na censura, porque a censura é a castração de qualquer tipo de criação. (ANTÔNIO, 2012, p. 167)

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