Abstract: Fiction might not be formally the same genre as ethnography, but fiction remains a legitimate companion to anthropological reflection. Placing Kafka alongside the authors of this special section of SA/AS allows me to read them just a touch beyond their central positions: especially for what they can teach us about untranslatability, ‘impass-ability’ and impossibility, as a vital part of ethnography and of relating more generally. After discussing the texts of this section, I address questions posed to our panel at EASA2020. I then discuss what I call Brazil’s most untranslatable novel, which sheds unique light on contemporary anthropological worries about untranslatability, or impossible-to-fully-bridge difference.

Keywords: ethnography, fiction untranslatability, impossibility, indeterminacy

Outside the Law there stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes to this doorkeeper and asks to be allowed into the Law, but the doorkeeper says he cannot let the man into the Law just now. The man thinks this over and then asks whether that means he might be allowed to enter the Law later. ‘That is possible’, the doorkeeper says, ‘but not now’. Since the door to the Law is open as always and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man bends down to see inside. When the doorkeeper notices that, he laughs and says, ‘If you are so tempted, why don’t you try to go in, even though I have forbidden it? But remember, I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. Outside each room you will pass through there is a doorkeeper, each one more powerful than the last. The sight of just the third is too much even for me.’ . . . The man decides he had better wait until he is given permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. He sits there for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and wears the doorkeeper with his requests . . . [until] he does not have much longer to live . . . ‘Everyone seeks the Law’, the man [finally] says, ‘so how is it that in all these years no one apart from me has asked to be let in?’ The doorkeeper realizes that the man is nearing his end, and so, in order to be audible to his fading hearing, he bellows at him, ‘No one else could be granted entry here, because this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall now go and shut it’ (Kafka 2009: 153–154).1

Fiction might not be formally the same genre as ethnography, but as a product of everyday ‘serious noticing’ (Wood 2020 [2014]), fiction remains a legiti-
mate companion to anthropological reflection (see also Tsing on anthropological ‘arts of noticing’). As I read and re-read Stephan Palmié’s, Anne-Christine Taylor’s and later João de Pina-Cabral’s articles on the question of determination in ethnography, Kafka’s well-known parable ‘Before the law’, quoted above, kept coming to mind. Our authors’ respective explorations of the assumptions, or ‘hinge propositions’, on which ethnography turns, as well as ethnography’s limited potential for complete ‘unhinging’, conjured Kafka’s tale of a man forbidden from entering even the first of many (infinite?) doors, which stood open yet impassable. Placing Kafka alongside our authors invited me to move them just a touch beyond their central positions: especially for what they can teach us about untranslatability, impass-ability, indeed impossibility, as a vital part of ethnography and of relating more generally. Yet I offer this reading not in order to lament, or describe a permanent or new crisis, but instead to revisit the humble grounds of our relations and knowledge. Of course I am unhinging nothing, really, when I say that passing through doors doesn’t mean we will arrive; or when I describe ethnography, and relating more generally, as inevitably hard and partial and never quite what we expect (Strathern 2005). But despite these ‘indisputables’, the idea of thinking through untranslatability, indeterminacy and impossibility often remains suspect among anthropologists. So my aim here is to foreground the importance of thinking to the murky edges of relations – ethnographic and otherwise – because it also helps us find what is at their heart. First I emphasise how questions of untranslatability animate Palmié’s, Taylor’s and Pina-Cabral’s texts. Then, I address questions posed to us at EASA 2020, hopefully to quell at least some of the doubts expressed about our plenary’s collective indeterminations. Last, I discuss what I call Brazil’s most untranslatable novel, whose author admired Kafka but sheds even more direct light on the devil that lurks in contemporary anthropological worries over untranslatability, or impossible-to-fully-bridge difference.

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‘Can we become unhinged?’, Palmié asks. To answer this question, Palmié seeks help from a spirit, Tomás, who was brought to his attention during his first fieldwork among Afro-Cuban Santeros in Miami. Two of Palmié’s diviner-interlocutors independently told him about Tomás, the spirit of a dead slave, and about how this spirit spectrally compelled Palmié to do this particular research. Palmié notes how, for his interlocutors, Tomás’ existence and power was unquestionable – was the ‘hinge proposition’, in Wittgenstein’s sense, on which their world turned. Yet even once Palmié let Tomás into his world, things were not totally unhinged: Tomás became more of a door opened to him, and Palmié has still not stopped believing that he (or someone like him) ‘might be able step through this door, even if none of us ever really will succeed in doing so’.
Palmié’s conclusion is what first conjured Kafka’s impassable door for me, and we had a lively conversation about it at the time. Palmié subsequently gave a gloss of Kafka’s parable in a footnote of his article, where he emphasises that he is ‘not partial to such a fatalistic reading’ (see Palmié, this issue note 14). Perhaps Palmié, who explored the parable’s lighter side in our correspondence, ultimately chose to flag Kafka’s ‘grimness’ here because he agreed with me on another issue discussed at the time: it is likely safer among new acquaintances, and unknown readers especially, to first acknowledge Kafka’s tragic side.

There are undoubtedly dark notes in Kafka’s writing, not least in ‘Before the law’, where the man from the country dies without ever having been permitted entry into the law. And while Kafka’s ‘true’ meaning here is up for debate (in good Talmudic style), it is now clear to me that grasping the parable’s humour is necessary for any deeper understanding of what Kafka was trying to do here and elsewhere – as well as for uncovering the lessons Kafka might hold for anthropology.

Of course explaining why Kafka is funny is difficult. This is actually one of the reasons why David Foster Wallace (1998) stopped teaching Kafka to his American undergraduate students. Even Foster Wallace’s most successful classroom strategy, to show how Kafka radically literalises what is normally treated as metaphorical, wasn’t satisfactory. It wasn’t able to convey, Foster Wallace admits, ‘the deeper alchemy by which Kafka’s comedy is always also tragedy, and this tragedy always also an immense and reverent joy’ (1998: 23). Certainly students were engaged by the idea that Kafka’s story ‘The penal colony’, for example, could be reread in light of the literalisation of expressions ‘like “tonguelashing” or “By a certain age, everybody has the face he deserves”’ (Foster Wallace 1998: 26). But the very idea held by Foster Wallace’s students that humour is something you ‘get’ may have been an obstacle to their understanding, especially as it comes along with another American (I might just call it a secularist) social convention: the notion that everyone just has a self. ‘No wonder’, Foster Wallace says, that students ‘cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke – that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home’ (1998: 26). If Foster Wallace could afford to give up teaching what he calls Kafka’s more ‘religious humour’ to his students, anthropologists do not have that luxury – and not only because anthropologists need to cultivate the capacity to challenge common views by understanding ‘others’. Indeed, as all of the contributors to this special section suggest, and as Pina-Cabral highlights most directly, ethnography isn’t just about making sense of ‘others’ anymore. Instead, they argue that anthropologists, necessarily including their students, must also be able to grasp the relations that may have already made them internally plural – impossible to fully ‘individualise’ – which can also make ‘us’ forever a bit opaque even to ourselves, let alone to ‘others’ (see also Chua and Mathur 2018).

The impossibility of fully knowing, or even remaining, stable selves and others, then, should be seen as less of a tragedy and more like a basic fact that
drives ethnography – a point which allows me to swing back to Taylor, whose article I also read a bit more as an account of impossibility and untranslatability than it may have initially appeared. Indeed, Taylor sees ethnography as the translation of translations, made possible by a mutual ‘desire for ethnography’ by anthropologist and interlocutor. Crucially, she argues that this desire is mutually misunderstood because, in the indigenous Amazonian case, for example, their well-documented aspiration for a relation with outsidedness is quite different from any similar Euro-American one. This is, furthermore, based on what she thinks may be their (indigenous) hinge proposition, as she describes it: ‘that relations are necessarily predicated on a difference between the terms they connect; the greater the difference, the more significant the relation becomes’. In short, the desire for ethnography among her Amerindian (especially Jivaroan Achuar) interlocutors is constituted by a desire for the transformations that otherness can bring – something equivalent, she says, to ‘nostalgia for the future’, which anthropologists come to partake in alongside the ‘nostalgia for the past’ that is built into the discipline.

I certainly concur that the ethnographic setting is created by desires for transformation, and agree that what constitutes these desires is not the same – in other words, I do not dispute that mutual misunderstanding grounds anthropology. Yet opacity also grounds knowledge more generally, as Kafka himself inferred when he had a (fictional) priest reflect on the interpretation of ‘Before the law’ in his novel *The Trial*: ‘correct understanding of something and misunderstanding of the same thing are not entirely mutually exclusive’, the priest says (Kafka 2009: 156; see also Schuman 2015 on the fascinating intersection with the early Wittgenstein on this point). But to extend and transform the idea that impossibility is part of knowledge, alongside Taylor’s own decision to title her contribution ‘Anthropology comes in when translation fails’, I playfully offer a rereading of what initiated her reflections, a suggestion she first received in a pre-fieldwork visit with her doctoral advisor, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

‘Let yourself be carried by the field’, Lévi-Strauss said to her and Phillipe Descola at the end of their last meeting before departing for fieldwork. While her interpretation of this advice led to her reflection on the desire for ethnography, it also inspired her call here for a study of the experience of ethnographic investigation, to understand especially what degree of ‘unhinging’ our interlocutors are aspiring and consenting to.

There does exist something like such a study, untranslatable though it is. But first, let me turn to Lévi-Strauss’ advice: could Lévi-Strauss also be suggesting that we allow ourselves to be carried by the field right to its very edge – to the limits of classification? That is, should we allow ourselves to be led to what is impossible to comprehend, and thus to the fundamental untranslatability that generates transformation?

Of course I consider this to be just another version of Taylor’s suggestions precisely because at least one of the edges of the field is the other, as she notes,
and she acknowledges the existence of ‘untranslatables’. But it is worth noting more generally that in *La Pensée Sauvage* Lévi-Strauss primed anthropologists on the impossibility at the heart of knowledge and life – even of history – when he said that less socially interested historians tend to model ‘a confused outline of Gödel’s theorem in the clay of “becoming”’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 262). Here, Lévi-Strauss was not opposed to history as such, as has often been said of him. By recalling Gödel’s theorem of incompleteness, which holds that even in complete systems some things will remain impossible to prove, Lévi-Strauss was reminding us that while it is impossible to know everything, the very existence of impossibility means that things can change. An encounter with impossibility – an event at the limit of classification – provokes a necessary response: the production of further classifications; the proliferation of differences, resulting in transformation. Before post-structuralism proper, then, impossibilities, perennial encounters with difference, were at the heart of Lévi-Strauss’ thinking not only on anthropology, but on history as well (Johnson 2013; Keck 2009; Lebner 2021a).

Lévi-Strauss’ encounter with the too-different Mundé, to which Taylor also refers, helps concretise Lévi-Strauss’ work with impossibility. Boris Wiseman (2001: 8) describes this encounter as a moment when Lévi-Strauss realises that the ethnographic project is ‘an impossibility’. Yet Wiseman classifies this as a ‘negative’ moment in Lévi-Strauss’ work that is nevertheless temporary. Certainly Lévi-Strauss is feeling deflated, concluding that no one and no thing – from humans to grass – can be fully apprehended in its otherness; that it is either the relation that transforms the other, or indeed the self who can never really leave home and truly see the other. But the sheer negativity associated with impossibility, and the aversion to impossibility among scholars like Wiseman seems to stem from a Euro-American faith in, and desire for, limitlessness, perfection, transparency, translatability, unity and sameness.

Enter João de Pina-Cabral, who added his article after the above reflections had been penned. Happily, his focus on ‘field aporia’ deepened the resonance among all of our interventions. Building on Derrida’s (1993) notion of aporia to denote the “impossible crossings” or “limits of truth” that anthropologists encounter during fieldwork, Pina-Cabral suggests that field aporia are important both for pointing ‘to what needs further determination’ and ‘to the limits of the “field”’ (Pina-Cabral, 4, 5). Although I have noted elsewhere that Derrida’s concept of aporia is shadowed by ‘ontology’ more than Derrida or anthropologists might wish, I certainly agree that encounters during fieldwork provoke irresolvable questions that guide, drive and even haunt our ethnographies (Lebner 2021a: 456–457 n.18). I say irresolvable especially because, even if ethnographies should stand as answers to our questions, no description is definitive; someone could always offer a redescription, including ourselves. As our three authors have said in one way or another, ethnographic work must remain reflexive, drawing on all the conceptual and interpersonal relations that intersect it. Reflections upon
reflections on ethnographic determination – what I am offering here – should do the same.

In that spirit, Pina-Cabral’s main field aporia brings me back before the law, or at least to an inversion of Kafka’s parable. This in turn opens the door to a more overtly Christian problematic, which sustains the question of untranslatability, or mystery. Pina-Cabral offers a vignette about a man from the city who goes to the countryside to be allowed in. Contrary to Kafka’s man from the country waiting a lifetime before the law, Pina-Cabral, the man from the city, eventually succeeds in setting up in the community. And yet, Pina-Cabral continues to be haunted by his very first encounter, which opens and structures his article. Said encounter happens during his first descent into the main valley of the parish he was to study in the Alto Minho region of northwest Portugal. As he was winding his way down into the village by motorbike, he crossed paths with another motorcyclist. Pina-Cabral and the man began to exchange pleasantries, and Pina-Cabral soon began to ask his interlocutor about the richer and poorer people of the village. His interlocutor initially deflected his questions, yet Pina-Cabral persisted: ‘for example, the one who owns that house there’, he says, pointing to a seventeenth-century palatial villa, ‘Who is he?’ At this point the pleasantries end: Pina-Cabral’s interlocutor asserts the community’s internal sameness – ‘no, here we are all alike!’ – and abruptly starts up his motorbike and speeds away.

Pina-Cabral presents this as one of the aporia that first animated his research, though not because he could not make sense of the man’s reaction; its general meaning was clear enough. In short, for Pina-Cabral, this was an aporia because the value of ‘community’ it enacted entailed an inconsistent ethic vis-à-vis its different members – it was essentially blind to various inclusions and exclusions – and he found it difficult to write about this in a way that would ethically satisfy all the parties involved, including his colleagues.

I too am fascinated by Pina-Cabral’s encounter, but for another reason, which I want to think with more: I am haunted by its resonance with a legendary poem of the cordel genre, ‘The Duel Between Manoel Riachão and the Devil’, which was written in 1908 by Leandro Gomes de Barros and continues to be performed and discussed, even online, in Brazil today (for extended analysis, see Lebner 2021b).

While there is a chance that Pina-Cabral’s interlocutor had actually heard that poem during his time working in Brazil, the interest in ‘The Duel’ here lies in how it reflects very common Catholic concerns, which any community built on a ‘feeling of (parish) community’ might have, including the Minhoto people that Pina-Cabral describes (and perhaps especially in the 1970s, see below). ‘The Duel’ recounts how Manoel Riachão, a guitar player, slowly discovers how the stranger he is talking to is the Devil. The climax of the tale is most interesting for us. Once Riachão accuses his interlocutor of being the Devil, the Devil makes his final bid to win him over and, much like Pina-Cabral did in his own encounter, the Devil begins pointing out the injustices and inequalities Riachão and his father have faced – especially compared to their neighbours and relatives:
Riachão, you love God
But are badly recompensed
God made Paul a monarch
And Peter a simple soldier

Your neighbour and relative
Got rich without working
Your father worked so hard
And could never get richer
He didn’t go to bed for one night
Without praying. (Barros 1908: 14–15)

The message of the cordel is clear: you must always watch out for devilish persons and practices that sow division; that seek to break the human and divine relationships that compose you and your world.

Of course, I am not insisting on this analysis as the “right” reading of Pina-Cabral’s vignette. Still, it is worth entertaining the idea that it is not necessarily as far-fetched as some might think and considering what that might mean. It is certainly the case that in the wake of Vatican II calls resounded within the Catholic Church to do away with antiquated notions of an embodied ‘devil’. However, as Pina-Cabral would likely agree, this is neither the perspective of all Catholics nor is it, crucially, even the position of the contemporary Vatican. By 1975, four years before Pina-Cabral encountered his first field aporia, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published ‘Christian Faith and Demonology’, which affirms that ‘the existence of the demonic world’ is ‘a dogmatic datum’. And then Cardinal Ratzinger, the then-new prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II, reasserted this position: ‘Satan is the absolute destroyer, undermining every relationship: man’s relationship to himself and men’s relation to one another’ (Ratzinger and Messori 1985: 151). It bears noting that this idea of the Devil as the destroyer of relationships is not unique to late twentieth-century Catholicism and that in the Christian tradition even before the Reformation, the problem of evil has been spoken of less as an aporia than a ‘mystery’ (see Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975).

Let me leap to my point: considerations of transcendent and immanent evil remain part of how people in Euro-America and beyond (Catholics or otherwise) have and may sometimes still process kinds of difference. I am stating this as less of a criticism than a fact, though I acknowledge that it continues to wreak havoc among communities today. What should anthropologists do in face of such dangers? Should they adopt the long-held Euro-American perspective, inherited from Christian tradition, that marking difference is somehow damning? Or should we carefully describe differences, to better think with them and redescribe them? Should we acknowledge that the site of difference may always shift, but continue to find ways to bring difference, even impossible-to-dissolve
difference, to light, to render it less of a wrong to be righted, a problem to solve, than first and foremost a condition of life – indeed the condition that connects us all? I will explore these questions via straight anthropological debate first, and then return to what the Devil – and his fiction – have to say to us.

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For all its good intentions, the emphasis on the human potentials for unity and sameness, even in their secular enlightenment versions, has not dissolved the politically pernicious fear of the irremediably dissimilar or different. Marilyn Strathern has long argued in this vein and recently expanded on fears of dissimilarity in her recent book, Relations (e.g. Strathern 2020; see also a review of this work Lebner 2020a). Yet despite her vital contributions, it seems that untranslatability, indeterminacy or impossibility often continue to be politically suspect in anthropological thought, and some of the questions raised during our EASA panel confirmed this. We were asked: how can anyone, especially applied anthropologists, take seriously an anthropology that avows untranslatability? And isn’t the panel just reinstating the same old ‘unforgiving colonial binary’ between us and them? I drew on Strathern to answer the second question in our EASA session, and I further develop that train of thought here to help formulate a response to the first.

Of course, numerous prominent anthropologists have been accused of exoticising, of exacerbating differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Yet Strathern fully anticipated this problem in the 1980s, though her moves in this regard have been regularly misunderstood, which is why they are important to recall here. In fact, some critics have singled her out as a special offender by focusing on her key concepts, rather than on their role in her mode of redescription. The concept that has attracted the most critical attention is the ‘dividual’, which is often taken as evidence that Strathern hopes to establish radically distinct ontologies between Euro-America on the one hand, where persons are considered individual, and Melanesia on the other, where persons are more partible and internally divided. Marshall Sahlins is a notable critic on this issue, adopting ‘the title of a currently popular American television series, Curb Your Enthusiasm’ to tetchily make a point: ‘the Strathernian “dividual”’, he says, ‘is threatening to become a universal form of premodern subjectivity’ (2013: 25). The irony is that Sahlins’ counter-argument – that the autonomous Western individual ‘does not describe such individuals in their own family and kindred contexts’ (2013: 25) – is in fact Strathern’s point. As Pina-Cabral might put it, critics like Sahlins ignore Strathern’s profound awareness of the discipline’s ‘scaffolding’ (and Strathern (2018) herself has recently referred to it as ‘infrastructure’, turning the popular academic moniker back on anthropology). Yet we can also return to Gender of the Gift, which already made it clear that, for Strathern (1988: 29), anthropological translation is a ‘contrivance’ a ‘fancy’; that while writing in anthropological English or any language, really, one can never fully escape the built-in assumptions of said language in any one move (see 1988: 17–18). Strathern makes this point directly about soci-
ety, but she implicitly includes society’s perennial companion, the individual: ‘I displace what “we” think society [/individual] is by a set of different constructs, promoted in opposition to order [sic] to suggest an analogy with “their” view . . . treating both sets of ideas as formulae for social action’, then extends for us the original meaning of the concept’ (Strathern 1988: 17; my italics). The * note of the above quote (in the book it appears as note ‘10’) says this in plainer words still: ‘In comparing “our” categories with “their” categories, one is of course comparing two versions of our categories, the latter being derived from what we take to be salient or relevant to them, even as the ideas gained from what we take to be “their” categories come from “our” encounters. To extract certain distinct ideas out of the encounter is not to judge the people as distinct, nor necessarily entail a comparison of whole societies’ (Strathern 1988: 349).

Thus Strathern long ago anticipated the criticisms of Sahlins and others. Describing dividuality is not just a means to identify ‘Melanesian’ (or other ‘pre-modern’) difference. It is ultimately a ‘Euro-American’ description, whose very possibility means that Euro-American ‘individuals and societies’ can be grasped and lived otherwise. Indeed Strathern, enacting her apprehension of Melanesian sociality on the page, has herself displaced the authorial ‘I’ and thus the homogeneous ‘we’ (Lebner 2017, 2020a). In short, the ‘dividual’ is ultimately, and primarily, a means to inspire the redescription, extension and transformation of the over-naturalised individual and society – concepts which subtend the very idea of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ within anthropology and beyond.7

We have now nearly answered the first question: why should scholars take untranslatability and impossibility seriously, especially if scholars are concerned with the application of their work? I think the authors in this special section would concur that, even if we are perennially ensnared by the terms of our social and intellectual life, this does not mean that the search for understanding is futile. On the contrary, the work of transformation is both more painstaking and more important for this very reason. After all, as one plenary question about the ethnography of neo-Nazis rightly reminded us, the fact that many people still find it impossible to grasp various ‘others’ as benign or even worthy of life remains one of the most important challenges of our times. Yet it was also suggested that the analytical language of untranslatability and impossibility might compromise ways of addressing the ethnographic and political problem of neo-Nazism. However, it could be argued that without this language, on the contrary, the problem of neo-Nazis could not be properly addressed at all, as one of their core traits could not begin to be properly described for what it is: fear and hatred of ethnic/religious difference (the impossibility of sameness). More generally, untranslatability necessarily plays a role in all of our relations. ‘I’ and therefore ‘we’ are never one. The implications of this for research are many, but one basic truth, also echoed by our authors, is that it is impossible to fully know what impasses, misunderstandings and failures we will encounter in advance. And the unforeseeability of our relations – their various opacities to us, especially in the
moment – makes ethnography, with its open-ended character, crucial. To shut down reflection on untranslatability or impossibility, then, instead of developing robust reflections on them, is to misrecognise the power of ethnography and to even jeopardise its future.

The threat to open-ended inquiry, which begins from the premise that it is impossible to know in advance what research will find, has been present for a while (e.g. Strathern 2000). But from where many of us sit now [autumn 2020], socially distanced in the worst global crisis of our lifetimes, the struggle over the future of ethnography seems nigh, stemming from budget cuts and new calls for utility, productivity and knowable ‘impact’. So perhaps now more than ever we must be ready to define ethnography’s importance. How else to promote the unique value of ethnography, especially for these times, if not by asserting that ethnographers are the most prepared researchers to uncover impossible-to-predict social phenomena? Certainly this preparedness is also due to how ethnographers are trained to interrogate received knowledge, starting with the statist, secularist analytics that go unquestioned in many human sciences (Lebner 2020b). However, it is ultimately ethnographers’ readiness to grapple with everyday opacities that arguably makes them the most faithfully able to convey the mutable truths they encounter.

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Perhaps surprisingly, one of the best descriptions of the challenges of ethnographic in/determination can be found in what I earlier called Brazil’s most untranslatable novel, which many Lusophones already know is João Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, published in 1956. While anthropologists of Brazil have long drawn inspiration from it (Brandão 1998; Marques 2002; PinabCabral 2007, 2008), it has yet to be fully claimed as a classic of anthropological thought (though see important discussion by Rattes 2015 [2009]). It is more often, and rightly, celebrated as Brazil’s and indeed one of the Portuguese language’s star contributions to world literature. But the problem is that the world doesn’t even quite know *that* yet, because the book is essentially untranslatable. Gregory Rabassa, the celebrated American translator of Júlio Cortázar, Gabriel García-Marquez and Clarice Lispector, among many others, wrote that *Grande Sertão* ‘would have to be rewritten, not translated’ (cited in Krause 2015: 114). Of course the book has been translated, and rather flatly under the English title of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. But the translations failed to communicate Rosa’s astounding linguistic innovation – from confounding neologisms to cascading rhythms. It is precisely because of its untranslatability – how it conveys this untranslatability within Portuguese and how it resists translation to other languages while being ethnographically faithful and enlightening – that I think it should be considered a classic of anthropological thought. Indeed, the novel approximates what Taylor calls for here: a study of the experience of ethnography and an experiment with how to write about it – untranslatability and all. It is
also brings us back to the Devil, or at least his uncertain presence which plays a
major role in the book. So let me say a few words about Grande Sertão as I bring
this comment to a close: it sheds special light on why much scholarly thought
might try to foreclose untranslatability and why we might refuse to comply.

Grande Sertão is grounded in Rosa’s (admittedly brief) fieldwork in Brazil’s
arid interior, the sertão, and is thus an account of both the results and effects
of his ethnographic engagement.9 The story is built around questions the narra-
tor, Riobaldo, poses to an outsider, sometimes referred to as ‘doctor’, though we
never actually hear the outsider respond. Riobaldo seems to want his interlocutor
to help him decide the undecidables, especially resolving the issue of whether
or not the Devil exists, but ultimately Riobaldo cannot decide – and this is what
drives him to tell his story and in this way get closer to himself and the divine. As
Riobaldo says (pardon the translation):

[Sir] you help me talk more with myself. Look see: what is bad, inside us, we
always pervert by becoming distant from ourselves. Perhaps this is why people
like to talk?

[Your ideas] Sir . . . give me peace . . . The confirmation . . . that the Thing
doesn’t exist. Right, no?

But Riobaldo continues to wonder: ‘who knows . . . maybe the native badness of
man makes him only capable of seeing the approximation of God in the figure of
the Other? (Rosa 1994: 48–49). The ‘Other’ Riobaldo refers to here is of course
the Devil; indeed Riobaldo lists twenty-two other names at this juncture (besides
‘thing’) for the Devil, some of which are ‘the Individual’, ‘the Dirty’, ‘the Man’,
‘the Boy’, the ‘I-don’t-know-what-to-say’ and ‘That-which-never-laughs’ (Rosa
1994: 48). However, if for Riobaldo the Devil could be any others or selves, he
also suggests that to find good, or God, one must pass through the other – one
must relate – even perhaps to the Devil. Thus the uncertainty regarding selves
and others, coupled with Riobaldo’s need to relate nevertheless, are what ulti-
mately drive the story itself.

The predominant literary criticism generally takes Riobaldo’s life story,
in which he consistently wonders if he has made a pact with the Devil, to be a
metaphor for something else, like the pact with power, rather than any faithful
description of the religious lives of backlanders (Bolle 2004). Yet I take Riobaldo’s
uncertain account of himself to his interlocutor as the expression of an ethno-
graphic truth. I mean this in two ways.

First, I mean this literally: it reflects what ethnographers and others have
observed among backlanders and their descendants in the sertão and elsewhere.
Speaking for myself, when I first read Grande Sertão, I was astounded (especially
because of the hype around its difficulty), to read a close echo of the language
of my own interlocutors in settler Amazonia, who often chose similar narrative
modes, made neologisms wittingly and unwittingly, and spoke about the per-
viasiveness of evil, many even affirming ‘of course the devil exists, we just don’t
believe in him!’

But then I realised that the ethnographic fidelity of *Grande Sertão* wasn’t that surprising after all: like Riobaldo, many of my interlocutors came from the backlands or were descendants of backlanders. Indeed, Rosa was deeply inspired by the backlanders he met during his fieldwork, by his father’s tales, and by the popular *cordel* poetry he read – in the genre of ‘The Duel’, discussed above – all of which are reflected in Riobaldo’s character.

Second, Rosa offers an ethnographic truth not only because he was trying to convey how backlanders were. He was also communicating the truth of his experience by describing how backlanders were to him – part of a not-entirely-transparent world, which he was also a part of. Thus Rosa made it a key part of the story and even the language he used that ‘understanding’ (as much as one’s ‘being’) can only ever be partial. Writing in language that may come from an agent of the Devil (the agent being Riobaldo), Rosa wanted to convey the terrestrial and “mystic” essence of his ethnographic encounter (Lebner 2021b): backlanders taught Rosa that hell might be engaging with others and oneself, but they also showed him that relating is our only path to redemption.

This search for redemption might make *Grande Sertão* a Christian tale, but it brings me to my final point. In drawing on Rosa to reflect on our authors, I don’t mean to champion Christianity or, for that matter, the Devil. My hope is above all that we should learn with them, especially to reflect on scholarly, anthropological and Euro-American thought (which of course are not necessarily the same thing; Chua and Mathur 2018). Rosa adds a particularly important dimension to our understanding of the tragi-comic aspect of lives lived with untranslatability, a reflection I began with my discussion of Kafka’s more ‘religious’ (perhaps ‘Jewish’) humour, brief though my discussion was. If Rosa’s story conveys related humour, it also reminds us of the role of Christianity in the colonisation of Brazil and elsewhere, a process precisely where radical difference, indeterminacy, and untranslatability were deemed a tragedy, an outgrowth of the fall, a cause and source of evil to be eradicated, perhaps especially in the Americas (Souza e Mello 1993). Recalled like that, we can hear its echoes from across the spectrum of even contemporary Euro-American fears of difference, whether grounded in secular, Christian or other religions or cosmologies. Yet it is important to note that Riobaldo, like my interlocutors, and certainly Rosa, did not always see the untranslatable or unknowable as tragic. They often saw it as a fact of life, as well as beautiful in its mystery, and we can learn from that, too. Perhaps learning from all the people here discussed, we can also acknowledge that irreconcilable, ultimately impossible-to-bridge difference – whether in ‘others’ or ‘selves’, at home or away – can be beautiful, humbling, transformative, and also, if we are honest, can sometimes put a smile on our faces even as we recognise its seriousness?

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I cannot help but return to Kafka to again help sum up the challenge of ethnography – and my response to our authors. In a letter to Max Brod in 1921,
Kafka explained the conundrum of Jewish authors writing in German (he was of course including himself):

They existed among three impossibilities . . . These are: The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might also add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of writing (since the despair could not be assuaged by writing . . . writing is only an expedient, as for someone who is writing his will shortly before he hangs himself – an expedient that may well last a whole life). (Kafka 1977: 289)

Cynthia Ozick quotes parts of this passage to assert the impossibility of translating Kafka, ‘what chance can a translator have to snare a mind so elusive that it escapes even the comprehension of its own sensibility?’ (1999: np). But for our purposes it reminds us of something else, too: ‘Before the law’ is sometimes read as a reference to Kafka’s problems with Jewish or paternal law, but it is clear from this letter that Kafka knew a thing or two about trying to get through other doors as well. And while today’s anthropologists generally have more power than Kafka did as a member of a seriously embattled Jewish minority in early twentieth-century Prague, Kafka still has much to teach. Indeed, we now know he was writing with more than just ‘gallows humour’ (Foster Wallace 1998: 26) – he wrote joyfully about the absurd challenge of understanding the world he was in and, in so doing, he captured a profound truth. To acknowledge that anthropologists forever face this trial, too, does not mean that I think that all struggles are the same, or even less that ‘we are all in this together’. In fact I think that Kafka would agree (though he might chuckle at first when asked to address anthropological issues) that it is vital that anthropologists begin to contemplate our ‘uncommon futures’ (Valentine and Hassoun 2019). Nevertheless, I think that ethnographers are still allowed to be inspired by a shared question: that we should remain determined to transform with the untranslatable truths of others?

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Notes

1. ‘Before the law’ was first published on its own in 1915 in the Jewish weekly *Selbstwehr*, then later appeared as part of the collection *A Country Doctor* in 1919. It subsequently appeared in Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which was published posthumously in 1925 (here quoted from Kafka 2009).
2. Though see Palmié (2014), where he embraces the conditions of impossibility of historicist knowledge.
3. On ‘secularist’ vs secular and secularism, see Lebner (2020b).
4. *Cordel* poems/literature are a kind of print media that emerged in the late nineteenth century and used to be pinned up on cords in open-air markets (hence the name). They were also performed. *Cordel* continue to circulate today and their form and content remain largely the same (see Lebner 2021c). I am dating the publication of ‘The Duel’ to 1908 according to the Casa Rui Barbosa, which holds it in a digital archive of *cordel* literature. However, I have seen other dates attributed to it on the internet. For example, the ‘Grupo Lima-Riachão MA’, a blog partially run by a former city councillor of the town of Riachão in the State of Maranhão, Magno Lima, states that it was published in 1899 (http://grupolima.blogspot.com/2011/09/peleja-de-riachao-com-o-diabo.html Accessed 28 September 2021).
5. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* defines mystery as the ‘ideas or works of God that are beyond the reach of natural human knowledge’ (1976: 406). Evil, even though potentially the work of the Devil, is still allowed by God, and this allowance for evil is what remains impossible to understand.
7. For more discussion of Strathern’s redescription and its grounding in analogical thought, see Lebner (2017, 2020b); for Strathern’s recent expansion of analogy, see Strathern (2020) and my own review (Lebner 2020a).
8. Rattes, in a 2009 Master’s thesis subsequently revised (2015), has to my knowledge produced the first attempt to draw out the anthropological elements and lessons from Guimarães Rosa’s work. He focused in particular on how Rosa created a space of the ‘in-between worlds’: one where he could show how distinct realities or ontologies could be ‘conjugated’ or ‘crossed’ (Rattes 2015 [2009]: 15–16). Although this definitely resonates with my description, as with the others I address here, I draw out the incomplete translatabilities entailed in such encounters.
9. In May 1952, Rosa famously made a twelve-day journey on horseback through the backlands of Minas Gerais with a group of cowboys, two of which, Manuelzão and Zito, became especially important inspirations for Grande Sertão. Two months later, in July, he went to a cowboy gathering in Caldas de Cipó in Bahia and wrote about it to his father, with whom he maintained regular correspondence, asking regularly for stories remembered from his life as a store owner in the backlands. Rosa had already planned to take a
journey into the backlands in the mid-1940s – expressly to inspire his writing – though he never subsequently mentioned it, indicating that a first extended journey may never have happened (Barbosa 2007: 200, 239).

10. The resonance with Amerindian engagements with enmity is interesting to contemplate (see Taylor 2015, para 13; Lebner 2012, 2019; also Pina-Cabral 2008).

11. It is worth noting that not all colonialisms have been powered by a drive to obliterate difference. For instance, as Mueggler (2020) argues, during the Ming dynasty’s colonisation of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, native chieftains asserted their own sovereign powers by recognising and managing untranslatable difference.

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Revisiter l’intraduisible : un commentaire

La fiction n’est peut-être pas formellement le même genre que l’ethnographie. En tant que produit d’une «observation sérieuse » quotidienne (Wood 2014[2020]) par contre, la fiction reste un compagnon légitime à la réflexion anthropologique. En plaçant Kafka aux côtés des auteurs de cette section spéciale de SA/AS, je peux les lire un peu au-delà de leurs positions centrales, en particulier pour ce qu’ils peuvent nous apprendre sur l’intraduisibilité, l’«impasse-abilité» et l’impossibilité, parties essentielles pour l’ethnographie et des relations/rapports plus généralement. Après avoir discuté les textes de cette section, je réponds aux questions posées à notre panel lors de l’EASA2020. Je discute ensuite de ce que j’appelle le roman le plus intraduisible du Brésil, qui jette une lumière unique sur les préoccupations anthropologiques contemporaines concernant l’intraduisibilité, ou la différence qui est impossible à combler entièrement.

**Mots-clés** : ethnographie, intraduisibilité de la fiction, impossibilité, indétermination