

Haunted heritage: Space and history as repositories of cultural memory in Gilberto Freyre and Jayme Griz /

Herança assombrada: Espaço e história como repositórios de memória cultural em Gilberto Freyre e Jayme Griz

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 orcid.org/0000-0003-0256-1306

Received: May, 18th, 2020. Approved: May, 26th, 2020

How to cite this article:

GABRIEL, Maria Alice Ribeiro. Haunted heritage: Space and history as repositories of cultural memory in Gilberto Freyre and Jayme Griz. *Revista Letras Raras*, v. 9, p. 37-48. n. 2, jun. 2020.

ABSTRACT

The writings of the renowned Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre were a highly influential work for his successors. In *Assombrações do Recife Velho* (1955), Freyre's contribution encompasses interdisciplinary fields, such as cultural sociology, historiography, and social anthropology. His narratives about ghosts, revenants and wraiths are also important for literature researchers as well as for the field of memory studies. The purpose of this article is to present accounts about ghostly encounters and haunted places, referred to by Gilberto Freyre and Jayme Griz, respectively in *Assombrações do Recife Velho* and *O Cara de Fogo* (1969). The objective of the present study is to discuss comparatively some common issues of colonial life mentioned in these accounts: traumatic experiences and memories involving slavery, migration and urbanization. The analysis indicates that ghost stories and places considered haunted can serve as historical repositories for a plurality of social imaginaries related to space, memories, stories and folktales derived from oral and written traditions of collective memory.

KEYWORDS: Cultural history; Literature; Memory; Space; Ghost story.

RESUMO

Os escritos do reconhecido sociólogo brasileiro Gilberto Freyre constituem um legado referencial em seu campo. Em *Assombrações do Recife Velho* (1955), a contribuição de Freyre abrange áreas interdisciplinares, como a sociologia cultural, a historiografia e a antropologia social. Suas narrativas sobre fantasmas, almas penadas e espectros são igualmente relevantes para os estudos literários e memorialísticos. O propósito deste artigo é apresentar relatos que abordam encontros fantasmagóricos e lugares assombrados, referidos por Gilberto Freyre e Jayme Griz, respectivamente, em *Assombrações do Recife Velho* e *O Cara de Fogo* (1969). O objetivo é discutir, comparativamente, tópicos comuns à vida colonial referidos nesses relatos: memórias e experiências traumáticas sobre escravidão, migração e urbanização. A análise indica que histórias de fantasmas e locais considerados

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 <http://dx.doi.org/10.35572/rlr.v9i2.1770>

assombrados podem servir de repositórios históricos à pluralidade de imaginários sociais ligados ao espaço, memórias, histórias e contos folclóricos, das tradições oral e erudita, retidos na memória coletiva.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: História cultural; Literatura; Memória; Espaço; História de fantasma.

1 Introduction

Memories studies have considered the historical relationship between collective memory and space. The material aspect of a room, a house or a landscape may have several values attached, inspiring imaginative means to express memories, personal accounts and popular narratives. In considering why orally transmitted memories are retained by living generations, the philosopher Jeffrey Andrew Barash specified the cognitive magnitude of the recollection of personal experience:

“What does it mean to remember?” This question might seem commonplace when it is confined to the domain of events recalled in past individual experience; but even in this restricted sense, when memory recollects, for example, a first personal encounter with birth, or with death, the singularity of the remembered image places the deeper possibilities of human understanding in relief. (BARASH, 2016, p. 1).

When Recife’s ghost stories first appeared in *Assombrações do Recife Velho*, most of them were accounts of people who had been interviewed by Oscar Melo, employed by the newspaper *A Província* as police reporter (FREYRE, 2000, p. 29); others were briefly referred to in early writings such as *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) and *Sobrados e Mucambos* (1936). Freyre’s commentaries on ghosts and haunted sites in those early works illustrate colonial habits; historical events; popular beliefs; “relations of man with nature,” finances, culture, religion, family, dependents, and slaves:

For safety’s sake and as precaution against pirates, against demagogic excesses, and against the communistic tendencies of the natives and the Africans, the proprietors of the big landed estates in their excessive zeal for private property would bury beneath their houses jewels and gold just as they did their beloved dead. These two motives were always uncannily mingled in the folklore of the Manor-Houses: with empty rocking-chairs rocking away on loosened tiles and leaving no trace on the morrow; with dishes clattering in the cupboard at night; and with the souls of departed lords of the manor appearing to relatives and even to strangers, begging Our Father’s and Hail Mary’s prayers, they moaned and groaned and pointed out the places where

barrels of money were to be found. This at times was the money of others, of which the owners of the house had illegally possessed themselves, money that friends, widows, and sometimes slaves had entrusted to them for safekeeping. (...) Often money that had been buried disappeared mysteriously. Joaquim Nabuco, who had been reared by his godmother in the Manor-House of Massangana, died without ever knowing about the large amount of gold which the good lady had stored for him and which was probably buried in some hole in the wall. When Nabuco was Brazilian Minister in London, an old priest told him of the treasure that Dona Ana Rosa had saved for him, but not a pound of it was ever discovered. (FREYRE, 1986, p. xxxviii).

The aim of this article is to present accounts about ghostly encounters and haunted places, written by Gilberto Freyre and Jayme Griz, respectively in *Assombrações do Recife Velho* (1955) and *O Cara de Fogo* (1969). The objective of this study is to analyse comparatively issues of the colonial past referred to in these narratives: traumatic experiences and memories involving slavery, migration and urbanization. Based on oral narratives, personal accounts, memories and historic events, these texts serves as prolific sources to examine the links between the memory of a society and its material and figurative spaces. The meaning of certain places for the collective memory can be constructed, transmitted and resignified by means of symbolic elements, but also combining these symbols with real facts in a ghost story.

2 The history behind the story

Oral stories about haunted houses are often related to traumatic events that people have experienced with emotional pain in the past. In *Assombrações do Recife Velho*, Gilberto Freyre described the capital of Pernambuco as a city with a sizeable population of very real ghosts. The accounts in this book were collected by the author as oral history in 1929, when he was editor of the “old newspaper *A Província*.” As the sociologist reflected in *Sobrados e Mucambos*, the collective memory identifies catastrophes, disasters and tragic episodes as the origin of the haunting phenomena:

With the passing of the years, there was hardly a city residence which did not have the reputation of being haunted. Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, São Paulo, Recife, Ouro Preto, Sabará, Olinda, São Cristóvão, São Luís, Penedo – all these older cities to this day have their haunted houses. In one, a young man

stabbed his sweetheart, and, ever since, the stairway has creaked or moaned all night long. In another, because of money buried in the ground or in the wall, a lost soul appears. In a third, because of a master's cruel treatment of his slaves, there is the sound of weeping at night. (FREYRE, 1963, p. 167).

When the collective memory perpetuates ghost stories, the crucial event first appeared in personal stories, most of them were linked to spaces and people who had social power or fame. Written by the folklorist and poet Jayme de Barros Griz, *O Cara de Fogo* includes an interesting range of ghost stories. The author was born in 1900 and grew up in the countryside of Pernambuco. The narratives combine historical data, memories, oral literature and popular culture. The reports certainly were based on researches carried out by the folklorist within sugarcane region of old colonial mills, such as Água Preta, Aratinga, Barbalho, Camivou, Cocaupe, Gigante, Gravatá, Liberdade and Mata-Virgem. The accounts show the transformation of traditional mills to modern sugar mills, from the point of view of ex-slaves, migrants, rural workers, small traders and travelers.

The archaic sugar mills are the historic protagonists of Griz's tales, specifically, the author does not mention the names of historic figures of the country or region. However, in *Assombrações do Recife Velho*, the account entitled "O barão de Escada, num lençol manchado de sangue" (The baron of Escada, wrapped in a bloodstained sheet) alludes to Belmiro da Silveira Lins (1827-1880), owner of the mills Harmonia and Limoeiro, murdered during a political dispute. A "master's cruel treatment of his slaves" is the major theme of the account "O velho Suassuna pedindo missa?" (The old Suassuna requesting Mass?). The space in question concerns to a huge rural mansion, belonging to the family of Francisco de Paula e Hollanda Cavalcanti de Albuquerque (1760-1827), first viscount of Suassuna or Colonel Suassuna, father of the viscount of Suassuna Francisco de Paula Cavalcanti de Albuquerque (1793-1880). The "old viscount", told Freyre (2000, p. 113), haunted the family's property, regretful for not having been more tolerant toward his slaves. "It is related that the Viscount of Suassuna, on his estate at Pombal, had buried Negroes in the garden, victims of his patriarchal justice," as reported by Freyre (1986, p. xxxix).

Sebastião Nery (1998, p. 163) distinguished two branches of Suassuna renowned family: the majority of them living in Pernambuco; in Paraíba State, the author mentioned the father of the writer Ariano Suassuna (1927-2014), the journalist, lawyer and statesman João Urbano Pessoa de Vasconcelos Suassuna (1886-1930), murdered in the Brazilian Revolution of 1930.

The principal motif of the account “Um barão perseguido pelo diabo” (A baron persecuted by the devil) is the person who ascended the social ladder because of some special transgression, in general linked to unfathomable fortunes, a “joyful and lavish life”. This motif is usual in erudite and popular culture, and appears commonly associated with the Faustian bargain. One of the barons referred to by Freyre (2000, p. 103) in this account is a “brave” and decadent heir impelled to ride his horse late at night, recalling Edgar Allan Poe’s remarkable tale “Metzengerstein,” published in 1832. The historical counterpoint of this image was also depicted by Freyre (1963, p. 377): “I have already mentioned those who, by their success as slave traders, or through some other activity, came to be plantation owners, yet rode horseback in wooden shoes”. When many of those barons, viscounts and sugar planters went bankrupt, their properties, mansions and mills have been sold or converted into ruins:

The relative ease of life in the sugar-growing region, already affected by the discovery of the mines, declined still further with the rise of coffee crop. In the cities, the fine residences of the more improvident sugar planters were degenerating into big “barns” in need of paint, where the rosewood furniture was no longer lacquered or varnished. Rats, bats, and ghosts were taking over the neglected houses. Slaves, imports such as raisins, canned peas, English pianos, French wines were all going up in price, beyond the reach of the rural sugar barons, who were now being eclipsed by the coffee planters. (FREYRE, 1963, p. 46).

The gradual decline in the productivity of sugar planters in the second half of the nineteenth century affected many rural communities, notably due to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The period after the abolition of slavery intensified migration from the country to the towns. Matthew Sparke (2013, p. 299-300), Professor of Geography and International Studies at the University of Washington, stressed the existence of an extensive networking acting within the framework of the internal extremes of wealth and poverty in global cities. It occurs because these localities are better linked to other global cities than to the rural hinterlands that provides them with food, land, utilities, and migrant workers. Such connection establishes its own internal mechanisms of social control. Global cities reveal spaces of urban inequality with zones of abandonment and slums located right next to areas highly urbanised, with gentrified neighborhoods and gated communities.

This phenomenon is rooted in the past. Freyre (1963, p. 46) mentioned: “[...] prosperous cities with rural areas in decline like the sugar-producing North in the second half of the

nineteenth century”. In the same context, the ghost stories of *Assombrações do Recife Velho* and *O Cara de Fogo* register the gradual process of expropriation and mechanization of sugar mills. At the core of this historical event lies a set of economic and non-economic factors in determining the subsequent bankruptcy of wealthy landowners, for example, the interests of abolitionist political groups. The study of Selwyn H. H. Carrington (2003) discusses the economic impact of legislature after the abolition of the slave trade on the sugar industry, and the influence of this process in upward social mobility.

Some accounts of *O Cara de Fogo* can illustrate how the ownership of great rural plantations and imposing urban properties was synonym of socio-economic and political status. Many heirs of big sugar cane mills of the north and the northeast were economically ruined. In “Assombração no Rio Formoso” (“Haunting in Rio Formoso”), Griz tells the story of an abandoned and decrepit mansion, haunted by the irascible ghost of an old and autocrat sugar mill owner, which refuses to abandon his dwelling place. Griz’s accounts also illustrate how the skilled labour of freed slaves was directed towards modern sugarcane mills. However, the living condition of lower classes remained difficult, because their work was still concentrated in the hands of the emergent sugarcane-growers.

Griz (1969, p. 21) showed the economic presence of the rural migrants searching for local integration and work opportunity in neighbouring regions and small towns (GRIZ, 1969, p. 51). In this way peasants and ex-slaves became dependent on the sugar mill owner, employed persons, cultivating a small piece of his lands to subsist. Griz (1969, p. 23) narrates the story of a migrant couple, Custódio and Cohen, who decided to live in an abandoned ranch, a distant place, with the reputation of being haunted. Peter L. Eisenberg (1974, p. 212) asserted that if the relations between employers and workers in some farms of the northeast may have modernized with the system of sharecropping, adopted after the abolition of slavery, it is not clear to what degree this brought benefits to the rural workers in terms of material prosperity. Griz showed how these migrant workers act as storytellers, preserving anonymous accounts, ghost stories and family memories of the past.

The ghost stories observed in *O Cara de Fogo* take place in inhabited spaces, abandoned sites, wild places, dark and desert roads, forests full of outlaws, spectres, cries of alarm, whistles, odd sounds, laughs, sounds of steps, magical animals, and mysterious lights.

This type of haunting does not really belong to urban areas, but appear outside towns and villages Freyre (2000, p. 50).

3 Repositories of cultural memory

In *Assombrações do Recife Velho*, the urban ghosts can be seen in mansions which have lost their former glory; old houses with buried treasures, immured skeletons, voices of persons counting coins and noise of crockery smashing. But there are other ghosts, wandering spirits, which haunt cemeteries; ruins of churches, convents, forts and mansions; ancient buildings, as the Santa Isabel Theater; public spaces where happened tragedies, as the massacre of civilians occurred in Recife, during the rebellion called “A Setembrizada,” in 1831; execution sites and mass graves.

Tim Edensor (2005b) considered architectural spaces capable of producing an experience which is historical, sensorial and imaginative. Edensor (2005a, p. 16) compared photos of industrial ruins, analysing how different “stages and temporalities of decay”, linked to process of restoration, renovation, demolition and dissolution affect the perception of the original form of ruined spaces.

The historian James Davidson (2014) wrote about the several pictorial and photographic representations of the Manor-House of Megaípe, probably the major relic of the Pernambuco colonial period. Freyre included a lithograph representing the old house in the first edition of *Casa Grande e Senzala*. Important writers and scholars, such as José Mariano Filho e Júlio Bello, commented the loss of that cultural patrimony. The poets Manuel Bandeira and Ascenço Ferreira portrayed in verses their thoughts and personal sentiments related to the Manor-House. Megaípe’s photographic register was done by Armando Oliveira, Beroaldo Mello and Ulysses Freyre. The painters Manuel Bandeira (homonymous of the poet) Alfredo Norfini, Fedora do Rego, Mario Nunes and Monteiro Fernandez created artistic reconstitutions of this part of national memory. Davidson also mentioned José Walsh Rodrigues’ documentary film that explored the architectonic project of Megaípe.

Imagem 1 – The old Manor-House of Megaípe (Solar de Megaípe), rural Manor-House of the sugar mill Megaípe (founded before 1623) which was dynamited in 1928. Jaboatão dos Guararapes, Pernambuco, Brasil.



Source: Wikipedia commons.

The destruction of the Manor-House of Megaípe left an irreparable gap in the memory of the Brazilian architectural heritage. In 1928, João Lopes de Siqueira Santos, owner of the lands, dynamited the old house, trying to avoid its official and definitive conservation as cultural property.

Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr (2010) compared the anthropological notion of absence with the physiological phenomenon of “phantom pains”, “an experience of something which is materially absent”.

“In the social realm, too, people experience ‘phantom pains’ in the form of sensing the presence of people, places and things that had been obliterated, lost, missing or missed, or that have not yet materialized” (BILLE; HASTRUP; FLOHR, 2003, p. 3). Edensor (2005a) explained how to explore certain spaces can stimulate the affective memory. Bille, Hastrup and Flohr (2010, p. 3-4) stressed that: “[...] the absent elements are sensuously, emotionally and ideationally present to people, and are articulated or materialized in various ways through narratives, commemorations, enactments of past experiences or visualizations of future scenarios.” In this sense, ghosts and spaces are similar to repositories of knowledge and memories of the past:

The manor-house ghosts are in the habit of making their presence known by apparitions and some noise that are practically the same throughout Brazil. A short while before the manor-house of Megaípe was stupidly demolished by dynamite, I had occasion to collect from the residents of the vicinity ghost stories connected with the old seventeenth-century dwelling. These tales had to do with the clatter of dishes heard in the dining-room; the sound of merry laughter and dance steps from the drawing-room; the rattling of swords; the swish and rustle of feminine silk; lights that were suddenly kindled and extinguished all over the house; moans and the clank of dragging chains; the weeping of a child; and apparitions of the grow-and-shrink variety. Similar ghosts, so I was informed in Rio de Janeiro and in São Paulo, inhabit the ruins of the Manor-Houses in the Paraíba valley. And in Recife I learned from the old inhabitant that every night at midnight, from the chapel of the Manor-House that formerly belonged to Bento José da Costa, a very pretty young woman clad in white, who customarily goes mounted on a donkey, pretending to be Our Lady. This is possibly the daughter of old Bento, fleeing the patriarchal tyranny of a father who had forbidden her to marry Domingos José Martins. For these ghosts commonly embody all the joys, sorrows, and most characteristic actions of the life of the manor-houses. (FREYRE, 1986, p. xxxix-xl).

Folk literature is a prolific realm for the storyteller. It was the elder who told to sons, nephews and grandsons, daily and historical facts of the past, the life story of a person or of a group. It was he who told stories about missing sites, ancient labours, life experiences, people who have died, and the supernatural, beyond the simple meaning of a historical record.

Pessoa de Morais (1969, p. 10) has observed in the prose of Griz a narrative technique employed to reproduce “a psychological and sociological time”, whose vestiges are still engraved in the memory of storytellers and members of the rural community. Freyre also refers to elderly local residents as oral sources of information:

It was work that I accomplished under difficult conditions – eating once a day and living alone and isolated in a house – which still exists – on Encanamento Road, at that time the property of my brother Ulysses, where he and I, as bachelors, had lived for some years. In 1932 he was already a married man. He provided the half-abandoned house to me, and my family agreed that during the day I would be served by the old Manuel Santana, a black born in the time of slavery and for a long time a member, so to speak, of our family; and in a certain way my collaborator, through oral information, in the elaboration of *Casa-Grande e Senzala*. I learned much from this as from other Manuels, who, like him were black, ex-slaves, descendants of slaves, born in senzalas or in the shadow of manor-houses, during slavery period. (FREYRE, 1968 apud ISFAHANI-HAMMOND, 2008, 133).

Freyre and Griz's stories collected from slave descendants and rural migrants impart social factors associated with the construction of collective memory. Such storytellers have an important role in forging the cultural identity, experiences, memories, stories and traditions of a community. *Assombrações do Recife Velho* and *O Cara de Fogo* preserve a collection of personal accounts and popular stories told by descendants of enslaved people, migrants or local residents who witnessed the variations in the surrounding landscape of rural possessions of enslavers. To a certain extent, Freyre and Griz's works complement each other, highlighting the mechanisms of migrants' local integrations, as well as specific aspects of Recife's urbanisation.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the ghost stories presented in *Assombrações do Recife Velho* and *O Cara de Fogo* as one type of historical source. It has to be emphasised that not all surviving accounts considered as primary sources by the authors are historically valid. Popular culture is a dynamic and plural system, that interacts with the human being's subjectivity and with history. When an account prevails in oral culture, transmitted for some time in a group or society, its history is not composed by the records and experiences of one person only. Narratives which migrate from one region to another assimilate new motifs and themes, according to the local culture.

In this situation, consciously or unconsciously, imagination can be a possible alternative for the reconfiguration of a personal or collective traumatic experience. The oral narratives reproduced artistically the author's memory, cultural repertory and even emotion on a certain subject. Pedro Nava (1974, p. 41) compared the voluntary memory with an incomplete "puzzle" used to reconstitute the scenario of historical events and figures. The demolition of a house can reveal pieces of this puzzle:

In various instances, in Bahia, Olinda, and Pernambuco, in the course of the work of demolition or excavation, kegs of money have been found beneath the houses. This happened in the case of the Pires d'Avila, or Pires de Carvalho, manor in Bahia, where in a corner of the wall was found "a veritable fortune in gold coins". In other cases all that has been dug up is the bones of slaves, executed by their masters and buried in the garden or inside the house without the authorities knowing anything about it. (FREYRE, 1986, p. xxxviii-xxxix).

Some excerpts of Freyre and Griz's writings quoted in this study certainly present distinct autobiographical elements, integrated to the objective description of historical facts. The record of significant events and memories in Freyre and Griz's narratives is a distinctive feature of memoirs, a genre with literary and historiographical components. In the rural environment where Freyre (1996, p. 30) and Griz (MORAIS, 1969, p. 12) grew up, living together with ex-slaves and descendants of slaves, they could listen and learn from their folk tales, ghost stories, memories and narratives of slavery. Such repertory, enriched by a series of experiences and literary readings, depict historical events with diverse authorial perspectives. In "A velha branca e o bode vermelho" (The white old lady and the red goat), Freyre (2000, p. 107-112) narrated autobiographical episodes of his childhood, intermingled with recollections of gossip stories ("o zunzum da vizinhança") and elements of the wonder tale ("história da carochinha"). Then the numerous events, figures, life experiences and haunted places referred to by the authors, are not perceived from a unique viewpoint. In some cases, collective memories regarding historical sites interpret the social representation of a particular scenario, making it part of a cultural message:

Corresponding to the decline of the wealthy individual's political power with its seat in a Manor-House of the most aristocratic, most prestigious, or most markedly patriarchal character, was the increasing public political power lodged in judicial, police, military, or simply bureaucratic agencies of the monarchic government and, later, of the republican. Not infrequently these agencies were installed in former patriarchal residences as in the ruins of forts captured from a powerful enemy; even in their conquered state these made-over ruins were conspicuous for the survival or the look of their former power. (...) The patriarchal Manor-House imposed itself in those (...) expressive cases, to the conquering heroes of the '89s by the solidity of its architecture nobility. (FREYRE, 1986, p. lxxx-lxxxi).

Ghost stories and haunted places make present traces of historical narratives and confer temporality "for the survival" of remembrance of absent people, life experiences, acts of reparation and irreparable losses.

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