

## Gilberto Freyre and the Poetic Optics of His Lusotropicalist Imagination

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**Abstract:** *Even though Gilberto Freyre is a renowned scholar of miscegenation theory, not much is known about his poetry. His collection Poesia Reunida (1980) (Collected Poetry), provides a rare glimpse of the sociologist as he addresses themes of women, family, slavery, and nostalgia. Embodying Lusotropicalism, Poesia Reunida embraces multiracial ideology while maintaining a laissez-faire attitude toward the colonized Amerindian and enslaved African populations. Freyre deploys an imagistic vision to describe his memories of landscapes and to characterize Brazilian identity. Drawing on T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and Manuel Bandeira, this study offers a portrait of the sociologist as a poet of substance and describes how he struggles to transcend the limits of his miscegenation theories.*

## Apprehensions on Cultural Hybridity

While Freyre is better known as a sociologist, anthropologist, and historian, other illustrious contemporary writers, like Guimarães Rosa, Manuel Bandeira, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, described as an “extraordinary writer” and recognized him for the “poetic qualities of his prose” (Burke and Pallares-Burke, 2008, p. 203), placing him within the circle of the greatest Brazilian writers. Through the power of his lyricism and imagism, Freyre demonstrates the quality of making legendary that which seems familiar and mundane in the sociological imagination. Issues such as family, childhood, sexuality, and polarities, as well as environmental sounds, smells, colors, and general cultural social history, are laid bare through metaphoric imagery. Burke and Pallares-Burke note Freyre’s penchant for interdisciplinarity by virtue of his professional interstices between art and science:

It was relatively easy for him to work in an interdisciplinary manner because he did not need to limit himself to a single discipline for professional reasons. He had wide interests that discouraged specialization. It was also easier for him than others to be post-modern because he was in a sense pre-modern, a defender of tradition (2008, p. 207).

Yet, despite publishing several volumes of poetry, now collected under *Poesia Reunida*, Freyre's magisterial interpretative work on Brazilian culture, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) (*The Masters and the Slaves*) has primarily attracted scholars. While Freyre's contributions to Brazilian history, culture, and social theory are immeasurable and straddle many disciplines, it is his ability to embody cultural criticism, shifting from theorizing miscegenation and cultural hybridity, especially as they relate to the contributions of Africans to Brazil, to autobiographical pieces, that betrays his innermost passions and persistent idiosyncrasies. Not only was he an avid reader of other cultures and histories, but he was adept in "tropicalizing" Euro-American cultures to theorize what he considers to be the greatness of Brazil.

Often considering himself anti-sociological and anti-logical, Freyre recognizes the fundamental contradictions in his creative world as a poet in search of his own artistic identity, despite the influences of poets such as Luís Camões, Manuel Bandeira, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Vachel Lindsay, Lêdo Ivo, Tiago de Melo, Mauro Mota, and Ronald de Carvalho. Freyre asserts that the Brazil he portrayed in his poetry was, for the most part, "artificial in its political organization, which explains his own penchant for being more poetic than logical—but in spite of it all, still sociological in authenticity" (1961, p. 5). He repeatedly references how he was influenced primarily

by American imagists and describes his special fondness for what he calls “sentimental transience” (1961, p. 5). Freyre was well-read and was a distinguished man of letters, both while living in Brazil as well as in exile. As a literary and cultural critic, he not only supported local interpreters of regional life, such as José Lins do Rego, Jorge Amado, Raquel Queiroz, and Ariano Suassuna, but he co-founded the *Centro Regional do Nordeste* (1924) and organized the *Congresso Regionalista* (1926) and the first congress of Afro-Brazilian Studies (1934). Among the eminent participants in this historic congress were Mário de Andrade, Jorge Amado, Luis Cascudo, Melville Herskovits, and Edison Carneiro.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom enshrines cogent ideas about poetic influence as a self-consciousness of the predetermined nature of knowledge, despite efforts by newer poets to negate the precursors to his or her creative invention. Bloom argues that all poets are, by design, “under the shadow of the Covering Cherub” (1973, p. 155).<sup>1</sup> In other words, no poet can possibly escape the perpetual connection with the past. In surpassing the limitations of Freudianism to childhood traumas alone, Bloom takes the poetic world to a different level by insisting that the new poet’s quest for originality, immortality, and divinity is nothing but an illusion. No poet can create

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<sup>1</sup> For the application of this theory on such writers as Shakespeare, Whitman, Crane, Emerson, Tennyson, Browning, and Yeats, see also Bloom (2001), which approximates influence with sublime strangeness.

in a vacuum without some past influence: “The precursors flood us, and our imagination can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded” (1973, p. 154). Freyre is not without past influences, whether poetic, humanistic, or scientific. Taking his first intellectual cue from the American anthropologist Franz Boas (with whom he studied), Freyre was able to combine many disciplines, such as race, geography, sexuality, economics, politics, sociology, history, religion, and literature, into the cohesive and powerful treatise *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933). Just as his scholarship, particularly anthropology, has been tremendously influenced by that of the US, so too has his poetry.

While Euro-American imagism and Brazilian modernism affected his poetic production, Freyre was not easily structured into a facile specialization.<sup>2</sup> He embodied multiple agencies in the effort to expand his horizons as well as contribute to the intellectual debates of his time through social action. His signature work, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, while primarily a mix of anthropological and sociological study, was also endowed with Brazilian social and cultural history. Though highly celebrated as a seminal work that reinvented the stature of Brazil within the frameworks of new historicism, the social theory of miscegenation was criticized for its hypocrisy. Given its

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of imagism and theories associated with it, see, for example, John Gage (1981, pp. 1–31), and John Gery, Daniel Kempton, and H. R. Stoneback’s (2013, pp. 1–21).

painstaking effort to prove the fraternal relations of all Brazilian races, *Casa Grande e Senzala* became Freyre's signature statement on racial democracy in Brazil. However, the reality is that there is still no racial equality in Brazil. Freyre's argument about the "affectionate Big House" is often challenged: "His key idea of hybridity is increasingly criticized in Latin America (...) " (Burke and Pallares-Burke, 2008, p. 210).

Despite its intention to praise race-mixing as a quality of social mobility for all Brazilians, the theoretical thrust of *Casa Grande e Senzala* is flawed by minimizing the oppression of Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian populations, who were victims of colonial oppression, brutality, and exploitation. Burke and Pallares-Burke persuasively claim: "Miscegenation, together with other forms of mixing, is the link between the idea of racial democracy and that of Luso-Tropicalism, the greater propensity of the Portuguese to interbreed with native women, their capacity to fraternize with the so-called inferior races or more broadly still, of their social plasticity" (2008, p. 186). Yet, a close reading of Freyre's sociological masterpiece reveals that it is filled with poetic passages, such as the one embodying a palpable sentimentality and cultural nostalgia for the plantation: "It was the Negro's hearty laugh that broke in upon the 'dull, abject mournfulness' that tended to stifle the life of the Big Houses. He it was who cheered the plantation hands, who inspired the *bumbas-meu-boi* [a folkloric performance in which

lower class mocks the higher class], the *cavalos-marinhos* [sea horses], the carnivals, the festivals” (1986, p. 472). Though such moments are less frequent than the more culturally anthropological and scientific, they do provide some passing instances of comic relief and humanization, even in the middle of descriptions of the most dehumanizing circumstances of the plantation economy.

In an interview with Renato Campos, Freyre describes his literary ideas and influences, especially imagism, and gives insight into his perspective on aesthetics and humanism (Freyre, 1974, pp. 71–80). To a question on the potential demise of the written word, Freyre responds by privileging the forms of oral tradition as proposed by critics of his era, not only reassuring readers about the indestructible and persistent link between literary values and their corresponding graphic representations, but also affirming the sustainable influence of regionalism, traditionalism, and modernism in his major works: “This modernism, by the way, was brought directly from the United States, Paris, Oxford, and Munich (think of ‘New Poetry,’ ‘New Criticism,’ ‘New History,’ Imagism, Expressionism, Post-Cubism) by those who launched the movement in Recife” (1974, p. 71). In his own introduction to an edited volume on *Imagist Poetry* (1972), Peter Jones, invoking Ezra Pound’s poem “Oread” as an example, notes the poverty of imagination, excessive restraint, lack of symbolism or abstractions, and the

seeming rift between evocation and representation. While upholding the view that imagism refers to all poetry written in irregular verse in which the image literally means pictorial impression, Jones argues that, instead of the mood determining the form, poets let the form determine the mood: “Imagist poetry fills us with hope; even when it is not very good in itself, it seems to promise a form in which very good poetry could be written” (1972, p. 35). The imagistic imagination ultimately constitutes the theoretical and contextual framework from which to appreciate the central thrusts of Freyre’s poetic corpus and its iconic ambiguity in *Poesia Reunida*.

### ***Poesia Reunida*: Lasting Legacy of a Signature Poetic Corpus**

Whether he personally acknowledged it or not, and whether the praise of his poetry by his contemporary inner circle writers was compelling to him or not, Freyre was a poet of substance in spite of himself. While the title of Freyre’s first collection of poetry, *Talvez Poesia* [Perhaps Poetry], hints at humility or self-doubt by questioning the poeticity of his creative production, his poetic corpus is endowed with all the elements of creative force and emotional intelligence. From the invocation of northeastern cities, such as Salvador, Recife, and Olinda; the celebration of women in his family and professional life, especially his wife Magdalena (Madá); the interpenetration of Africa



with colonial Brazil and the legacy of slavery in forging Brazilian culture; the nostalgia<sup>1</sup> of the colonizer for visited landscapes, such as Algarve and Aveiro, or the memory of Portuguese discoveries; the invocation of childhood memories as a labor of sentimentality, to his Lusotropical adventures across the world, *Poesia Reunida* coalesces around the persistence of sensibility to national consciousness, even as predicated on the legacy of the plantation economy. As a result, a compelling social theory emerges in Freyre's sociological study as well as in his poetic collection.

Freyre's singular volume could have used the help of an expert editor to organize it thematically or structurally to assist the reader in better appreciating its chronology and thematics or, at least, to provide some sense of structure for the different contexts of this work by one of the most complex thinkers of the twentieth century. Advanced praises by his close associates, such as Manuel Bandeira, Antônio Carlos Vilaça, and Ledo Ivo, ultimately provide the most riveting comments and shed light on the rigor and complexity of Freyre as a Brazilian intellectual. In his characteristic irreverent and humorous style, Bandeira references Freyre's sheer bluntness in some of his poems, painting the image of nude or sweaty women in Bahia: "Your poem, Gilberto, will be my eternally betrayed lover's pain. I cannot be satisfied with those intricately crafted lines that I so much enjoyed, that were so shamelessly

lyrical; penetrating the entire bodily curves of the city *mulata*. What a curious feat! Damn it!" (qtd. in Freyre, 1980, p. 2).<sup>3</sup> If Bandeira calls attention to Freyre's gift of detail in his grotesque and misogynic portrayal of women, Vilaça alludes to his meditative acumen: "The little poem, 'In Heidelberg: thinking of death,' what a masterpiece!" (qtd. in Freyre, 1980, p. 2). But it is in Lêdo Ivo's cogent perspective that places Freyre among the very best modernist poets of all times:

The poem "Bahia of All the Saints and of Almost All the Sins" places Gilberto Freyre as one of our classics in Brazilian Modernism. As Roger Bastide mentions, whosoever wants to understand Brazil must inevitably transform himself/herself into a poet. But Gilberto Freyre, a *born and made poet*, according to the wisdom of his friend, Amy Lowell, did not falter at this metamorphosis. He has always been a poet, and that is why he understood Brazil from its very foundations (qtd. in Freyre, 1980, p. 2; Ledo Ivo's emphasis).

These marketing blurbs are not only succinct and precise, but they also offer rare insights into the cryptic world of an artist better known as a sociologist than a poet. The result is an instigating introduction to a rather fragmented collection. To give some cohesion to the poetic selection, I group the main issues, as I have hinted above, by examining the persistence of dislocation and travel in Freyre; his keen eye for the

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<sup>3</sup> This collection contains 80 poems in total. It also echoes a wide range of nostalgic reminiscences regarding Gilberto Freyre's ideological and formative past as well as cultural influences.

enchantments of the city; his love and appreciation for women in and outside of his family life; his ambivalent position on the virtue of the colonizer; and the persistence of nostalgia that impacted his adult life in exile, a reality that also caused him to reminisce on the place of his childhood in his poetry and overall ideological vision about personal and cultural memories.

### **Dislocated Soul, Exiled Self**

Freyre is never unidimensional and no study on him can be either. As the fluid intellectual seeks a balance between social sciences and humanistic traditions, his characteristic traits as a social investigator blend with those of a man of letters. No one captures this duality better than Alfred Knopf, in his foreward to *The Gilberto Freyre*

*Reader:*

It [Freyre's writings] has all the craft, documentation, and 'jargon' that go by the name science in the social sciences. But in addition, it has something of the Bergsonian intuition of the poet's insight and the artistic vision ... It reminds one of Proust at his best, but it is more robust, more vivid and all-embracing." (1974, p. xvi).

As one dissects the power of his poetry to take us to the uncharted terrains that influenced the poet and scholar, one is constantly reminded that poetry, like music, is the language of the soul. As we follow Freyre's dislocation from his maternal Recife in

Pernambuco to his experiences as a student, scholar, and exile in Western Europe and the United States, poetry becomes that creative outlet through which the pain and pleasures of displacement from one's natal home to the outside world are captured, whether in the sheer quest for peace and tranquility or even in the troubling quest for stability and meaning amidst the contradictory currents of life. While these journeys were transformative and progressive, they were not without their moments of disequilibrium. Poetry provides that imaginative escape from the tensions and stressors of life.

In Freyre's self-searching autobiography *Como e Porque Sou e Não Sou Sociólogo* (1968) [How and Why I Am and Am Not a Sociologist], he lays out the fundamentals of his soul and his humanism—which consists of an innate empathy for others, even as he seeks to understand them to also understand himself. To understand human nature and behavior, Freyre had to “feel as if he were specifically Indian, Moor, Jew, African American, African; and more than that: woman, child, slave, oppressed, exploited, abused, in both ethos and status, by patriarch and masters” (1974, p. 63). This constant search for the self is better articulated in an interview with Renato Campos, in which the author confesses his penchant for paradox in his creative endeavors: “My own literary style is a mixture of the popular (including the use of popular phraseology) and

the aristocratic (including values assimilated from classic and modern authors who are noteworthy for their unpopular virtues). In sum, paradox” (1974, p. 74). Although his concept of “racial democracy” has been consistently challenged by contemporary critics, Freyre remained a fervent believer in his Luso-Tropical complex as a science. For him, Brazil has all the racial peculiarities that qualify her as a proud pioneer. In fact, he sees the colonial plantation ideology as so cogent that he insists the miscegenation process is a justifiable “case of political responsibility conditioned by an anthropoecological philosophy” (1974, p. 78). The author of *Casa Grande e Senzala* was unapologetic about his claim of Brazilian racial harmony despite racial violence during and after slavery.

Access to Freyre’s poetic collection, which constitutes the referential focus [of this paper](#), is rare, whether in Portuguese or in translation for the consumption of Euro-American audiences. Fortunately, *The Gilberto Freyre Reader* includes three poems that have been translated by Barbara Shelby, namely, “In Heidelberg: Thinking of Death” (1956), “In Salamanca: Death and Hope” (1956), and “Plantation Boy” (1925). Even as a sample selection, these poems combine the seriousness of mortality with Freyre’s transient meditations on his childhood memories, including a passionate encounter of with “a naked black slave girl.” While Freyre started writing poetry as early as his teens, the maturity of a poem like “Plantation Boy” is remarkable, as the poetic voice

compares the rural young mind to the city dweller, preferring the rural all the same. Not only are his enumerations of his adventures detailed, such as playing with “little black comrades”, his servants, that “cut him a fine juicy joint to suck” (referring to sugar cane), but also conscious, apparent in the poetic voice’s description of his love escapades with black slave girls: “And then one day came a naked black slave girl / To launch the plantation boy / On his first adventure in love” (1974, pp. 193–94). When the foregoing scenario is viewed as a poetic rendition of the classic Brazilian miscegenation that Freyre preaches wholeheartedly, one cannot but wonder why Freyre celebrates a violent and unequitable act of rape as an “act of love.” The context is exploitative, pure and simple. It is not about genuine and consensual love but a master-slave routine sexual “relationship,” in which the white poetic voice has the upper and privileged hand to possess the black body as a despicable “adventure in love.” In the other two poems, written much later, Freyre betrays himself as a fragile heart when it comes to death. The conversation with death, in both cases, reveal Freyre’s adventures in Europe in his midlife, including in Heidelberg and Salamanca. They also capture a tormented soul begging for death to come “sweetly, gently, peacefully” (1974, p. 191), to seek him out as if he were already sentenced to death. Indeed, he is tormented by the gradual approximation of death, which is not suggestive of vindication for the victims of slavery

and sexual exploitation but rather a natural process of ageing on which the author was reflecting. Freyre thus celebrates an act that should ordinarily be condemned and not praised by all conventional standards of critical analysis.

The tripartite sampling of Freyre's poetic *oeuvre* as translated by Shelby represents the mix of the imagistic and expressionistic as Freyre provides a rare contextual window into the cultural fabric of Brazilian identity. Not only do his poems lay bare the diverse landscapes the sociologist-poet traversed across the globe in the process of his professional development and personal curiosities, but they also paint a profound portraiture of Freyre well beyond what his scholarly works can reveal about what he termed "Brazilian patriarchal society." Whether the poetic voice is enjoying the adventures of travel or the combined pleasure and pain of exile in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, what matters is the penchant for the documentary that englobes the artist. To be able to visit the world is to be financially stable and privileged. His visits to Oxford, Rome, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, Évora, and Algarve, among other locations, even when seen as work-related, come as professional expenses that are only reserved for privileged researchers. As Freyre returns to places he has seen before, they bring memories of the past as well as a sense of rejuvenation in the present. The image of Paris ("Paris") is quite nostalgic, despite an inadvertent incident from the poetic voice's

past life: “Thirty years ago it was / When I lost some blood in a hotel / Even then nostalgic I am still / Of this poor character and his Paris.”<sup>4</sup> Freyre’s cosmopolitan consciousness, despite his country rootedness, aligns him more with the colonizer than the colonized. Though writing in the post-independence era, Freyre privileges a celebration of the colonial virtues of domination and exploitation over the plights of the colonized.

Besides his travels across Europe, the master of multiracial identity also sought to visit Goa and Macau, Portuguese colonies in Asia. Freyre’s miscegenation theory cuts across the entire Lusotropical world, including South America and Africa. By undermining the stake of these colonized others when it comes to their political and economic independence, the Portuguese Empire ensures that they remain perpetual subjects of colonial power. Two poems in *Poesia Reunida*, “Goa” and “In Bombay,” evoke the plight of the colonized in the Asiatic realm. In “Goa,” the former territory retains its old majesty amidst postcolonial ruins, and the numerous churches evoke Lusotropical landscapes while the island struggles with anticolonialism and anticlericalism in search of a new identity. But it is in the poem “In Bombay” that the poetic voice proclaims Indians’ perpetual innocence, as different cultural and religious

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<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Freyre, *Poesia Reunida* (Recife: Edições Pirata, 1980), 54.



identities contest for affirmation: “I see for the first time Indians in India proper ... / I see Hindus, Persians, Moslems, Christians / Men eternally child-like / Gurus torn apart among youngsters” (1980, p. 82). Freyre’s penchant for copious enumerations betrays his attention to detail as a social scientist, even if they are elaborated with the sensibility of the poet.

### **Enchanting Mysteries of Brazilian Cities**

Three Brazilian cities—Salvador, Recife, and Olinda—are at the heart of Freyre’s poetry, especially in the way he invokes their churches, festivals, monasteries, women, and historical value systems. But it is in Freyre’s characterization of Brazil from the viewpoint of the landscape of Olinda that one sees a comparative view of strategic states, such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais:

“The Brazilian landscape one sees from the heights of Olinda is a far cry from the grandiose panorama of Rio de Janeiro, Santos, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and the immense landscapes of the Amazon ... From the heights of Olinda a sweeping gaze can encompass the four hundred years of history that have gone into making Brazil what it is today” (1974, pp. 29–30).

This synthesis suggests that Olinda is as pastoral as it is modern when compared to bigger states, yet it retains the elements of tradition and pride particular to its historical

foundations. Brazilian cultural history is incomplete without recognizing the reality of the Northeast, as its plantation economy gradually morphed into tradition and modernity following the abolition of slavery. While these cities are historic, they also retain a certain regionalism that sets them apart from other parts of Brazil given their Northeastern location, where the legacies of slavery, drought, rebellion, religiosity, and festivals form a lasting ecological framework of resistance against domination. At the same time, relics of the cultural landscape manifest in visible social religious mementos that are embodied in religious architectures and rekindle memories of the past. One of Freyre's signature poems, in fact his most anthologized, "Bahia of All the Saints and Almost of All the Sins," exemplifies the best of the sociologist of miscegenation's poetic world.

Although Brazilian regionalism of the 1930s came after the modernist movement of the 1920s, which Freyre may well have contributed to with his *Manifesto Regionalista* (1928), the poet transcends the local to become a representative of the national when it comes to modernism. In "Bahia of All the Saints and Almost of All the Sins" (henceforth referenced as "Bahia"), he privileges the city as a trope of speed, chaos, disorder, and cultural regeneration. Recreating and documenting images, landscapes, and cultural archives, Freyre deploys his keen eye for details through chaotic enumeration to render

Bahia not as the “Bahia of All the Saints” as Jorge Amado conceived, but by adding his sense of paradox with “...and Almost of All Sins.”<sup>5</sup> Amado’s legendary work captures what inspired Freyre, especially in Amado’s description of Bahia as a vital force of Brazilian popular culture:

The life force of Afro-Brazilians was stronger than the horsewhip and holy water with which they were able to keep alive an original and a miscegenated culture that is original and unique to Brazil. This unique culture emanates from two other cultures despite the incredible conditions of slavery” (1977, p. 34).

Freyre conjures a lasting celebration of Bahia by invoking the different elements that make the city what it is: women, churches, food, religiosity, music, festivals, and sex. As the longest poem by Freyre, it captures the poet at his best as one who is influenced by the lyrical freedom of Brazilian modernists and American imagists alike.

The urban setting of Bahia that Freyre invokes takes the form of a state divided between the horrific legacy of slavery and the modern vitality of cultural regeneration, even amidst the deprivation, poverty, and social inequalities. The racial experience in the Americas is violent and despicable, to say the least. Yet, rather than offering an indictment of slavery, Freyre celebrates modern racial hybridization. Though the long

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed understanding of the cultural and social history that inspired Gilberto Freyre in this poem and its title, see Jorge Amado (1977).

poem seemingly has no stanzas, the free style verse gives a sense of structural pattern, especially in Freyre's use of a period after his chaotic enumeration of images, transforming the long poem into six poetic movements. Beyond his acute admiration for Bahia, as betrayed by his detailed description of its striking characteristics, Freyre holds the city in certain reverence, combining praise with criticism, even indirect. In the first movement, the poetic voice invokes Brazilian *favela*-type homes that are hurriedly built one on top of the other, churches that are not quite as big as those of Pernambuco, and the sense that Bahia could be the Mother-Queen of Brazil, giving birth to other Brazilian cities. What is striking in this first movement is the poet's conclusion that this entire image is nothing but "vanity upon vanity" (1980, p. 9), perhaps alluding to the overwhelming poverty and social destitution.<sup>6</sup>

If, for Thomas Mann, "the identity of place resists the flux of time" (qtd. in Bastos, 2012, p. 135), so too it is for Freyre as he captures the exact conundrum faced by Bahia as a state with colonial history. Nevertheless, as Alan Dawson notes (2014), Africa continues to be "invented and reinvented in the Brazilian context" (2014, p. 17).<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> This is a biblical reference to Ecclesiastes. The void that leads to this conclusion about "vanity" implies the speaker's frustration that Bahia is like a wishful postcard and all the elements of the city struggle to fit into it the photo opportunity that tourism engenders but which does not truly capture the reality of squalor on the ground. For a closer study of the images of the city in Bahia, see Délio José Ferraz Pinheiro and Maria Auxiliadora da Silva (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See also Scott Ickes (2013, pp. 40–70).

city of Salvador, for example, has all the elements of an African city by virtue of the many elements it retained since the advent of slavery. Despite this African influence, the city is not immune to hybridization, such as the influence of globalized blackness in Bahia, including Jamaican music (reggae) and the symbolic Rastafari way of life. The rhythmic melody of the rest of the movements in Freyre's "Bahia" speaks to the poet's persistent enigmatic awe in the face of the overwhelming and enchanting mysteries of the city of Salvador—otherwise metonymized as "Bahia." In the second movement, for example, in the middle of an homage to Bahian food, incense, *mulatas* (mixed-raced women), and cuisine, the poetic voice laments "the emergence of Holy Sacrament / ... / medications against syphilis" (1980, p. 9), a paradox that cannot be lost to a perceptive mind. In other words, in the same instance of pleasure comes pain and disease, which only Bahia understands. The suggestion that Bahia is a city infected by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) may be a reference to the global tourist industry and its relationship with prostitution,<sup>8</sup> a very perceptive social critique on the part of Freyre.

Freyre systematically takes a surgical aim at the many aspects that constitute the fabric of Bahia by subjecting them to a hyperbolic purview to further challenge a society

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relationship between race and diseases, see for example, Luiz Antonio Teixeira (1997). Freyre may well be placing more emphasis on the safety of foreign tourists than over the well-being of locals here; by invoking the image of prostitution as a "flood," he is at once suggesting that the commercialization of the female body is a double dilemma for the tourism industry. The locals need the foreigners for commercial purposes; the same way the foreigners need the locals for their problematic yet commercialized pleasure. It is indeed a much bigger debate that perhaps does not have the space to be dissected here.

he sees as unique and miscegenated. In the third movement, the poetic voice ridicules the overwhelming religious inscriptions all over the city, where such captions read: “Blessed be our Lord Jesus Christ / (Forever! Amen!).” Meanwhile, he alerts the reader to the paradox of piety and sin in this “(embodied land of the 1500s) / people of Bahia” by pointing out the availability of drive-throughs charging thirty cruzeiros per hour for sex. But it is impossible to escape the centrality of multiracialism, which Freyre emphasizes is the defining character of Bahia: “Bahia of warm colors, black flesh, spicy dishes / I detest your orators, Bahia of All Saints / Your Ruy Barbosas, your Otavio Mangabeiras / But I love your black women, your *mulatas*, your food” (1980, p. 10).<sup>9</sup> Despite the air of religiosity and profanity, the poet deploys mimicry to invoke the presentness of slavery in the city, as if the relics of social oppression persisted in the exploitation of women. Even when veiled amidst festive celebrations, the voluptuousness of Bahian women is inescapable, regardless of the occasion for which they are dressed. Overall, there is an offensive sense in which women are generally

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<sup>9</sup> Otávio Mangabeira graduated from the Polytechnic School in Bahia, where he later became a Professor of Astronomy. In 1908, he was elected Vereador (Councilor of Bahia), thus beginning a long political career that earned him two exiles. In 1912, he was elected Federal Deputy and, in 1926, in the Luis Washington government, the Foreign Minister.

Ruy Barbosa de Oliveira (1849–1923) was a Brazilian diplomat, writer, jurist, and politician. He was a federal representative, senator, Minister of Finance, and diplomat. For his distinguished participation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hague Conference, defending the principle of equality among nations, he earned the nickname “Eagle of the Hague.” Part of Barbosa’s legacy in Brazilian history is that he authorized, as Minister of Finance, on December 14, 1890, the destruction of most government records relating to slavery.

objectified by being equated with or even constantly and suggestively reduced to sexual food for consumption.

Freyre's socio-cultural perspective shifts quickly from one image to the next. In the fifth movement, the poetic voice takes the on role of a repressed Reverend Father who is dialoguing with Bahia on its blend of religiosity and cultural profanity. He notices the heavily breasted Bahian women, imagining how they are destined to breastfeed the totality of Brazilian children: "Old black women of Bahia / Selling *mingau angu acarajé* / ... Sagging breasts / Mothers of all the most beautiful *mulatas* of Brazils / ... / *Mulatas* with almost angelic hands / ... / raising great masters almost similar to the Imperial times" (1980, p. 11). Here, beyond the reference to slavery and black women producing "small masters" or mixed races, Freyre seems ambivalently critical of the exploitation of the Bahian *mulata*, as though she is only good for sexual gratification and procreation.<sup>10</sup> Her body is objectified; she does not belong to herself but to those who exploit her in exchange for ephemeral material gains. The violence of sexual acts is further captured in the interpenetration of sanctity with sodomy. Perpetual sinning is evoked by the vibrant rocking of the bed during sex, even as the sweat of orgasm is let loose in the ironic hell of self-indulgent fornication in "Bahia of All Saints". To articulate

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between sex, races, and exploitation, see Peter Wade (2009).

complete satisfaction from the poet's creative visit to "Bahia / Salvador / Saint Savior / All the Saints" (1980, p. 12), the poetic voice reassures the reader that he will surely return with open arms to the city of Bahia, with all its promiscuity and other promising enchantments.

When contrasted to Bahia, the twin cities of Recife and Olinda evoke similar decadence but perhaps more modesty. In these cities, religiosity seems more central, as suggested by Freyre's description in "Bahia" of the lean churches of Salvador compared to those of Pernambuco. In "Old Windows of Recife and Olinda," the reader sees the cities through the old windows of the "Igreja do Livramento" and "Convento do Carmo". Both are illuminated at night, allowing the poetic voice to see the destitution of the São José, where the dwellers hang their clothes to dry on a string in full public view. In Olinda, the poet cannot ignore the view of Amparo Street, which reminds him of a romantic game of chess, as the female figure on the window signals an invitation of love to an invisible lover, as if both were recreating the classic passionate love of Romeo and Juliet: "On the balcony seems to appear someone / A sweet female person beckoning / To the cautious lover in black robe / For an encounter in the woods / Just like the times of Romeo and Juliet" (1980, p. 13). The rest of the poem empathizes with the plight of the women of these rich barons, who are ironically sexually repressed and must seek



sexual satisfaction elsewhere, even if only through fantasy. Through these most minute details and scientific observations of sociological inquiry, Freyre, as a young poet, prepares for his later sociological masterpieces, which combine his passion for scientific inquiry with the consciousness and sensibility of a poet.

### **Desiring Carnality and Seemingly Defending the Sexualized Woman**

Regardless of how one reads Freyre, the fact that his central work *Casa Grande e Senzala* evokes the formation of the Brazilian family suggests that he could not escape discussions of sexualized women, controlling men, as well as self-gratification in sex. In his own critique of the double standards of a patriarchal-agrarian society, Freyre argues that, on the one hand, women are exploited by men, who are permitted to enjoy the freedom of pleasures that carnal love engenders as justifiable under the pretext of social procreation. On the other hand, the same society limits a woman's opportunities "to domestic duties and activities, to contacts with her children, relatives, nurses, old women, and slaves" (1974, p. 162). Though the wholesale violation of women in Freyre's seminal work is dismissed or even justified as necessary for the miscegenated transformation of Brazil, the fact that Freyre recognizes this inequality among the sexes indicates a theoretical defense of women, even though he could not help himself, which

under the weight of patriarchal society was too burdensome to openly critique. Several poems in *Poesia Reunida* involve women, such as “Magdá ou Madá,” “Minha Nova Madá” [My New Madá], “Se Eu Perdesse Madá” [If I Should Lose Madá], “Pensando em Madá” [Thinking of Madá], “A Menina e a Casa” [The Little Girl and the House], “Maria,” “Ana Cecília,” and “Paisagem Sexual” [Sexual Landscape] among others. In some, Freyre exudes the affective posture that women on plantations are conditioned to have sexual intercourse by the sexual urges of their men and not by their own free will. He writes, “Thus the plantation or ranch mistress, and even the lady of the town house in Brazil, became an artificial, morbid being. A sickly person, deformed by her role of servant to her men and doll of flesh and blood to her husband” (1974, p. 162).

Freyre’s sensibility here is remarkable when compared to the carefree description of exploitative sexual acts in *Casa Grande e Senzala*. While Freyre describes carnality during enslavement, he also exudes compassion for the women in his own life. One wonders whether this contradiction may not be a matter of professional convenience, as though the eye of the anthropologist were bound to be less sentimental than that of the family man. Of the foregoing poems about women, the most significant are those dedicated to Magdalena, supposedly Freyre’s wife. In these poems, we see the immense passion the poet-author has for his wife and the feeling of total loss whenever he is

away from her. Above all, we sense a note of the macabre when he imagines losing her, as in the poem, “If I Should Lose Madá”: “life would become nothing but a cold lifeless end / ... / almost a sepulcher / the days become nights / the nights become darkness / the desires become like ashes / all the flowers without aroma / all the stars without shine / if I should lose Madá” (1980, p. 104). If his wife is treated with such sensitivity and sensibility, one sees a correlation to Freyre’s work as a sociologist when he probes the contributions of Amerindian women to the formation of Brazil as opposed to her dehumanization as a sexual object:

The milieu in which Brazilian life began was one of sexual intoxication. The women were the first to offer themselves to the whites. This was a wholly physical love, a taste of the flesh. The native woman must be regarded not merely as the physical basis of the Brazilian family. She must also be considered a worthwhile cultural element. She gave us the hammock. The Brazilian of today, a lover of the bath is reflecting the influence of his remote grandmothers (1974, 92).

In the forgoing a more balanced portraiture of the Amerindian woman, sexual exploitation, while not excused, is reread as part and parcel of a cultural miscegenation process in which different elements come together to create the unique Brazilian family.<sup>11</sup> What Freyre fails to address, however, is the violent nature of that imposed

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the sexualization of the woman in the context of “New History,” see, for example, Peter Burke (1999, pp. 439–43).

and unequal “family” formation. Though more of a romanticization of the real situation, Freyre’s description portrays the poet-sociologist as a humanist, at best, in spite of himself.

### **Genealogy of the Plantation Plight**

One wonders whether Freyre’s entire scholarly and poetic corpus praises the colonial oppressor. As Freyre points out, the plight of the slave is only improved by the labor of animals and machines:

Man’s identification with the animals is most closely linked to his own status or to his endeavor to transcend it. To be sure, slave or forced labor was little lightened among us by the increased use of these animals on plantation, ranches, for the transportation of persons and freight, the feeding of children and the nourishment of the sick (1974, pp. 105–6).

The colonial exploitation of the body of the slave, whether sexually or commercially, originates from the racial relations that deemed one master and the other slave. The plantation was a clear experiment in social and racial hierarchy, as the master gave the orders; the middle person communicated and enforced such commands, while the slave received the message and executed the desired action under unspeakable violent duress.

Because sexual or “cultural interpenetration” must happen between two entities, Freyre proposes an anthropological model to explain the production of the theory of Lusotropicalism, which the dictatorial regime of Salazar in Portugal later adopted to justify the Portuguese colonization of Africa because it conveniently applied to colonial Brazil as well. As Freyre notes in *O Luso e O Trópico*:

‘Luso-Tropical’ is a term for the Brazilians of many shades who today make up one of the most ethnically and aesthetically diversified populations in the world, with such varied types of feminine beauty and male physique that is increasingly difficult to say which is the most typically Brazilian. All of them, however, tend to shade into a tropical or quasi-tropical brown-skinned hue” (1974, p. 86).

Thus, to be colonized by the Portuguese essentially means to be Lusotropical. In other words, the value system of the Portuguese tended to be superimposed on that of the colonized, even as Brazil’s extra-European qualities, writes Freyre, “draw us closer closer to the Asiatic or African origins and manifestations of many of the values of our Luso-Tropical culture” (1974, p. 87). In sum, the carnal and the economic are meshed in the process of building a Lusotropical world with varied and shifting identities.

Of the limited poems that can be found in *Poesia Reunida* to deal with slavery and the dilemma of the enslaved African in the Brazilian plantation economy, three are quite telling: “História Social: Mercados dos Escravos” [Social History: Slave Markets],

“Natureza Africana” [African Nature] and “Dança de Pai Adão” [Uncle Tom’s Dance]. In their catalogues of oppression, relative to the demeaning plight of blackness and the enslaved’s burden of humiliation and perseverance, these poems share profound images of the aftermath of the tortuous journey across the Atlantic; the memories of the respectable value systems that came with African identity before the advent of slavery; and the coping mechanisms that forced the enslaved to compromise their moral values in the face of the slave master’s bestiality. Taken together as a rare window into Freyre’s frame of mind, these poems reveal the deep emotional traumas and plights of the enslaved as reconstructed by the poet-sociologist. In “Social History: Slave Markets,” the poetic voice performs a haunting exposé of the humiliating atmosphere of the slave market, where humans are displayed for inspection and eventual sale to the highest bidder. The poem narrates the sickly greenish looks of Africans on the slave market block, compared to gagged “animals” and chained human cargo, well-built, yet compelled to allow potential buyers to “inspect them from head to toe.” The human inspection is gruesome and dehumanizing to say the least: “Jumping, showing their tongues, / Breathing in and out as ordered / Like those dolls that squeak” (1980, p. 24). Through the detailed enumeration of the plight of the slaves on the market, the poet appeals to the reader’s sense of disgust, as if calling for vindication and retributive

justice for the horrors of slavery. There is a cumulative effect of the catalogue of insults meted out to the slaves, even as they continue the Atlantic journey of misery beyond the ocean. Lost in a new land, nostalgic for the family they left behind, broken by the horrors of that violent separation, and completely deranged and unaware of the future awaiting them at the hands of a strange master who has the right to treat them as an object, the plight of the newly sold slave is similar to that of someone sentenced to life imprisonment without any possibility of parole and whose only certainty is death. Such is the pain behind Freyre's "social history" in the powerful, compelling poem of the same name. In other words, the slave market is the beginning of the history of a slave, which in turn becomes a microcosm of Brazil's collective history, as both seller, buyer, and the "bought" are complicit in a surreal social transaction that will affect generations to come. The reader can only help but feel appalled and desire to take corrective action as a matter of urgency.

While the other two poems related to the African in the New World are less provocative and tormenting as that of the slave market, they also describe the process of the African's transformation from the pastoral ambience he is used to in Africa to the more problematic ambience and perpetual negotiations on the plantation, where his humanity is called into question. "African Nature" recounts the wild and pastoral

setting of pre-slavery, as leopards lurk and imagine having the young cowboys for a snack. The poetic voice wishes the young cowboys could invoke the divine assistance of Our Lady of Fatimah to “save them from the fangs of the leopard / that pursue them so cruelly” (1980, p. 79). Shortly after that encounter between prey and predator, which almost resulted in death, the poetic voice imagines another encounter between a hyena and some maidens, who are petrified by the hyena’s ruggedness. In both instances, the poetic voice likens the dynamic between victim and victimizer to the law of the jungle, in which the fittest survive. In the context of slavery, the master is the predator, while the slave is the prey. For the “prey” to survive, it must learn to think and act like a predator, either beating him at his own game or learning to negotiate his self-preservation through perseverance. As for the poem “Dance of Uncle Tom,” it is a magical reenactment of the life of a long-deceased *babalorixá* (an African traditional healer of the Yoruba ethnic group), whose life has been inherited by an Uncle Tom figure. The Uncle Tom of the title dances as if possessed by the spirits of departed slaves. As the poetic voice describes it: “Seeing this old / black giant dance / was quite riveting / By the dawn / he was no longer the same / but something of an Alf / with wings on its feet” (1980, p. 30). As the memory of many generations are infused into one grand Memory, the Uncle Tom figure is transformed from a traitor of his people’s



resistance into a symbol of ancestral memory, blowing away and dancing during long nights of terror and anguish in hopes of overcoming the persistent memories of those slaves who are tormented in their graves by the horrors of slavery. Uncle Tom's act is a performance of exorcism to rid his own body of the persistent burden of slavery. When taken as a disparate but unified triad, these three poems by Freyre indict slavery in Brazil and suggest that the spirits of the exploited are restless and continue to cry for social justice.

### **Nostalgia and Childhood Memories**

If the revulsion of the enslaved and the injustices of slavery brought so much torment to Freyre that he documented it passionately in the foregoing poems, the nostalgic memories of childhood bring a better frame of mind and relative consolation. As if the memories of his wife, Magdalena, were not enough, Freyre captures in "Menino de Engenho" [Plantation Boy], "Menino de Luto" [Mourning Boy] and "Ausência" [Absence] a cataclysmic moment in Brazilian social history and the Regionalism of 1930s in the Northeast. The subject of the poem "Boy" embodies a frozen time in history, as most histories of the period tend to recapitulate. While it most likely borrows from José Lins do Rego's *Menino de Engenho* (Plantation Boy, 1932), the

poem describes a metaphoric boy, growing up on a plantation, who speaks for the many others like him who were born on the plantation not as slaves but as the privileged children of the master. This perspective sheds some light on the experience of living as a child amidst the horrors of slavery, side-by-side with the slaves and yet so immune to their pain and suffering. Due to the real and implied insularity of that child, he was protected and set apart from the dilemmas of the enslaved.

Freyre's "Plantation Boy" ruminates on the memories of childhood, such as playing "[w]ith his little black comrades," roaming the forests "with the pickaninnies," and enjoying the sexual adventures of being with a "black slave girl" in the name of "love." In summing up this experience, the poetic voice emphatically declares: "No doubt about it: a plantation boy / lived a happier life / than a city-bred child; / lived a carefree life, and dressed as he pleased" (1974, p. 193). While the "Plantation Boy" celebrates childhood adventures, "Mourning Boy" critiques Freyre's contemporary generation, whose way of life had grown out of touch with the discipline and desire for perfection of the older generation, with their traditions of memorization and learning, including romance languages, geography, and grammar. Given this stern environment, the only opportunity for them to escape was during outings for burials. On one such occasion, writes Freyre ironically, the little boy needed to put on his best attire and look

well-kept and mannered: “stiff cap / black tie / and solemn burial steps. / Only allowed to go out in mourning / of one’s own childhood” (1980, p. 40). In both of the foregoing poems, the joys of childhood supersede its misadventures. Yet, in “Absence,” the poetic voice wonders about the eternal nostalgia that imprisons him, even as he is unable to read, listen, and hear. In this final poem, nostalgia can be overpowering and paralyzing, especially when one’s frame of mind is dejected and totally dislocated: “It is the worst nostalgia / that of the little absences / little drops of rain on the inside / even when everything is sunny” (1980, p. 96). With this theme of childhood memory and nostalgia, Freyre joins his fellow regionalists, such as Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, Rachel Quiroz, and José Lins do Rego, in documenting the best in local traditions and folklore, especially as they concern childhood mementos and memories in the Brazilian Northeast. It must be noted, however, that childhood memories and nostalgia often converge with exile, as the poet reaches out romantically to his natal Recife as a cultural crucible and where his early formations were pleurably forged.

## Conclusion

In the early 2000s, my research focused on Freyre’s theory of miscegenation as it applied to the counter-positions of Afro-Brazilian cultural producers, whose daily

experiences showed “racial democracy” to be nothing but racial hypocrisy. While conducting scholarly and ethnographic research in Brazil, I had the pleasure of visiting the acclaimed sociologist’s house adjacent to the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation in Recife, Pernambuco. I recall asking the professional tour guide where the invisible Afro-Brazilian “friend of the family” slept in that house. We were shown the rooms and beds of all the members of the family, except that of the Afro-Brazilian “family friend.” Of course, his picture stood amidst other portraits of the “family,” and the guide was quick to note how racially diverse Freyre’s home was while he was alive. Apparently, I had unsettled the guide, who could not give any precise answer other than to gesture that the black outsider was free to come to visit the Freyre’s family whenever he felt like it. This anecdote triggers a whole set of reflections upon analyzing Freyre’s *Poesia Reunida*. In its representative unity, the volume of poems announces Freyre’s poetic consciousness and sensibilities alongside other celebrated writers, such as Jorge Amado, Manuel Bandeira, José Lins do Rego, and Guimarães Rosa, among many others who admired and respected the poet-sociologist. More than a work of substance and legacy, *Poesia Reunida* provides a unique window into the soul of Freyre as he intimates us with his escapist adventures and lasting research through Euro-America, Africa, and Asia. Somehow, he balances his thirst for knowledge with an inner quest for his own

humanity. For the dislocated and exiled scholar who must come to terms with his own fragility and with issues of love, hate, slavery, and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society, it is a journey indeed. While poetry may have been an outlet for Freyre to wander the inner chambers of the human mind, he seems to “redeem” himself as a preacher of miscegenation through his portrayals of the horrors of slavery in his *Poesia Reunida*. Though redeemed in words, Freyre is ultimately both a resolute inventor and unrepentant inheritor of the legacies and contradictions of Lusotropicalism. As Freyre’s miscegenation theory continues to be studied and debunked, the lasting glory of a passionate scholar of the historical foundations of Brazil remains undiminished as his political vision and ideals are preserved for future generations, despite the reservations we may hold about Freyre’s minimization of the violent nature of slavery to convince his readers about the questionable basis of Brazil’s alleged harmonious racial relations.

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