

The Road to *Casa-Grande*. Itineraries by Gilberto Freyre

Enrique Rodríguez Larreta
Translated by Noël de Sousa
and Mark Streeter

Two portraits hang in Gilberto Freyre's library in Apipucos. The first represents Manuel Oliveira Lima (1853-1928), the historian and diplomat from Pernambuco; the other, Franz Boas (1858-1943), a German anthropologist and teacher at the University of Columbia, founder of American Cultural Anthropology. These two authors are constantly referred to in his books and are highlighted in *Casa-Grande & Senzala*. Gilberto Freyre maintained a constant dialogue with them throughout his life.

Recife, 1917

With Oliveira Lima the relationship began early. One of the first texts read by Gilberto Freyre around 1913 was Oliveira Lima's brief lecture "Vida Diplomática" ["Diplomatic Life"].¹ Freyre's first article was devoted to him, and it appeared in "O Lábaro," at the American Baptist College. Freyre was seventeen years-old and already displayed a surprisingly mature critical assessment. The observations on Oliveira Lima as a historian, his style, the use of travel books and documents are already an indication of his own approach to history.

Freyre especially values Lima's qualities as a great narrator as well as the visuality of his prose:

Oliveira Lima doesn't look, he sees; he has the sensitivity of a photoplate. His diplomatic pilgrimage was not the mere fitting of an Epicurean. He made a beeline up from secretary at the diplomatic mission to the post of minister. He landed in the United States and instead of looking through the narrow prism of

an absent-minded *bon vivant*, with a cigarette in his mouth and a monocle in the corner of his eye, he looked at the great land with a sociologist's sagacity, giving us subsequently a book that García Merou described as the most complete study of Lincoln's Republic.

Oliveira Lima goes about his historical excavations just like a tourist who climbs the snow-clad Swiss mountains with a Kodak. With it he gets some candid shots of types and features. Everybody moves—old chief justices get into their jalopies, amusing and prudish ladies cross the street in palanquins, carried by liveried black men, Alexandre de Gusmão speaks to the Friar King D. João V, and the latter's apparitors gallop through the streets of Lisbon, upon contact with that magic wand which is Oliveira Lima's evocative power.²

The strength of the historian lies in his evocative ability. In those lines, written at the age of seventeen years, we already have the central intuition of Freyre's work. And one of the themes is empathy, a notion that he believed he himself was the first to use in studies conducted in the Portuguese language.

His first essay on cultural criticism (1922) was on Oliveira Lima's work. It was an analysis of his *History of Civilization*, a project that took him many hours of reading in New York and that he published in the *Revista do Brasil*. Monteiro Lobato, the director of the publication, didn't overlook the novelty and the brilliance of his style. In the article, Freyre acknowledges the importance of Lima's work but at the same time preserves his own intellectual independence. Moreover, in it there already appear other aspects. The readings of economic history with Seligman, the author of the *Economic Interpretation of History*, and with Charles Beard, one of the creators of the so-called "New History" and an analyst of the economic foundations of the American Constitution, both of whom Freyre studied at Columbia, led him to question the overly political and cultural character of Oliveira Lima's historical perspective. On the other hand, Freyre's vision of the progress of the "carboniferous civilization," as he describes the European modernity in gestation, is more pessimistic than Oliveira Lima's liberal evolutionism. He criticizes the ideology of progress and women's right to vote, a hasty judgment for which he quickly apologized in a private letter.

Oliveira Lima was his mentor for many years, sending him books on urban sociology from Washington and making available to him his major *Brasiliana* [*Brazilian Collection*], as well as his personal ties in America and

Europe, namely, his access to Columbia, and his diplomatic contacts in Lisbon and Paris. Relatively aloof from his father for a good part of his life, the mother is the central family figure for Freyre. Therefore, Oliveira Lima became an all-important father figure, imbued with the entire aura, in the eyes of an imaginative adolescent, of a universal *Pernambucano*, a writer and a character of the epoch towards the end of the Empire.

New York, 1921

It was in connection with Oliveira Lima that Gilberto Freyre met Franz Boas and decided to study at Columbia. In 1921, Franz Boas was an important public intellectual, known for his radical political positions in the racial debate. He enjoyed great prestige in the American academic and cultural world. The relationship between Boas and Gilberto Freyre has been discussed on many occasions, even to the point of doubting his status as Boas' pupil. However, both his correspondence and other sources of the time show that Franz Boas was an emblematic figure for Gilberto Freyre as a student in Texas even before he went on to do his master's in New York.³ Freyre attended Boas' courses at Columbia and in 1921 carefully read Boas' main work, *The Mind of Primitive Man*. One of his main friends from his student days, Rudiger Bilden, with whom he shared his intellectual concerns and bohemian pastimes at his apartment in the Village, is the one who kept alive the ties with Columbia and Boas during the twenties. It is no mere accident then that the news of Boas' death in 1943, accompanied by the obituary from the *New York Times*, reached him through a letter from Bilden. Rudiger Bilden traveled to Brazil with a scholarship from Columbia in 1926, where he stayed for a year to finish his research on race. Freyre highlights the importance of Bilden's ideas in *Casa-Grande* in several references.⁴ For his part, Franz Boas, in *Anthropology and Modern Life*,⁵ writes that:

The race perception between whites, blacks and the native Indians in Brazil seems to be completely different according to how we look at it. Along the coastal area there is a huge black population. The mixing with native Indians is also very striking. The discrimination between those three races is much less present than in our country, and the social obstacles to miscegenation or to social progress are not great. (67)

Freyre attributes that opinion to a report by Rudiger Bilden. In this regard, it may be said that paradoxically Gilberto Freyre did influence Franz Boas. Both in this paragraph and in all of Boas' discussion of race, culture and cultural processes, the position Boas wanted to undermine was that of physical, biological and deterministic anthropology. At the same time, Boas' central idea was the relativization of racial differences based on a cultural point of view. As for Boas, his scientific agnosticism and his aversion to abstract theorization, a *destructive* method, to use a concept from his pupil Edward Sapir, is also present in Gilberto Freyre and in his predilection for the description of social circumstances instead of a theoretical approach, since Freyre disliked generalizations. But just as Boas redefined the theme of race from the point of view of a rich and complex vision of the role of culture—and this was a radical assumption in the 1920s and 1930s—, a similar operation was conducted through the writing in the early thirties of *Casa-Grande* with regard to the interpretation of national culture. In the main, Freyre considered racial miscegenation as being beneficial for civilizing efforts and no longer saw it as a deficiency or an insurmountable barrier, as it had been until then by most Latin American and Brazilian thinkers—for instance, Oliveira Vianna, José Ingenieros and Alcides Arguedas. On the contrary, Freyre saw in the mixed-race culture a positive component, indicative of superiority. In that regard, he was inspired partly by the theme of one of his readings of the time, Randolph Bourne, who in his famous article “Transnational America”⁶ highlighted the superiority of America over Europe due to its cultural mixing, as opposed to the provincialisms of European national cultures.

The influence of essayists such as Walter Pater, Lafcadio Hearn and the *fin de siècle* aestheticism in, for example, George Moore and J. K. Huysmans inspired a vivid sense of an erotic and affective dimension of culture, highlighting its sensorial and aesthetic aspects and laying greater store by subjectivity. Nietzsche and Simmel were early readings present in the elegiac and visual tone of *Casa-Grande*, stressing the importance of the erotic both in a sensual and more strictly sexual sense. *Casa-Grande* is an erotica of the Brazilian culture in the sense presented by Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation*: “Instead of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”⁷ Gilberto Freyre's own sexual experiences, of which his personal diaries, partially published in *Tempo Morto e Outros Tempos*, have talked at length, undoubtedly contributed to underline his own singular perspective absent

from other works of social interpretation of the time.⁸ That is certainly why Freyre's was noted by Roland Barthes, who stressed Freyre's freedom in referring to the dimensions of pleasure and sensuality. On the other hand, Barthes himself wrote at the end of his life a personal diary, *Incidents* (1979), with a remarkable likeness to Freyre's taste for the singularity of the intimate biographical detail.

Recife in the 1920s

In the 1920s *Casa-Grande* appears foreshadowed in texts such as Freyre's master's thesis *Social Life in Brazil in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century*,⁹ which is already a search for the *temps perdu* of a Brazilian family. In this work, Freyre advances opinions on slavery and family life that will be fully developed in *Casa-Grande & Senzala* and *Sobrados e Mucambos*. In 1925, in *Livro do Nordeste*, he published two articles (one of them, "Aspects of a Century of Transition in the Northeast of Brazil"), both of which were incorporated later on in *Região e Tradição*. In those essays a substantial number of the themes of *Casa-Grande* are already there: slavery, the mixing of races, the socialization of women and men in the patriarchal family, as well as a considerable part of the documental sources. The vivid and evocative style of writing is also already present, as is the taste for the transcription of documents and the visuality of language. But the representation of the system of slavery is less incisive than in *Casa-Grande* and the text sometimes gives the impression of being written from the point of view of the slavocracy, such as when, for example, he describes the slaves' rebellions as "collective insolence."

The 1926 visit of Rudiger Bilden and the preparations for the installation in Recife of the first Sociology Chair prompted Gilberto Freyre to update his readings in social sciences, which were to provide the basis of *Casa-Grande & Senzala*. However, up until 1930 the plan of the work was not defined. Since 1926, Freyre had been thinking of writing a history of Brazilian childhood, a project that he conceived of in New York in 1921 and that he continued to work upon during his visit to Nuremberg, the "city of toys," in 1922. In Lisbon, archive researches are still being carried out in connection with this project.

Stanford, 1931

Everything changes in 1930: the exile, the fleeting passage through Salvador and the coasts of Africa on his way to Lisbon, access to new libraries in Lisbon and, especially, his stay at Stanford. The handwritten notebooks from

Gilberto Freyre's courses at Stanford show the thematic and bibliographical importance of that stay for the plan of *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, especially the readings on the history of Portuguese colonization. Some citations and references in *Casa-Grande* are direct transcriptions of course notes. But perhaps every book requires an event that crystallizes its conception. And in the case of *Casa-Grande* this was, in my opinion, a letter sent by H. L. Mencken. It was, in fact, during his stay in California that he renewed contact with H. L. Mencken, the famous American cultural critic. Freyre offered Mencken his master's thesis. Mencken praised it and suggested to him that he expand it into book form. All the feverish readings, archive research, the many projects and the partial works coalesced at that moment. The unwritten "History of Brazilian Childhood" is replaced with a new book: *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, which only later came to be called by that name. In November 1932, when two chapters had already been completed, the book carried the title of *Vida Sexual e de Família no Brasil Escravocrata*. It was a name, moreover, quite similar to that of his master's thesis, which reveals how close was the source of inspiration for both texts.

Not only the themes but also the focus of the Stanford course was a preparation for *Casa-Grande & Senzala*.¹⁰ As Austregésilo de Athaide recounts in a report written in New York,¹¹ Freyre defined his course in California as "a type of Loyola's spiritual exercises applied to the study of the past. I try to give my foreign students a realistic vision of the Brazilian past—like the vision Loyola tried to transmit of hell and heaven... It's just that in our case it is about our country and people." In addition, he quickly highlighted the importance of reviving the past in all of its colors and flavors, showing his impatience for political and diplomatic history: "what I'm interested in is the intimate, social details" (Athaide, *Diário de Pernambuco*, 1931, 9).

The context of the time also needs to be illuminated. 1930 is a crucial moment in the modern history of Brazil, when the spaces for thinking the national in a renewed way were created. The reflections undertaken by the modernists and the intellectuals of the 1920s are deepened and the agenda is extensively renewed. The proto-globalization of the thirties and the emergence of new peripheral nations will provide the context for the great essays of national interpretation written by Sergio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Jr. Is *Casa-Grande & Senzala* an expression of the ideology of the "national character"? Yes, insofar as the convergence of those diverse productions is the result both of a culture and of reflection on the past as the

laying of the foundations for progress. No, simply insofar as a work such as *Casa-Grande & Senzala* possesses other dimensions; it is more than merely a study of the national character as in Ruth Benedict's understanding of the notion, developed in her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.¹² Freyre's work has yet another historical dimension—it uses economic and social materials that together lead to new researches on the historical formation of Brazil—daily life, food, family, sexuality—, besides reformulating the topic of race. The combination of social history with anthropology substantially enriches the contribution of Gilberto Freyre's work.

The mixing of seemingly diverse materials that acquire new meaning when combined in a new manner characterizes to a high extent the operation of the sociological imagination, which is an effort to represent a civilizing process whose both light and dark sides are projected onto Brazil's centuries to come.

It is, in short, a classic. But the supreme litmus test of all classics is the degree of affliction its reading causes to future readers. From the number of yawns and the feeling of the book dropping from our hands, our distance vis-à-vis the enshrined text is registered. It is that discomfort caused to the body that reminds us that great books, just like empires, nations and human beings are children of time that is to say, mortal. At certain moments, some classics reveal themselves as an unredeemable part of the past: they are boring because they mean nothing to us any more. Is *Casa-Grande & Senzala* readable today? It's a question that we need to ask ourselves. I indeed do think it is, partly due to its original approach to the complex theme of interrelations between race and culture, a subject that is still moot in post-modernity. Gilberto Freyre's interpretations still hold their interest independently of the validity attributed to them. Its reading resuscitates specters of the past we cannot definitively live down. And Freyre accomplishes this with a literary mastery that ensures *Casa-Grande & Senzala* a place among the great works of the modern historical imagination.

Notes

¹ It is worth transcribing a fragment: "How many diplomats, like the Baron of Penedo, in the midst of the splendors of the more sumptuous courts and the refinements of the earliest civilizations would remember with insistent and more than literary longing their native village, modest in itself but guarding the mouth of one of the great rivers of the world, would elevate that longing to the point of coming, after almost five-hundred years, to spend the last days amongst their countrymen? These are the strong and after all happy ones, not those that forget

their horizons, alienate their hearts and renounce their origins. Diplomatic life can always be enviable: the death of the diplomat is so only in similar cases" (32).

² "O Lábaro," 26 November 1917.

³ Freyre 1922.

⁴ Bilden n.d.

⁵ Boas 67.

Among the vast bibliography on Franz Boas, see A. L. Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Murray B. Emenau, Melville J. Herskovitz, Gladys A. Reichard and J. Alden Mason; Richard Handler, "Franz Boas 1858-1942," *American Anthropologist New Series* 45.3, Part 2 July-Sept. (1943); Richard Handler, "Boasian Anthropology and the Critique of *American Culture*," *American Quarterly* 42.2 (June 1990), 252-273; Arnold Krupat, "Irony in Anthropology: The Work of Franz Boas," *Modernist Anthropology*, ed. Marc Manganaro (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1995) 133-145; George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) and *The Ethnographer's Magic and other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1995). Boas' theoretical corpus was far from forming a coherent body, built upon an opposition between race and culture, as the exchange between Luiz Costa Lima and Ricardo Benzaquen de Araujo seems to suggest. See Araujo 1994.

⁶ Bourne 37.

⁷ Sontag 21.

⁸ Freyre *Tempo Morto*.

⁹ See note 3.

¹⁰ See Needell 1995.

¹¹ Athaide 9.

¹² Ruth Benedict *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

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