



SEÇÃO: TEMÁTICA LIVRE

## Intermedial textures: Gilberto Freyre: sociologist, poet, painter

*Texturas intermediáticas: Gilberto Freyre: sociólogo, poeta, pintor*

*Texturas intermediales: Gilberto Freyre: sociólogo, poeta, pintor*

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**Abstract:** Relying on the concepts of intermediality, ekphrasis and intermedial reference, the essay discusses Gilberto Freyre's vast oeuvre as that of a multiple artist, working in different areas\_ poetry, painting, literary prose\_ as well as the author of groundbreaking contributions to the social sciences. The article especially underscores the close relationships between his output in the verbal and in the visual arts, remarkable for their constant reference to events, characters and landscapes analyzed in his sociological texts. In this context, the whole of Freyre's production may be taken as a multiple, kaleidoscopic text, which, in different media, explores close-knit themes.

**Keywords:** Intermediality in Gilberto Freyre. Gilberto Freyre's poetry. Freyre and the visual arts.

**Resumo:** Apoiado nos conceitos de intermedialidade, écfrase e referência intermediática, o ensaio discute a vasta obra de Gilberto Freyre como a de um artista múltiplo, atuante em diferentes áreas\_ poesia, pintura e prosa literária\_ além de autor de contribuições pioneiras para as ciências sociais. O artigo destaca especialmente a íntima relação entre suas obras de arte visual e as de arte verbal, notáveis pela constante referência a acontecimentos, personagens e paisagens analisados em seus textos sociológicos. Nesse contexto, toda a produção de Freyre pode ser considerada um múltiplo e caleidoscópico texto, que, em diferentes mídias, explora temas estreitamente relacionados.

**Palavras-chave:** Intermedialidade em Gilberto Freyre. A poesia de Gilberto Freyre. Freyre e as artes visuais.

**Resumen:** A partir de conceptos de intermodalidad, écfrasis y referencia intermediática, este artículo trata de proporcionar una visión general del vasto trabajo de Gilberto Freyre, el trabajo de un artista polifacético, activo en las áreas más diversas: en poesía, prosa y pintura, además de ser autor de trabajos pioneros en las ciencias sociales. Se presta especial atención a la relación entre sus obras visuales y escritas, notables por su referencia a eventos, personajes y paisajes presentes en sus textos sociológicos. Como se verá, la producción de Freyre es un texto múltiple y caleidoscópico, que, por medios mixtos, explora temas estrechamente relacionados.

**Palabras claves:** Intermedialidad en Gilberto Freyre. la poesía de Gilberto Freyre. Gilberto Freyre y las artes visuales

### Introduction

Not many among those interested in the visual arts have heard of Gilberto Freyre's painting. Painters are even less familiar with his achievement as a poet and literary prose writer. On the other hand, many Brazilians, just as a significant number of scholars worldwide, are familiar



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with his work as a sociologist, the author of such groundbreaking works as *Casa-grande & senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal* (1933) and *Sobrados e mucambos: decadência do patriarcado rural e desenvolvimento do urbano* (1936). As landmarks in our cultural heritage, these publications, even now, well into the twenty-first century, remain the object of endless arguments among specialists in the social sciences.

Not so amply discussed, but equally enticing, is the close connection among the different fields of Freyre's contribution: literary prose, poetry, painting and sociological writings. As Mário Hélio Gomes Lima (1981, p. 161) reminds us, in order to interpret Brazilian society, Freyre turned not only to documents and historical writings, but also to novels, drawings, paintings and caricatures, made more interesting, I can add, by the fact that they all refer to one another, as a single, kaleidoscopic whole.

### 1. Freyre as a multiple artist

This makes him an outstanding example of the multiple artist, the creator of an interlocked web of verbal and visual productions, of irresistible appeal to students of the relation between verbal media and the arts. It is this aspect of Freyre's oeuvre its intermediality that this essay will briefly discuss. As theoretical support, I rely on the concept of intermediality as the study of the interrelation between texts in different media. In Irina Rajewsky's words (2012, p. 18), "intermediality can be used ...as a generic term for the study of all those phenomena that, (as the term suggests) somehow happen among media. Therefore, the expression 'intermediatic' names configurations related to the crossing of frontiers among media. "Furthermore, the use of a socio-cultural approach for studies in intermediality, adopted in this essay, is vindicated by Jürgen Müller" (2012, p. 76). The theoretician states that "a sociological or functional concept of media, which relates media to historical and socio-cultural processes, still seems to be the most suitable approach to any kind of intermedial research."

### 2. Freyre as a social scientist

Working in this direction, from the overflow of pertinent publications, I begin by selecting some evaluations of Freyre's work as a social scientist. I take this as the suitable focus for the consideration of the connection between different aspects of his work — the central point to which his prose, his poetry and painting converge. As to his pioneering contribution to the social sciences, Heloisa Toller Gomes (1994, p. 14) writes:

[t]he uproar caused by the publication of *Casa Grande*, both at the national and international level, resulted chiefly from [...] his emphatic affirmation of the black and mestizo contribution to the historical and cultural formation of Brazil, at a time when Afro-Brazilian and Afro-American studies were still incipient.

In his introduction to the 2003 reprint of *Casa grande e senzala*, Fernando Henrique Cardoso calls attention to these and other related matters. According to Cardoso (2003, p. 24-27), Freyre, in his sociological studies

reveals the condition of the patriarch, of *ioiôs* and *iaiás* (young masters and mistresses in colonial Brazil), of black playmates and hand-maids [...] [He] recognized the value of the negro, reinterpreted our culture through the race and even the physical environment [...] He proved, more emphatically than everyone, the hybridity and even the cultural plasticity of the social interchange among contraries, which are not only a trait, but an advantage for Brazil.

Toller and Cardoso thus insist on themes also recurrently explored in Freyre's poetry, paintings and drawings: the condition of black and mulatto slaves, their relationship with their white masters, their work in rural and urban environments. As to literature, the artistic character of his prose has been highly praised by specialists, who present him as a master in the arts of verbal language. This praise would no doubt be appreciated by Freyre, who called himself a writer rather than a sociologist, as he suggested in the title of his *Como e por que não sou um sociólogo* (How and why I am not a sociologist).

### 3. Freyre as a literary writer

General references to his literary merits are too many to be cited, so I will limit myself to some

comments by fellow writers. To begin with, in "Gilberto Freyre, criador literário", David Mourão Ferreira offers a detailed analysis of Freyre's novels, starting with *Dona Sinhá e o filho padre*, published in the USA as *Mother and Son*. As Ferreira tells us, the text was praised by Roland Barthes for its "obsessional sense of the substance, of the palpable presence of the living object" ("senso obsessional da substância, da matéria palpável, do objeto vivo"). It is impossible to divorce this book from the history of Brazil, argues Ferreira, who adds: "Had this, and his other novel, *O outro amor do Dr. Paulo (Dr Paulo's other love)* been the author's only works, critics would have been Freyre as a poet. If we move on to a critical appreciation of Gilberto Freyre's poetry, the first thing to be noted is its pictorial quality, enhanced by its relation to the author's sociological work and to his biographical experiences. These elements jump up even in such short excerpts as the verses taken from the poem "Mocambos de Recife", which I translate from the Portuguese:

[...] brown shacks  
grayish  
sometimes purplish  
looking like pieces torn  
from the dirty habit of Saint Francis of Assis.

The description seems to have dropped from the brush of a painter, who, with a few strokes of brownish, grayish and purplish tones, suffuses his canvas with a glowing representation of the shabby clusters of shacks which precariously shelter the destitute in Recife, Freyre's native town. The allusion to Saint Francis, traditionally associated with poverty, ties in well with the description of the huts inhabited by the very poor. As tradition has it, Francis renounced his father's inheritance and wandered as a beggar in the hills behind Assisi. For a time, he worked as a scullion in a monastery and wore a cloak and girdle given him as alms by a friend. The reference to the saint may also have something to do with Freyre's memories of famous churches in Recife, notable for their baroque images of saints. Seen from another angle, the poem, which illustrates

Freyre's memories, stands out as a remarkable example of ekphrasis, a form of intermediality consisting in the verbalization of an observer's encounter with visual configurations.

#### 4. Ekphrasis in Freyre's poetry

As defined by Claus Clüver (2017, p. 30), "[e]kphrasis verbalizes a real or fictive viewer's perception of, or reactions to, characteristic features of non-kinetic visual configurations. It deals with configurations that actually exist or suggests the perceived existence of such configurations in virtual, or fictive, reality". "Mocambos de Recife" conforms neatly with Clüver's definition. The poem invites us to imagine certain sites of Recife, Freyre's beloved town, as he remembered it: the place where he was born and made his home. All we have to do is to trust his own word for the fact that his poem represents his perception of aspects of the Brazil of his youth. At the end of a symposium organized in his honor, Freyre, adopting what he called "a Proustian perspective", confessed that all his work flows out from:

an intimate social history, an inclusive, sexual, intuition coming from [...] boyhood [...] somehow biological or instinctive, and not only recorded in writings and documents [...] Everything I have written [...] or even drawn or painted as a bisexual artist, has been [...] a recuperation of a maternal Brazil [...]

In a similar remark, Mário Hélio Gomes de Lima writes: "the Brazil [Freyre] interprets is not Brazil, but his Brazil. History, no doubt, but having as its source, the documents of his family, his experiences and reminiscences [...]" These words could just as suitably apply to "Bahia de todos os santos e de todos os pecados", probably the longest and most famous of Freyre's poems. To start an analysis of this text, the appreciation of Manuel Bandeira, one of the "three cavaliers" of Brazilian modern literature, is an obvious choice. Besides the general praise in the essay, "Gilberto Freyre, poeta", Bandeira (1958, p. 398) takes time to discuss the poem at length. Our "cavalier" actually confesses his admiring jealousy of Freyre's poetry, especially of *Bahia de todos os santos e de quase todos os pecados*. The

poem had three versions, the first one published in Bandeira's *Antologia dos poetas brasileiros bissexto contemporâneos* (1946), the second, with alterations by the author, in the magazine *O Cruzeiro*, on January 29, 1942, and the third in Freyre's own books *Talvez Poesia* and *Poesia reunida*.

### 5. Freyre's poems and his sociology

Bandeira was enthusiastic about Freyre's exploit with the composition of "Bahia de todos os santos". Writing to the author on June 4, 1927, he quipped: "your poem, Gilberto, will make me the butt of a cuckold's eternal jealousy. I cannot reconcile myself to its well-dosed impudence, so shamelessly lyrical, exhaling the fragrance of vanilla like a clean mulatto girl.

From my perspective, side by side with some typical ecfrastic passages, one of the most interesting aspects of "Bahia de todos os santos", which illustrate the relation of Freyre's poem to his work as a social scientist, are the verses quoted below, suggestively reminiscent of themes in *Casa Grande & Senzala* and *Sobrados e Mocambos*. Where could one find a more lyrical expression of Freyre's central thesis, the celebration of hybridity, the crossbreeding of different races and traditions, which he takes as an example of the richness of Brazilian culture?

Consider the verses:

People from Bahia! Black, brown, purplish,  
mulatto people  
The color of the good jacarandas of Brazilian  
sugar cane mills,  
(wood that termites do not know)  
Free from ham-colored faces  
Or bodies the color of fried turkey  
Bahia of hot colors, brown flesh, piquant flavors.

We may here remember that in *Sobrados e mocambos* (p. 466-67), his celebrated study of the decadence of rural patriarchy and urban development in Brazil, Freyre discourses upon the proclaimed sexual attraction of white slave masters for their mestizo slave girls. He attributes to popular tradition the belief in their aphrodisiac power. By the charm of the way they walked, smiled and looked, by the smell

of their flesh, the skill of their fingers in intimate caresses, mulatto young women exerted upon white men a seduction that could catapult them from the miserable condition of slaves to the privileges of sexual partners, sometimes even the threatening rivals of their white mistresses. It is not unreasonable to read the verses below as a poetic version of the author's allusion to the allurements of these women:

[...] the most beautiful mulatto girls in Brazil  
With opulent breasts, with nipples ready to  
nurse all Brazilian children  
Mulatto girls with the hands of angels  
Hands to caress their young masters  
Raising them to become lords of the Empire  
Dressing their young mistress' hair  
Lulling ladies to sleep

The poem also evokes Freyre's tribute to other slaves, especially old black wet nurses, who, so he says, often enjoyed the affection of their master's children and won a position comparable to that of their mistresses. The lines, "Old black women in red shawls", may well evoke the author's words about wet nurses in *Casa grande & Senzala* (p. 435). Here Freyre mentions traditions (sometimes hotly contested by other scholars) about the place of honor Brazilian families allowed to these "black mothers" in their old age:

Liberated from slavery, they most invariably grew into large round fat women. Negro women whose every whim was indulged by everyone. Little boys asked for their blessing; slaves called them "lady". Coachmen drove them around. In festive occasions if anybody saw them proud and snobbish among the white people of the house, this person would take them for well-born ladies, never captives from the slaves' quarters.

He was probably thinking of these "black mothers" ("mães pretas"), when, as can be assumed, Freyre himself approved of the photo illustrating p. 223 of *Casa grande & Senzala*. He certainly saw hundreds of similar photos, frequent in the manor houses he used to visit. The photo was taken by Augusto Gomes Leal, in João Ferreira Villella's studio, in Recife, circa 1860. It shows an old black woman, sitting erect, like a lady on her chair, with a white boy clinging affectionately to her right arm.

The woman, probably the child's nurse, exhales a dignified tenderness, as she serenely faces the camera. She wears a fashionable dress, with a long necklace and elegant pleats hanging from her neck. The inclusion of this photo in Freyre's book can be taken as an example of the category of intermedial reference, defined in Irina Rajewsky's essay (2012, p. 25) as the insertion in verbal texts of works produced in other media. Then, according to Gabriele Rippl (2015, p. 10) "one (absent) medium is 'evoked' by a present medium as in ekphrastic or pictorialist descriptions". As the reference in Freyre's book is to photography, we cannot refrain from recalling certain pertinent remarks insistently discussed by critics. Among them, in her introduction to Maria Beatriz Coelho's, *Imagens da nação*, Heloisa Pontes (2012, p. 16) reminds us that "[far] from being an objective register of reality, photos [...] are no more than an interpretation [...]" and, as Coelho herself (2012, p. 22) adds, "a reconstruction which organizes, hierarquizes and enhances a part of the visible world."

## 6. Freyre and photography

These observations fit like a glove the photo of the black nurse. It certainly does not correspond to reality. It does not portray the woman as she would be seen in the ordinary clothes of her working days. Like others of its kind, the photo registers a performance. It was planned by the photographer, who studied the pose of the woman and her charge, the best angle, framing and illumination. The nurse's mistress was certainly present and helped the photographer with his choices. She also obviously lent the clothes and jewelry worn by the nurse. In her borrowed finery, the old woman herself, as we all do when we know we are being photographed, consciously or unconsciously took the pose she thought would make her look best. In the end, the picture would hang on the wall of a rich house, to flaunt the wealth and generosity of the owners. It was images like these, enshrined in his nostalgic memories of the Brazil he knew, that Freyre possibly had in mind, when he mentioned the "old black women in red shawls" in his poem "Bahia de todos os Santos e de quase todos os pecados".

Other verses abound in lyrical allusions to general features of Brazilian life in the nineteenth century. They bring back recurrent themes spread here and there in *Casa Grande and Sobrados and Mocambos*: memories of things Freyre observed as a youth or was told about towns like Recife and Bahia: their architecture, weather, smells, food, clothes, ornaments, religious habits, even popular medicine against syphilis contracted in furtive sexual contacts:

Bahia of All Saints (and of almost all sins)  
 Fat churches (in Pernambuco they are thinner)  
 Houses climbing on top of one another,  
 Houses, two-story buildings, churches,  
 Like people squeezing to be caught in newspaper or magazine photos  
 The whole of Bahia is a fat maternal town  
 As if from the wombs prancing on their hills  
 From which so many Brazilian towns have been born  
 Others were still to come out  
 Soft oily air  
 Smell of food  
 Smell of incense  
 Smell of mulatto girls  
 Hot breaths from vestries and kitchens  
 Boiling cooking pans  
 Burning spices  
 The Holy Sacrament being raised  
 [...]  
 Potions against syphilis  
 [...]  
 Gold baubles  
 Trinkets  
 The gifts of Portuguese men

## 7. Freyre's writings on mulattos

In *Sobrados e Mocambos*, Freyre (2013, p. 470) reports that, as Brazil entered the nineteenth century, Bahia became "the paradise of mulattos." It is to them that the poem refers, or to those among them who, owing to their political contacts, or to their talent as lawyers or administrators, rose to the highest class of Brazilian society. Under these circumstances, the mulattoes "became" white, for all intents and purposes, including political ones. Often graduates of the University of Lisbon, they affected urbane manners and sophisticated

habits. Well at ease in their French overcoats, as if they had been born in them, they married into the richest and most powerful families, and often behaved pedantically, more so than their white contemporaries of the same class. Images of such mulattos emerge from the lines: "Graduates wearing pince-nez [...] Mulattos of bland speech".

As the poem ends, the lyrical voice promises to return to the scenes nostalgically described. The last verse mentions the wooden boards where street sellers exhibited their wares \_crafts, fruit, and local delicacies\_ to attract tourists and regular clients. The boards were supported by legs, spread in the shape of an x. In the poem, the letter, indicative of unknown factors, as in algebra, suggests the mysterious future reserved for Brazilians.

One day I'll return in leisure to your brown  
Brazilian breast  
To your churches where Vieira once preached  
[...]  
To your tables with legs spread as in the letter  
x (such is the future of Brazil)

Another poem, ("The Brazil of days to come" ("O outro Brasil que vem aí") calls attention to an aspect of Freyre's work seldom, if ever, discussed: Freyre's gaze turned not only to the past, to the Brazil of his youth, but also to the future. So, past and future meet in his poetry as in his paintings. If "Bahia de todos os Santos" looks back to the past, "O outro Brasil que vem aí" beckons to the future. The poem reads like a prophecy of the country the poetic voice dreams for Brazil — a realm of solidarity and freedom, proud of its mixed races, embracing all sorts of citizens — a country where all Brazilian will be able to say "This is the Brazil I want" the Brazil they will be allowed to govern, if only they are worthy of a government capable of seeing the people and listening to them.

The first verses celebrate Freyre's central thesis, the racial and cultural hybridity of Brazil:

I hear the voices  
I see the colors  
I feel the steps  
of another Brazil  
the Brazil of days to come  
more tropical  
more fraternal

[...]  
The men of this Brazil will not have the colors  
of their three races  
but the colors of their regions and professions

Then the poem celebrates the democratic structure of this utopian, culturally plural country:

Every Brazilian will be able to say: this is how  
I want Brazil  
Every Brazilian, not only university professors  
or intellectuals  
[...]  
Any Brazilian will be allowed to govern this  
Brazil  
[...]  
So long as he is worthy of the government  
of Brazil  
So long as he has eyes to see Brazil  
And ears to listen to Brazil

## 8. Freyre as a painter

From my perspective, the poem deserves attention, not only for its intrinsic beauty, but chiefly because of its close relation with a neglected side of Freyre as a multiple artist: his production as a visual artist. Raul Lody's 2007 book *Do mocambos à casa grande. Desenhos e pinturas de Gilberto Freyre* includes reproductions of a large number of his pictures — oils, watercolors, drawings — kept in the collections of *The Gilberto Freyre Foundation*, the site of his former home, in Apipucos, Recife. These artworks almost invariably refer to objects and events mentioned in the author's poetry or sociological texts. Of course, the pictures are not those of an academic artist: they have the charm of works by so-called primitive painters. Mostly in warm colors (except for a curious self-portrait in shades of grey and black), they stand out as obvious references to Freyre's themes as a social scientist: pictures of sugar cane mansions with their chapels, black women profusely ornamented with necklaces, bracelets and crosses (probably the famous "bahianas", reminiscent of the slave street sellers of colonial Brasil), gorgeous mulatto girls, small houses sitting on hills, surrounded by palm trees, religious processions attended by black and white people, street scenes, popular characters and, as a case apart, a naked negro with a big penis handing a towel to a white woman.

## Conclusion

Impressive as it is, Lody's book could hardly suffice to keep the readers informed about Freyre's work as a visual art. A significant step in this direction was taken by Caixa Cultural São Paulo, with the exhibition "Vida, forma e cor" (Life, form, color). The event, curated by Clarissa Diniz, Fernanda Arêas Peixoto, Jamille Barbosa and Leonardo Borges, first took place in Recife and then was moved to São Paulo, from May to July 2016. The exhibition was meant to illustrate the relationship between science and the visual arts, which could already be noticed in the first edition of *Casa Grande e Senzala* in 1933. The idea was to recall Freyre's pioneering association between art and science, a lasting feature of his work. The exhibition showed about 200 pieces, exploring the meaning of Freyre's words, printed in a poster: "I paint when I am writing", "I write when I am painting". Paintings and drawings were shown side by side with excerpts of Freyre's texts on recurrent themes, such as the so-called popular culture and ethnic-racial relations.

From my standpoint, the most cogent aspect of "Life, form, color" is how well it underlined Freyre's achievement as a sociologist and as a multiple artist. As a case in point, I refer the reader to some pictures shown in the exhibition, with reproductions in the internet. Some of them take us back to the Brazil of the past, with its sugar cane mansions with their own chapels, gorgeous mulatto girls, religious processions and varied street scenes. Others nod to the future as in the poem cited above, "O outro Brasil que vem aí", Freyre's utopic vision of a Brazil, "more fraternal", "more Brazilian". Three pictures particularly refer to this future. "Football match" ("Partida de football") shows two young people, a white girl and a black boy, standing side by side, like friends, watching a game, significantly played by blacks and whites. In another painting (untitled), a white middle-class man, in a white suit, stands before a two-story house (a "sobrado"), facing the viewer. Not very far, a negro seems to be enjoying a landscape with the trees and small houses typical of small towns in north-eastern Brazil. Turning his back on the white man, he shows no deference to

him, as would be expected in earlier times. A third painting, titled "Black lady walking with her son" ("Senhora negra com filho no caminho") can be read as an adjustment to Freyre's flattering description (cited above) of the black wet nurses of colonial Brazil. The painting contrasts with Freyre's 1933 text and with the photo illustrating it: in this canvas, the black woman is not a slave holding a white baby, her master's child. What we now see is a black woman walking hand in hand with her little boy, who, in former times, would have been deprived of his mother's care. This is the Brazil Freyre dreamed of, the Brazil we are slowly building, "more tropical, more fraternal, more Brazilian."

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