

ON GHOSTS, JUMBIES, AND PHANTAS- MAGIC PRESENCES IN GUYANA

by Marcelo Moura Mello (Federal University of
Bahia, Brazil)



Stanley Greaves, *People of the Garden City*, 1962, oil on hardboard, 32 × 48 inches. From the series *People in the Pavement*. Copy reproduced from <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2607/stanley-greaves> (Access: May 30 2016). Reproduced with authorization of the author²¹.

“I have this theory that the conditions of the land affect the conditions of our own internal landscape”²²

Stanley Greaves.

Phantasmagory

Images and narratives about Guyana seem crowded by spectral forces. Very often, academic writings, art works, literary pieces, official discourses, newspaper columns, and daily conversations reverberate presences immersed in amalgamated temporal chains (see Mello 2014a; 2014b).

“*People of the Garden City*”, created by the Guyanese artist Stanly Greaves, is, among other things, a portrait of a transition, the extension of which goes beyond constrained temporal markers. The suffocating setting of the painting contrasts with the landscaping of the capital of

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²² Interview with Anne Walmsley in 1993, and published in “*Bomb Magazine*”. Available: <http://bombsite.com/issues/86/articles/2607>. Access in May 30, 2016, at 07:40 AM.

Guyana, Georgetown, known at the time of the composition of these artworks as the “*Garden City*” due to the finesse of the landscape gardening – materializations, as the colonial buildings, of the orderings of the colonial rulers, the British. The pallid and grayish tonality of *People of the Garden City* is accentuated by red and shady hues that seep and project themselves over beings impregnated by marks that have suppressed, or paralyzed, their senses – the leaves portrayed by Graves are wandering ones.

Speak in contrast is, in some sense, potentially confusing. In the 1950’s and 1960’s Georgetown was the epicenter of the anti-colonial and pro-independence struggles of the major ethnic groups of Guyana, Indo- and Afro-Guyanese (or Indians and Africans). Their leaders, Chedi Jagan and Forbes Burnham, united their efforts under a single party, the PPP (People’s Progressive Party) but at the end of the 1950’s the PPP had split along ethnic lines, and the independence of Guyana from Britain in 1966, was preceded by violent conflicts between the two groups that caused the deaths of hundreds of people and even in the proposition of the creation of two new nations (Smith 1995). At that time, the lawyer Forbes Burnham lead the foundation of another party, the PNC (People’s National Congress) whose supporters were mostly Afro-Guyanese. The PPP, in turn, continued to be led by Jagan, who counted on the support of almost the entire Indo-Guyanese population²³. Consequently, the rise of an independent nation was, simultaneously, a moment of inscription of a shift in the relationship with the old Metropole (Britain), and of deep fissures inside the country. Graves’ work portrays wandering beings confined in small rooms. *People of the Garden City* offers a glimpse of the reverberation of broad political histories in each space, small as it may be. Like the stained figures of *People of the Garden City*, many individuals carry with them, contemporaneously, marks of violence crystallized in reminiscences and bodies.

²³ More details can be found in: Despres (1967:62-66), Glasgow (1970:128-132); Hintzen (1989:32-37; 51-54; 63-70; 2004:112-117).

In fact, it's impossible to ignore the constant allusion of Guyanese people to the long-term effects of this transitional moment (the Independence period), whose phantasmagoria hover over the living. Far from being a fixed frame, the schisms of this period still resound, even in the form of narratives of losses, absences or resentments, even as an explicative resource for the tensions that emerged in other periods. It's not uncommon to hear in Guyana the sentence *this is a divided country*.²⁴

The remembrance of these conflicts conjures a practically invisible presence in contemporary Guyana: the British. Allocating responsibilities, Guyanese stress, very often, how determinant the deliberate actions of the British were in inciting animosities. The strong affirmation *they divided us and then left the country* is verbalized with some frequency in Guyana. Indeed, the white population in Guyana (0.01% according to the 2002 census) does not reduce the spectral force of the former colonizers.

In the 1960s, through an alliance with the United Force, a political party led by businessmen, and with support from Britain and United States, the PNC won the majority of Parliament seats, so Burnham became Prime Minister, keeping his power, according many authors, through massive election frauds until his death in 1985 (Hintzen 1989: 52-56; Trotz; Peake 1999: 54; Williams 1991: 271).

By the way, part of Graves's work is under the guardianship of Castellani House, the national art gallery and former residence of Burnham, a controversial personage known by his association with *obeah* – a term that encompasses several practices related to the manipulation and control of supernatural forces which are associated, in the Anglophone Caribbean, with witchcraft (Gibson 2001:18-19; Vidal & Whitehead 2004: 73) – and by following opposition to

²⁴ Italic expressions refer to native expressions. Similar expressions that regard the tensions and conflicts between Indo and Afro-Guyanese are: *Guyana is a split country*; *Guyana is a racial country*; *People in Guyana are very racial*.

his regime, the controversial politician is accused by many of causing the economic deprivation of Guyana during his ruling, of *destroying* the country, and even of *cursing* it.

After Burnham's death, the PPP won all elections between 1992 and 2010. During the electoral process of 1997 and 2001, several confrontations between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese took place, many people were killed, and hundreds of women raped. (Trotz 2004: 1-4). In April 2001, stores owned by Indian shopkeepers were burnt in Georgetown area. In 2006 no serious events were reported. During the 2011 election I was in Guyana, and no serious conflict took place, but Georgetown became a 'ghost town' for several days after 4:00 P.M since many people were afraid of disturbances. It's important to mention this atmosphere because certain moments, like the election period, seemed to be haunted by past events.

Basically is that scenario, about which I have presented only brief elements, that several academics mention to explain how Guyana was built as a racialized nation haunted by the colonial legacy. According to authors such as Brackette Williams (2001: 18-19) it is fundamental to understand how the nation-building was marked by attempts to deal with the colonial past and with the new contradictions that were raised during and in the years following independence. The relationship between several feelings of belonging – especially ethnic ones – and national identity in new independent states like Guyana was stressed in the specialized bibliography.

The most sophisticated venture in this line of investigation is William's work, *Stains in my name, war in my veins*, where she explores how "race, class, ethnicity, and culture had entangled in the historical development of particular ideological fields" (Williams 1991). It would be impossible here to cover all the details of the accurate analysis of Williams (see Mello 2014a: 61-66; 396-400). For the purposes of this article, sufficient is to say that Williams pays close attention to the historical constitution of what she calls "Anglo-European hegemony" in Guy-

ana, the “ideology” of which was marked by “racialized values”. In her vision, such “hegemony” took root in the country, assuming “phantasmagoric contours” after independence. In some measure, the attempts to “exorcize” the “ghost of colonialism” fostered “new hierarchies” based on the “structures of Anglo-European hegemonic domination” (Ibid.: 251-272).

According to the author, due to the process of decolonization of the country and to the authoritative PNC government, “fragments of colonialism hovered over the lives of Guyanese” (Ibid.: 127). The “process of homogenization intrinsic to the formation of a new nation” was counteracted by previous “heterogeneities and hierarchies” in such a way that Guyanese “struggled”, in their daily lives, against their “past and their present”. The “ghost of Anglo-European hegemony”, combined with the political and economic reality of the post-independence period, “could not be ignored by Guyanese population” (Ibid.: 257). This hegemony (in Gramsci’s sense) is defined as “ghostly” by the author because the colonizers (the British) were physically absent from the country – they avoided Guyana in the aftermath of independence. However, the “continuous influence” of this “pattern of past hegemonic domination” was, in several ways, “more powerful” in the 1970s and 1980s. The ghost of colonialism, in sum, was an “even-present presence” (Ibid.: 224) hard to fade out.

Daily and deep presences

The use of metaphors like these to think about and describe historical process is not free of consequences, since ghosts, spirits, and deceased persons are not merely allegorical historical mechanisms, iconic forms of social relations or symbolic expressions of secular realities, but instead beings with concrete existence in the daily lives of humans. (Cf. Chakrabarty 2001; Kwon 2008; Mello 2014b; 2016; Palmié 2014). In fact, Guyana is a country inhabited by several jumbies (spirits of the dead) and all of my field research, for ten months between 2010-2012, was marked by spiritual agency.

In my first day in the country I heard about jumbies, spirits of humans who had suffered a

violent (murder, accidents or due to witchcraft) or early death. Usually, jumbies are vengeful beings, unstable, resented, and evil, which change the state of mind of living persons, causing problems, sufferings, tragedies and apprehensions for them. Attached to earthly life, jumbies demand offerings of beverages and food, and even the sacrifice of animals (roasts, for instance), to be propitiated. The length of their existences depends, in that manner, on the performance of rituals that satisfy the wills of jumbies.

Something different occurs with another class of spirits, the *Dutch*. The *Dutch*, as Guyanese people say, are the spirits of the first colonizers of the three main regions of the country – Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo, three different Dutch colonies between 1650 and 1803, when they were taken by the British that unified the regions, in 1831, under the name of British Guiana. Guyanese people often associate the memories of the early settlers of the country with bloody events, particularly the taking of the three colonies by the British in 1803: in the disputes with the English, many Dutch families committed suicide (especially to avoid murders), while others individuals of Dutch descent were killed and raped; dispossessed of wealth, land, properties, relatives and friends, the former colonizers did not receive the appropriate funeral services. The nature of the first colonizers during their lives, marked by the urge to get rich at the expense of others (in this case, enslaved people) combined with the terrible moments of their deaths, became established as an indelible mark on the landscape of Guyana: dispersed throughout the coastal area of the country until today, the places of residence of these spirits are the old sugar plantations which they controlled centuries ago.

Due the unique circumstances of their raising, Dutch spirits have certain peculiarities. Some individuals, especially those versed in *obeah* practices, are able to invoke and control jumbies to harm other people, but no one has the capacity to master a Dutch spirit. These spirits tend to act only in self-interest, are not easily placated, and seek to retain the prerogatives of being the *owners* of the land (*masters of*

the land, or boundary masters), that is, the first inhabitants and owners, from the perspective of residents of the coastal region of Guyana, of the territories located in the country.

In sum, Dutch spirits tend to *possess* those who live in the places where they lived in the past, causing disturbances in the daily life of contemporary Guyanese not only because of their jealousy or vindictiveness, but also to experience pleasures that they abruptly ceased to have in their former lives. Often, these spirits have sex with people (both women and men) in the realm of dreams, and cause diseases, mental confusion and disordered desires (compulsion by the consumption of drugs or alcohol, high libido etc.).

The pervasiveness of Dutch spirits in the daily lives of my main interlocutors in Guyana – members of the Kali worship, a Hindu sect where deities *manifest* themselves in the bodies of humans – was remarkable. In the place where I conducted my fieldwork, a Kali temple named Blairmont, several individuals, most of them of Indian descent, seek assistance and healing from Hindu deities due to the *afflictions* caused by Dutch spirits – illness, sickness, tragedies, diseases, bad moods, depression, alcoholism, and so on.

The descriptive and interpretative task could conceive of the very existence of Dutch spirits as native historical views of the disputes between colonial powers over Guyanese territory (see Williams 1990 for a stimulating analysis), as representations of the colonial past of the country, as images from the past created and recreated through rituals, remembrances, and narratives. That kind of interpretation is valuable since Dutch spirits do have 'historical identities' – several reports about them stress their *origins* – but are not, I claim, a mere reflection, or epiphenomenon, of more 'real' ground 'facts' (history, politics, economics etc.). My own work (2014), influenced by Espírito Santo & Blanes (2014) is an attempt to trace the (long-term) effects of Dutch spirits in the daily lives and the ritual sphere of Guyanese people, as creators of society, as entities enmeshed with the biog-

raphies and trajectories of humans, as forms of existence, to quote Espírito Santo & Blanes (2014: 6) "manifested (and ultimately knowable) through their extensions [...] on a social and even historical plane, where extensions leave markings, traces, paths, and ultimately, 'evidences'".

Often, Dutch spirits, as well as jumbies, are labeled as mere expressions of Guyanese folklore, as if they could be reducible to the sphere of 'belief' – of course, no question is raised regarding the authoritative (Cf. Asad 1991) perspectives of interpreters, as if we were the only authorized persons capable of uncovering the 'realities' behind 'social representations'. The challenge is not to unveil the 'truths' behind the narratives, but to evoke a sociality which is inseparable from the presences of spirits (Cf. Cardoso 2007): In sum, to treat, analytically and conceptually, spirits as agents in the world.

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