Places That Frighten: Residues of Wealth and Violence on the Argentine Chaco Frontier

Gastón Gordillo *University of British Columbia*

Abstract: On the old frontiers of the Gran Chaco plains in northwest Argentina, people in rural areas argue that some of the overgrown ruins that dot the regional landscape have the power to "frighten" *(asustar)*, usually through the presence of ghosts, apparitions, or unusual sounds and lights. In this article, I aim to show that these experiences of fear contain important clues to the way local *criollos* (non-indigenous settlers of racially mixed background) spatialize their social memory. I analyze how the spatiality of these frightening presences is grounded on the vestiges of Jesuit missions, Spanish forts and colonial settlements that evoke the history of conquest that constituted the regional geography. In particular, I examine how criollo perceptions of these sites revolve around imaginaries of the wealth that allegedly characterized the region in the past and the violence once unleashed on "the Indians" who used to live there.

Keywords: fear, space, ruins, social memory, Gran Chaco, Argentina

Résumé : Dans les anciennes régions pionnières des plaines du Gran Chaco du Nord-Ouest de l'Argentine, certains ruraux prétendent que les ruines envahies par la végétation qui parsèment les paysages de la région ont le pouvoir de « terroriser » (*asustar*), généralement par le biais de la présence de fantômes, d'apparitions, de phénomènes sonores ou lumineux inhabituels. Dans cet article, je cherche à montrer que ces expériences de peur comportent d'importants indices relatifs à la manière dont les *criollos* locaux (colons non-indigènes d'origines raciales mélangées) donnent une dimension spatiale à leur mémoire sociale. J'analyse comment la distribution spatiale de ces présences effrayantes est ancrée sur les vestiges des missions jésuites, des forts espagnols et des implantations coloniales qui évoquent l'histoire de la conquête qui a structuré la géographie régionale. En particulier, j'examine comment les perceptions des criollos de ces sites tournent autour des imaginaires des richesses qui caractérisaient supposément la région dans le passé, et de la violence autrefois déployée contre « les Indiens » qui y vivaient.

Mots-clés : peur, espace, ruines, mémoire sociale, Gran Chaco, Argentine

During my fieldwork on the old western frontier of the Gran Chaco plains in northwest Argentina, there was an expression that local people used repeatedly when referring to the overgrown ruins of forts, Jesuit missions, or abandoned towns that dot the landscape and are associated with the conquest of the region. They would say in Spanish: "*ese lugar asusta,*" literally "that place frightens." By that, people meant that those who ventured there could be subject to an intense experience of fear, usually caused by the presence of a ghost or a strange sound. Fear is not the only feature they attach to those ruins, and not all ruins in the region are equally associated with this type of experience. Yet when people agree that a particular place "frightens," apprehension is part of a practice that evokes the history that constituted the regional geography. In this article, I aim to show that these experiences of fear contain important clues to the way local people spatialize their social memory. In particular, I analyze how the spatiality of these frightening presences evokes the history of colonial conquest against the "wild Indians" who once roamed the region. Further, I am interested in the cultural sensibilities associated with this perception, which see certain places not simply as frightening but as imbued with the capacity to *generate* fear: that is, "to frighten."

This bodily disposition can be analyzed in terms of what Raymond Williams (1961, 1973, 1977) called "structures of feeling." Much of the force of this concept comes from Williams' attempt to play with the tension between its two components, "structures" and "feeling," which at the time he began using this term (the 1960s) were often seen as excluding one another. With the concept of "structures of feeling," Williams was trying to account for the patterns that organize social subjectivity but also for the daily intimacies that make those "structures" fluid cultural fields, operating "in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (Williams 1961:48). As he put it, "structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution" (1977:133).

In this article, I analyze how these "social experiences in solution" are shaped by a social memory tangled with material vestiges from the past. In particular, I aim to show how local structures of feeling are configured by the spatiality of ruins in a process in which the latter become spatial-cultural sedimentations that people reconstitute, reinterpret and manipulate in terms of shifting collective experiences. In this region of Argentina, the southeast of the province of Salta, the way people construct this spatiality of fear involving local ruins draws on a relatively distant history of which they had no direct experience, for most of these sites were abandoned over two centuries ago. Therefore, the memories that these places evoke are based not on personal recollections but on a bodily disposition, a habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) terms, that draws on local narratives and images to read ruins on the landscape in a particular way.

The embodiment and remembrance of collective experiences of fear, suffering and terror have been the subject of numerous anthropological analyses (Das 2000; Feldman 1991; Gordillo 2004; Green 1999; Kleinman et al. 1997; Taussig 1987). But for the most part, these studies have focused on the memory of events directly experienced by the people under examination. In this article, I am interested in a type of fear that, even though equally grounded in people's lived experience, is reminiscent of events and conflicts that have long since come to an end. The spatiality of fear in this region, in this regard, is not necessarily linked to ongoing or recent conflicts but to a historically constituted structure of feeling that sees certain traces on the landscape as landmarks that precipitate the evocation of prior epochs. And the perception that those places "frighten" allows people to navigate and make sense of a geography seen as drenched in tension-ridden histories.

The analysis of this culturally mediated fear is important to account for the shifting social fractures that make up places in this region. A growing number of geographers and anthropologists have moved away from earlier conceptions of space as a fixed, rigid matrix and have examined space as a dynamic social and historical process that is permanently made and remade through practice, social relations, and political forms of contestation (Gordillo 2004; Harvey 1996; Massey 2005; Mitchell 2003; Moore 2005; Raffles 2002). In particular, several authors have explored the ways in which memory is a spatial practice that shapes people's perceptions of the geography and is, in turn, constituted by spatially grounded experiences (Basso 1996; Casey 1987; Gordillo 2004). I draw on this body of work to look at how fear becomes a cultural force that is important in analyzing both the spatiality of memory and the configuration of places as unstable, dynamic social formations. Ruins and other spatial traces, I argue, are particularly charged places in this regard, for they bring to light the historical nature of space and the tensions and ruptures that have constituted it.

Criollo Geographies and the Memory of "Indians"

Located at the eastern foot of the Andes, in the area where the Juramento River—called "Salado" downstream—flows down the mountains toward the Gran Chaco plains, this region was for several centuries a frontier separating the Spanish territories in the highlands from the lowlands under the control of *indios infieles* (infidel Indians).[1] Beginning in the late 16th century, the Spanish gradually built a number of forts, mission stations and towns on the frontier, both to protect it from attacks by indigenous groups and to launch military expeditions in the Chaco. After a long process of violence, confrontation, and accommodation, the local Lule and Vilela-speaking groups were either exterminated, pushed into the interior of the Chaco, or they intermingled with non-indigenous settlers. By the time the Argentine military finalized the conquest of the Chaco at the turn of the 20th century, the region of the Juramento-Salado River had become a geography without a noticeable indigenous population, dominated by cattle ranches and inhabited mostly by *criollos*, as non-indigenous rural dwellers of *mestizo* (racially mixed) background are called in northern Argentina.[2] This region, in fact, came to epitomize the home of the *gauchos salteños*—the cowboys that best represented in official narratives the cattle-raising livelihood of much of the province of Salta.

Most criollos I interacted with in the field are rural labourers who live in poverty, work on cattle ranches or agricultural farms, and own a few head of cattle. Others pay rent to landowners to graze their cattle on their lands. A few others own small and mid-size *fincas* (farms) and rely entirely on the labour of their own families. Beyond these differences, most local people see southeast Salta as an eminently "criollo" and "gaucho" region. Yet when they remember the past, they also highlight that "Indians" lived there and point out the different ways in which Christian missionization and violence gradually made them disappear as social actors. Influenced by state and Church-sponsored narratives and rituals that commemorate the regional history as an epic struggle between civilization and barbarism, most criollos remember those Indians as the epitome of savagery. Many emphasize that the latter were *malos* (mean) and *ariscos* (unfriendly or distrustful) who, in their hostility to civilization, were akin to wild animals. Yet together with this distancing from indige-

nous people and in tension with it, many criollos are open to acknowledging that they are in fact "mestizos" with "indigenous blood" who, therefore, partially descend from Indians. In other words, criollos are aware that the disappearance of indigenous people from southeast Salta was also the product of cultural and racial mixture and of the emergence of the criollos as a mestizo social subject. This mestizo identity in fact often makes many criollos create more ambivalent memories of those Indians and the civilizing violence once unleashed upon them, as we shall see.

The criollos' social memory is closely tied to the overgrown ruins that dot the forested hills and open fields that mark the landscape around the Juramento-Salado River. Most of these historical vestiges are on private lands, are not easily accessible, and have not been incorporated within state-sponsored practices of preservation. Yet local criollos, even those who do not live in the vicinity of these ruins, are sensitive to these sites' presence and see them as landmarks charged with the capacity to generate fear. This perception does not necessarily mean that people do not venture into these places. Some people do avoid them, as we shall see, but many have no problem going there for short periods of time during the day. Local criollos, in fact, guided me on most of my visits to these ruins. In this regard, most people see these sites as imbued with a sense of apprehension that does not automatically translate into outright fear. The transformation of these ruins into "places that frighten" is produced by contingent, often unpredictable events. But this usually involves the evocation of clusters of collective memories of events and actors associated with those sites. In what follows, I examine two of these clusters: the wealth that allegedly characterized the region in the past and the violence once unleashed on the indigenous people who used to live there.

Traces and Memories of Wealth

Beginning in the late 1500s, and for at least two centuries, the so-called *camino real* (royal road) passed along the Salado River connecting Buenos Aires to the mining centres in Alto Peru (today Bolivia). Currently, criollos living in this region invoke the memory of this road on a recurrent basis. On countless occasions during my fieldwork, I was told that "at the time of the Spanish" caravans of wagons full of gold and silver passed through the region. In people's collective memory, the actors who best embodied that wealth were *los Jesuitas* (the Jesuits). Jesuit missionaries were indeed active in this region in the 18th century, when they ran five stations among Lule and Vilela groups until the Spanish crown expelled the order from its territories in 1767. Today, people argue that the Jesuits were able to amass large fortunes due to the royal road and the labour of the Indians missionized by them. And the Jesuits, people agree, buried those riches underneath what are today those missions' remains.

The view that these ruins contain hidden treasures coalesced in a story I heard numerous times about the so-called "seven gold wagons of the Jesuits," which they allegedly buried before their departure with the hope that they would get them back on their return. Yet the Jesuits never came back and the seven gold wagons, so the story goes, are still there, below those remains. Currently, the overgrown ruins of two of those mission stations, San Esteban de Miraflores and San Juan Bautista de Balbuena, are relatively well preserved. Local criollos know these sites, respectively, as "the tower" (after the 15 metre high remains of the church) and "the church of La Manga" (named after the ranch on which the old mission chapel is located). People tell numerous stories about the riches that allegedly exist in or near these ruins and of the many treasure hunters who have tried to find them.

Criollos refer to these buried treasures as *tapados*, a term that can be roughly translated as "that which is covered" (*tapar* meaning *to cover*). Even though originally buried by social actors linked to the regional history, people tend to see tapados as sites jealously guarded by potentially frightening presences such as a *diablo* (devil) or an *alma* (soul)—figures that many criollos evoke to refer to the non-human, potentially dangerous beings roaming forested areas. One is able to find these riches only if these "devils" or "souls" mark their exact location through an unusual apparition embodied, for instance, in a rooster, a large snake or a light. The possibility of a person finding a tapado, in other words, ultimately depends on the willingness of those non-human beings to give it away. This is why many criollos agree that it is fruitless to try to search for tapados by using metal detectors or digging with shovels, for one can only find them if the latter are "granted" (*entregados*) as a gift. Further, many criollos also argue that those who do find tapados through encounters with "apparitions" nonetheless receive a cursed wealth, which either "doesn't last long" or later on causes the recipient's death—a view about wealth associated with diabolical entities that is common elsewhere in Latin America (Crain 1991; Taussig 1980). These perceptions have not stopped countless treasure hunters from combing the regional geography in search of tapados but locals tend to depict those searches as unsuccessful affairs conducted by people alien to the area. And the apprehension that many criollos associate with tapados brings to light the unresolved tension configuring this wealth:

that it is spatially proximate yet invisible, often unreachable, and ultimately cursed.

The view that a more prosperous, distant past has left a detritus of elusive yet potentially frightening riches is not restricted to the ruins of Jesuit stations. In May 2003, near the hamlet of El Vencido, not far from the limit between Salta and Santiago del Estero, a young man named Mariano took me to visit the mounds marking the remains of one of the first Spanish settlements in the Chaco: Nuestra Señora de la Talavera or Esteco (founded in 1565 and moved in 1609 to a new location farther west). We spent over an hour exploring the site, and on our return he took me to see a small pond of still greenish waters near the edge of the town's vestiges. Decades earlier and on that same spot, he told me, his great-grandfather saw a bright light that seemed to mark the presence of a tapado. That light, he thought, was probably caused by "the vapours" emanating from gold coins. His great-grandfather then grabbed a shovel and began to dig, thinking he had found one of "the gold wagons of the Jesuits." Yet after making significant progress he began hearing strange noises, made by "ghosts" or "spirits." He got scared and ran away. Rainwater subsequently filled up the hole he had dug and formed the pond we were observing. What seemed like a natural expression of the landscape was in fact the product of social practices informed and haunted by the memories of past riches. Ever since then, people in the area argue that the pond "frightens."

This apprehension is part of the dominant local sensibility toward the mounds of Esteco. Most inhabitants of El Vencido, located three kilometres west of the ruins, avoid entering the place close to sunset. People agree that "when the weather is about to change" or at dusk, it is possible to hear reverberations of the town's past life. Those sounds seem to have been even more apparent in the past. In October 2006, on a new visit to El Vencido, I talked extensively with Mariano's father, a man in his late 60s named Pablo. He told me that in his youth he could sometimes hear from his home a distant but clear murmur. He said,

> In the past, that place frightened a lot, especially at the time of prayer [at dusk]. It was really bad...When it was getting dark it was the time they made a ruckus [*la hora del bochinche de ellos*] in Esteco. You heard they were talking, you heard dogs, everything. It was a town.

It is primarily through the sounds of past mundane activities that Esteco lingers as an active presence on its own ruins, as if those sounds were the resonance of an epoch that resisted being erased from the landscape. And this is a presence that "frightens" and is closely associated with the remnants of past riches.

In this region, the Spanish ruins most famously associated with imaginaries of wealth are those of the second city of Esteco, the result of the first Esteco being moved in 1609 a hundred kilometres to the west, closer to the most important trade routes to Alto Peru. In this new location at the foot of densely forested hills, Esteco became the most important town of the Chaco frontier and concentrated the labour of thousands of indigenous men and women. In 1692, however, a powerful earthquake destroyed much of the town. Esteco, which had already entered a period of decline, was abandoned. According to a legend that is currently well-known in northwest Argentina, the inhabitants of Esteco were extremely rich, arrogant, and faithless, to the point that they used gold horseshoes and on rainy days put bread on the street to walk on. This is why, so the story goes, God himself decided to punish Esteco by causing the earthquake that destroyed it. Currently, criollos throughout this region agree that Esteco's fabulous riches still lie underneath the many mounds that mark the remains of this city, located a few kilometres east of Río Piedras, a small town of about 2,000 people. Generations of treasure hunters have searched for tapados there, leaving behind a landscape dotted with holes of different sizes.

Like the tapados left by the Jesuits, locals agree, the riches of Esteco are also looked after by potentially frightening presences. But the view that "God" sent the earthquake that obliterated Esteco is a further component of this apprehension and many criollos see the place as "cursed" (*maldecido*). The overgrown ruins of *la ciudad perdida* (the lost city) have for a long time been in a 50 hectare patch of forest located on a cattle ranch recently turned into a citrus farm.[3] Drawing on "the legend of Esteco," most locals see this forest as "damned" and many of the men who work on the farm have avoided entering it. This apprehension seems to be old. In 1906, an explorer from Buenos Aires conducted excavations in Esteco and complained that the local criollos feared the site and ended up refusing to work for him "because they heard the singing of a rooster or because they saw a ghost that lurked in the recently opened holes" (Payró 1960:198). As with the site of the first Esteco farther east, during my fieldwork in Río Piedras, people told me that strange roosters as well as dogs could be heard near the mounds, confirming that the ruins of "the lost city" are still haunted by forces and sounds reverberating from another era.

These frightening presences have curtailed many attempts to uncover the tapados lying below Esteco. Roberto is a former rural worker from Río Piedras now

in his late 60s. In September 2006, I visited him in his home and he told me how, when he was only 12, he "got scared" while searching for a tapado on the then cattle farm in Esteco. He was digging near a large mound when all of a sudden he felt "a cold thing" in his back, as if someone had stuck a cold dagger in his body. He ran away but was so terrified that he was unable to speak for four days. He got what criollos in the region call *susto*, a so-called folk-disease that is in fact known in many parts of rural Latin America. This is an often temporary state of bodily semi-paralysis in which a person loses his or her consciousness or ability to speak as a result of an intense experience of fear (see Green 1999). Roberto's grandmother eventually cured him and he recovered. But even though he continued working on the farm for several decades, he never entered Esteco again. The susto that temporarily took over his body is the most apparent product of the fear that can be triggered by these places. Therefore, when criollos argue that some places *asustan* (frighten) they mean not simply that people can be temporarily afraid; they also imply that this fear can be so intense that it can dislocate one's sense of self and make one lose control of one's consciousness.

The view that places such as Esteco "frighten" and the bodily disposition this view entails are not restricted to rural workers. In 2006 in Río Piedras, I met the grandson of the previous owner of the farm, an 18-year-old named Marcos who goes to college and works in the city of Salta but drives back to his hometown on weekends. Despite being part of the small local elite, he shared with local working-class criollos the view that the ruins of "the city of Esteco" are damned. Marcos told me that the previous year he had gone to Esteco on his bicycle and decided to take away with him a few pieces of the countless broken tiles that dot the site. On returning home, his bike felt heavier and slower than usual. From then on, he said, "many bad things" began happening to him: his mother got very ill and almost died; he had problems at school and work; and he began losing money. In Salta, he consulted "an astrologer" who told him that those objects had "bad energy" and that he should take them back to Esteco immediately. He did. On arriving in the ruins of Esteco to return the pieces of tile, he made the sign of the cross to deflect the place's bad energy. Since he knew I had been at the site several times, he told me, looking at me with a serious gaze, "I recommend that you do the same when you go to that place."

The view that the negative influences emanating from places such as this can be countered by symbols of Christianity is an important component of the structure of feeling shaping the spatiality of fear throughout the region. And the invocation of these symbols has been especially prominent in Esteco, given the particularly charged imaginaries that this place evokes. In 2000, a businessman bought the farm on which Esteco is located. He subsequently cleared and levelled a patch of forest on the eastern edge of the ruins and planted it with avocado trees. Shortly afterwards a frost, highly unusual for this area, killed all the plants. The owner feared that "the curse," stirred up by the levelling of some of the mounds, was behind the frost and contacted the priest from a nearby town to organize a religious ceremony in Esteco. In July 2004, a crowd of several hundred people arrived at the farm on several buses and trucks and gathered at the edge of the forest that hid the mounds of Esteco from view. The farm owner was present as was a member of the provincial legislature. The priest presided over the ceremony, and said, with his back turned toward the ruins of "the lost city":

> We want to ask God to put this sign of the cross in this place that's so historic...For the first time, and I know I'm not wrong, someone puts the cross in this place of Esteco so that Our Lord Jesus Christ...reigns over the life of this Church of Salta...With this blessing, we want to take any curse on this place away from it, take away all the curses and the fantastic stories that have been created about Esteco; ask for the souls of those who died in that event; free this place from any negative action, from any diabolical action...We want to free Esteco from any connotation of fear that we sometimes have in remembering...Free this place from this sad and difficult story, from everything that has been transmitted from generation to generation.

At the end of the ceremony, the priest and several men planted a one-metre wooden cross at the edge of the forest. This ceremony and the planting of the cross were remarkable attempts to invoke the power of the Church and Christianity to appease and control the negative, uncontrollable forces emanating from the remains of Esteco. It is worth noting that the priest was also trying to counter the structure of feeling that has long dominated collective perceptions of Esteco in the region, coalescing in "fantastic stories" passed "from generation to generation." This is a structure of feeling that he explicitly associated with the memory of Esteco and with the fear this place evokes. For Raymond Williams (1977:134), structures of feeling mobilize regularities in the lived experience of social actors sharing the same historical epoch, often cutting across class differences. As the ceremony at Esteco illustrates, this is the case in this region, where people of diverse class and social backgrounds share the view that certain places have the power to

"frighten." But what is distinctive about this particular ritual involving Esteco, in contrast to the accounts by working-class criollos examined earlier, is that the farm owner mobilized the power of the Church to try to counter this apprehension. The priest made another significant point: he was certain ("I know I'm not wrong") that no cross had been planted on that soil for over three centuries. This assumption further configures Esteco as an untamed place located beyond the reach of Christianity, and for that reason, requiring an affirmation of spatial and moral authority such as the planting of a cross.

Local perceptions of the ruins of Esteco and the Jesuit missions reveal that most people see the cursed riches hidden below them as the product of particular histories, ultimately tied to the process of conquest that configured the region. And some criollos are explicit in pointing out that this elusive wealth was produced by the past exploitation of indigenous labour. Some of these places, in this regard, "frighten" because they stir up memories of domination and violence.

Ruins of Forts and Bones of Indians

In this region of Salta, some of the clearest spatial reminders of colonial violence are the vestiges of the Spanish forts once built to guard the Chaco frontier. About 50 kilometres east of the second Esteco, near the hamlet of Balbuena, four relatively high mounds (five to six metres) mark the corners of what in the 18th century was Fort Balbuena. The well-preserved ruins of the Jesuit mission the fort was set to protect, San Juan Bautista de Balbuena, are a few kilometres away. Criollos living in the area argue that "the royal road" to Peru, and hence caravans of wagons carrying gold and silver, once passed only a few hundred metres away from "the fort."

The owner of the mid-sized farm that currently encompasses the four mounds is a tall, bright, energetic man in his 70s named Carlos. In July 2005, after I talked to him in his house in Balbuena for a couple hours, he took me to see the site of the fort, which forms an overgrown quadrangle of about one hectare fully surrounded by cornfields. While we were exploring the place, he told me that "40 years" earlier a group of men came to his house and asked him for permission to dig up the mounds. They thought that the place might contain tapados. He agreed, and they all began digging. Yet instead of a treasure they found human bones, and plenty of them, "all piled up." "It was a mass grave," Carlos told me:

> I think that when they killed large numbers of Indians, the Indians rebelled. And with the army that the Spaniards had, they liquidated them and buried them there. There are four mounds and we only opened up one of them. But I think that all the four mounds are the same and have bones.

I asked him who could have killed those people. "In those days, I think it was the Jesuits. Because those Indians who weren't tamed, they got them killed. They tamed many people, but others rebelled...The Jesuits made the Indians work for them." After discovering those bones, he continued, they simply buried them again. I asked him whether the place with the four mounds "frightens." He nodded:

> Yes, there are stories of apparitions. My dad was a person who didn't believe in those things. In 1961 or 1962, I was plowing that field...It was all cleared. There were no bushes, no weeds, nothing. Then, my dad came at night and told me: "I'm gonna relieve you for a while. Go get something to eat." "All right," I said. And I was away for about an hour. When I came back, my dad said to me: "You're going to frighten me." I asked him why, and he said I had been standing on one of those mounds, thinking I was going to frighten him...I told him it wasn't me. "Come on. Don't be silly," he kept telling me. But it wasn't me. He said there was a guy standing up there. I never saw anything, but my dad assured me it was true.

In a few strokes, Carlos wove through the local traces of death, violence and wealth to highlight some of the elements that characterize local views of the spatiality and historicity of fear. And the discovery of a mass grave at a site that embodies the past violence of the frontier brought to light the forms of oppression and disciplining that contributed to creating the riches that many people see as an elusive yet potent component of the local geography. Further, for Carlos, the mounds constituting the fort's remains were actually four mass graves; hence, they were nothing but piles of bones covered with dirt. The very materiality of the site, in other words, consisted of human remains. That the treasure hunters found traces of death rather than of wealth reveal that behind the surface appearance of riches existed a hard reminder of colonial violence. This is also a perception in which the actors most closely associated with the wealth of the tapados, the Jesuit missionaries, are remembered as agents of violence (rather than as "the protectors of Indians," as official narratives currently portray them). The mysterious apparition on the mound emerges here as a sign of disquiet, as a reminder that something disturbing happened there. This is also a sign that the remains of Fort Balbuena do not form an enclosed, restful place but an unstable, tense configuration haunted, in this case, by memories of death. And this is, unambiguously, the death of Indians.

About a hundred kilometres to the north, on a cattle farm covered with thick forests near the town of Las Lajitas, lie the ruins of another fort, which was in fact the most important Spanish fortification on the whole Chaco frontier: San Fernando del Río del Valle (founded in 1750 and abandoned in the 1810s). More so than in the case of Balbuena, criollos living in the area tell many stories of how the soldiers manning the fort fought the Indians who raided the frontier. The owner of the cattle farm where the fort's vestiges are located is a man in his late 50s named Armando, who lives humbly in a small house in Las Lajitas. I met him in July 2003, after several people in town told me he knew the location of the fort. When I visited him in his home, he immediately agreed to take me to see the ruins in his decrepit pick-up truck. A local acquaintance of mine, a man in his 30s named Víctor, joined us. Armando drove us to his farm, parked the truck at the end of a narrow dirt road, and we walked for about 40 minutes through the dense forest that covers much of the farm, with Armando leading the way, slashing his machete back and forth. We finally reached the site. Two-metre high mounds marked the perimeter of the fort and overgrown piles of large bricks signalled the layout of internal buildings. Víctor had never been there and was clearly impressed by the site. As we were exploring it, he kept repeating: "there has to be something here; there has to be something here." He was convinced, he said, that there were tapados below. Armando did not pay much attention to these remarks; rather, he commented that, decades earlier, a long, thick pole with steps carved on it could be seen lying on the ground (at that moment, it was nowhere to be seen). It was the lookout from where a sentinel saw "whether the Indians were coming." He added that captured "indios" were hanged from that same pole. I asked Armando whether the place "frightens." He shrugged; he said that some people argue that it does but that since he had never been there at night he had not seen or heard anything strange. Yet he then told me an intriguing story: a man named Gregorio claimed that decades earlier, while walking near the fort, he was "whipped" by "the soul of a Mataco," the standard derogatory term used in the region to refer to the Wichí people that used to inhabit the area around Las Lajitas.

Intrigued by the story, the following day I visited Gregorio at his home in Las Lajitas. A man in his 60s, he looked like the archetypical gaucho of the region: he was wearing a leather hat and baggy pants (*bombachas*, the typical gaucho pants) and his horse was standing outside his house. After chatting for a few minutes, I asked Gregorio about the story of "the ghost of the Mataco." He nodded casually. That happened, he said, because he found human bones carved out of the earth by flooding on the banks of the Del Valle River, near the ruins of "Fort San Fernando." On seeing the bones, he decided to rebury them inland. Suspecting that a soul was probably haunting those remains, he told me that he said to the bones: "Now I'm burying you again. Don't screw with me." Despite that, Gregorio said, "that bastard punished me." Shortly thereafter, he was riding his horse sharing the saddle with his two children near the fort's ruins. "And all of a sudden," he said, "I feel several whippings. They hit me with three strong whippings. Then my kids said: 'Dad, what's that?' 'Nothing, kids,' I told them. 'It's nothing.' But I was beaten with three big whippings, strong ones. ... I said to myself that maybe it was that Mataco shithead. That Mataco must have been big!" I asked him how he knew it was a Mataco. "They say they buried them over there."

As these stories illustrate, some of the ghostly presences that criollos associate with local ruins embody the actors who once constituted the social landscape of the frontier. And the apprehension grounded in the vestiges of these two Spanish forts is closely connected to human remains that, almost by default, are assumed to be those of Indians. This assumption draws on the memory of the violence that once engulfed this region and the fact that the current relative absence of indigenous people in southeast Salta can be traced back to that violence. The detritus of human bones that is part of these ruins' spatiality, therefore, creates an apprehension that often resurrects those long-vanished social actors not as passive objects of remembrance but as forces imbued with agency: as ghosts. And this is a presence that, in the eyes of Gregorio at Fort San Fernando, "punished" those who disrupted the sedimentation of those remains in space.

It is also worth noting that, for people like Víctor and for the men who asked Carlos to dig up the mounds near Balbuena, the ruins of these forts cannot but hold treasures. Imaginaries of wealth and of violence, in this regard, are entangled within the same social field shaping both their collective memory and the physicality of the regional landscape.

The memory of the killing of Indians attached to these sites is far from implying a celebration of indigeneity or a broader political critique of the violence unleashed against indigenous people. As noted, most criollos tend to participate in the hegemonic narratives that celebrate the triumph of Christianity and civilization over the savagery that once haunted the frontier. Yet by attributing potency to those remains, many criollos evoke the power contained in the memory of savagery and acknowledge the agency that those Indians once had in shaping those

some geographies. In so doing, they partially counter state-sponsored attempts to erase that agency from the regional collective memory and to project Indians into a remote past with no bearing on the present or on current landscapes.

Conclusions

Criollo structures of feeling about the forms of fear awakened by local ruins cannot be separated from their social memory of the conquest that turned the region into a "gaucho" geography without indigenous people. Wealth and violence are, as we have seen, closely intertwined sets of imaginaries within the tension-ridden sensibilities through which rural people in southeast Salta imagine their history. The stories of buried riches, and the fact that the sites allegedly containing them "frighten," point to the dialectic of proximity and distancing that marks criollo social memory. The wealth attributed to the Jesuit missions and to Esteco highlights the view that in the past that same geography was very different from the one that people currently know—one that is characterized by high levels of poverty. Yet this distancing is part of a tense movement that simultaneously turns those traces of wealth into spatially proximate presences, located almost within hands' reach. The widespread view that myriad tapados exist in the region makes it clear that those riches are still *there*, as indissoluble components of the landscape. Yet this is an invisible, largely unreachable and ultimately dangerous wealth. Criollo views of tapados, in this regard, are characterized by a profound sense of estrangement from them. And this estrangement, in turn, is embodied in perceptions of fear and apprehension.

As we have seen, the social sensibilities organizing the spatiality of fear among criollos are also connected to memories and physical traces of past experiences of violence, in a process in which wealth and violence are seen as part of a single thread. This is clear in the view that the Jesuits' wealth was not only brought on wagons from elsewhere but also produced locally through the exploitation and ultimate extermination of indigenous people. Thus, in the case of the mass graves of Indians in Fort Balbuena, the current absence of indigenous people and their presence as piles of bones evokes a suffering that is ultimately the expression of a collective death. That in Las Lajitas Gregorio claimed he was "whipped" by "the ghost of a Mataco" buried near the ruins of a fort, is also a notable inversion of the labour hierarchies and forms of violence that constituted the frontier. Indians armed with whips are still fighting back, even if only occasionally and even if they do so as ghosts.

As these different accounts show, the anchoring of apprehension in particular places, and especially in ruins, indicates that for local people something meaningful happened there. Most criollos, in this regard, read and navigate the regional landscape through a cartography of potentially frightening places that is as cultural as it is historical. This is a sensibility that treats the landscape not as an inert, arrested object but as a fraught, potent configuration that, as Raymond Williams would put it, is "in solution."

The nature of this fear is relevant for examining these sites' spatiality. In this region, people do not say, as most people would in other parts of Argentina, that certain places "are frightening" (i.e., that they "*dan miedo*"). Neither do they say that it is "the ghosts" or "the bones" located in particular sites that create apprehension and eventually "susto." People unambiguously say that it is the place itself that "frightens." In saying that, they anchor the production of fear and susto and, in fact, the very agency that causes fear *in space*. In other words, it is the place itself that produces fear, as if fear was intrinsically tied to the spatiality of that site. Fear is an embodied articulation of the memories that turn those places in ruins into unstable, discomforting configurations; it is also an expression that history is not simply the past but, rather, a spatially grounded, forceful presence that still haunts the living.

Gastón Gordillo, Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z1, Canada. E-mail: gordillo@interchange.ubc.ca.

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Notes

1 In the 19th century, in the province of Salta, the Salado River was renamed Juramento (Oath) to commemorate that in 1813, during the wars for national independence, General Belgrano made his troops swear loyalty to the Argen-

tine flag on this river. Once the river enters the province of Santiago del Estero it is called Salado again.

2 In the Juramento-Salado region in southeast Salta, there are only three small urban settlements (with a total population of 600) in which people identify as *aborígenes* (indigenous). These people, however, do not descend from the original inhabitants of the region but from Wichí who migrated to the area in the early 20th century from the province of Chaco and, to a lesser degree, the Bermejo and Pilcomayo Rivers.

3 Early in 2005, the farm owner bulldozed this forest with the aim of building a fruit-packaging plant, an event that created intense public controversy about the preservation of the remains of Esteco. The bulldozing received considerable media attention in Salta and a local judge ordered any further alteration of the site to stop, but the future status of the ruins of Esteco remains to this day unclear. I have analyzed this incident and the local responses to it elsewhere (Gordillo 2009).

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