



LIMA BARRETO ARCHIVE, A MEMORY FOR THE WORLD: CULTURAL LEGACY AND THE PRESERVATION OF AN UNDERGROUND MEMORY

Carlos Henrique Juvêncio

PhD in Information Science at Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasília, Distrito Federal, Brazil.

Professor at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1646741868261976>

carloshjuv@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT:

This article aims to understand the significance of the inscription of the Lima Barreto Collection, housed in the Manuscripts Section of the National Library, as a UNESCO Memory of the World, through the lens of Pollak's (1989) concept of subterranean memory. This study argues that the Lima Barreto Collection, beyond representing the writer, constitutes a vital social element. It immortalizes a Black individual, descended from enslaved people, who endured significant hardships due to the class and racial prejudice, as well as social vulnerability. The methodology employed involves bibliographic research, which seeks theoretical references on personal archives and their relationship with memory, alongside an understanding of UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme. The study concludes that it is essential to highlight the memories of numerous minorities groups that constitute society but are often unrepresented in memory institutions

Keywords: personal archives; Lima Barreto; memory of the world program.

INTRODUCTION

An individual elected to occupy a chair in the Brazilian Academy of Letters (ABL) is referred to as an “immortal,” symbolically granting its members the fleeting sensation of immortality through a glory “that remains, elevates, honors, and consoles¹” (Secchin, 2016). Afonso Henriques de Lima Barreto, known simply as Lima Barreto, was denied this privilege. The incumbent immortals denied his candidacies three times, as he did not meet their established standards. However, in 2017, immortality was conferred upon Lima Barreto when his personal archive was designated as a “Memory of the World” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Although the writer himself never received a similar title similar to this self-imposed and somewhat pedantic one, this worldwide recognition honors his journey.

Born in Rio de Janeiro on May 13, 1881, to João Henriques de Lima Barreto and Amália Augusta de Lima Barreto, both descendants of enslaved people, symbolism accompanied him from a young age. At seven years old, his birthday gift was the abolition of slavery.

Spectator to significant events in the history of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, Lima Barreto lived through the tail end of the 19th century and the dawn of the 20th. He bore witness to the Abolition of Slavery, the proclamation of the Republic in 1889 and social turmoil, as the Naval Revolt (1891-1894) and the Vaccine Revolt (1904). From 1900 onwards, as Rio de Janeiro served as the federal capital, Lima Barreto not only observed the city’s significant urban reforms but also chronicled them (Schwarcz, 2017).

Throughout his life, he held a bureaucratic position as a clerk at the Ministry of War but was distinguished for his writing, working as a journalist and author. He published numerous short stories, reports, and books, leaving a vast legacy to Brazilian literature (Schwarcz, 2017). Considered a pre-modernist, his works aimed to portray Brazilians and Brazil realistically, a trend that gained momentum from 1922 onwards, particularly during the Getúlio Vargas era (1930-1945).

This raw portrayal of Brazilian reality, particularly in the capital at the time, is a hallmark of Lima Barreto’s work. His writings exposed the forced displacement of the poor to the suburbs, away from the elite gaze, and the constant battle against prejudice. In addition to being Black, Lima Barreto also struggled with alcoholism, which often led to his marginalization by his peers in the Brazilian intelligentsia².

This article aims to explore the significance of the Lima Barreto Collection,³ and its being inscription as an UNESCO Memory of the World. This exploration will be conducted through the lens of Michael Pollak’s (1989) concept of subterranean memory. According to

1 “In a September 1898 session of ABL, immortals José Veríssimo and Lúcio de Mendonça presented, the following verse by Machado de Assis as its motto” (120 Anos..., 2018, n. p.).

2 Lima Barreto’s biography details numerous clashes with members of the Brazilian Academy of Letters

3 While referred to as a Collection, what exists is, in fact, the writer’s personal archive. This naming convention is common at the National Library, where even archives are often labeled as Collections, reflecting the institution’s collector-centric approach.

Pollak, subterranean memory is an “[...] parte integrante das culturas minoritárias e dominadas, [e] se opõem à ‘Memória oficial’, no caso a memória nacional” (Pollak, 1989, p. 4)⁴. He also emphasizes that

[...] uma vez que as memórias subterrâneas conseguem invadir o espaço público, reivindicações múltiplas e dificilmente previsíveis se acoplam a essa disputa da memória, no caso, as reivindicações das diferentes nacionalidades” (Pollak, 1989, p. 5)⁵.

Thus, the memory of Lima Barreto can be considered subterranean one, as he was a Black, poor, and alcoholic author whose stigmas marginalized him throughout his life. The Lima Barreto Collection, consisting of approximately 1,134 documents, is held by the Brazilian National Library under the custodianship of the Manuscripts Section.

Os manuscritos, desorganizados, após sucessivas mudanças, ficaram sob a guarda de sua irmã Evangelina de Lima Barreto e foram encontrados e organizados por Francisco de Assis Barbosa. Assis Barbosa, futuro biógrafo de Lima Barreto, sugeriu a Rubens Borba de Moraes, então diretor da Biblioteca Nacional, sua aquisição, o que foi feito após avaliação, em 1947 (Perez, 2018, p. 378)⁶.

In 2023, a little over a century after the writer’s passing, a new inventory of the Lima Barreto Collection began. This initiative was part of the commitment undertaken following the collection’s designation as a Memory of the World.

METHODOLOGY

This article posits that the Lima Barreto Collection transcends the representation of the writer himself. It serves as a vital social artifact, immortalizing a Black individual, descended from enslaved people, who faced immense adversity due to class, race, and social prejudices.

Initially, Lima Barreto faced class prejudice stemming from his birth outside the elite, despite being the godson of the Viscount of Ouro Preto⁷ – a connection that granted him certain advantages but did not shield him from the social scrutiny of his peers. This scrutiny

4 Translation: “[...] integral part of minority and dominated cultures, opposing the ‘official memory,’ in this case, the national memory” (Pollak, 1989, p. 4, editorial translation).

5 Translation: “[...] once subterranean memories penetrate public space, diverse and often unpredictable claims arise in the contestation over memory, as seen in the competing claims of different nationalities” (Pollak, 1989, p. 5, editorial translation).

6 Translation: “Following successive relocations and a period of disorganization, the manuscripts were safeguarded by Lima Barreto’s sister, Evangelina de Lima Barreto. They were later discovered and organized by Francisco de Assis Barbosa, the future biographer of Lima Barreto. Assis Barbosa proposed the acquisition of the collection to Rubens Borba de Moraes, then director of the National Library. This acquisition was finalized after an evaluation in 1947.” (Perez, 2018, p. 378, editorial translation).

7 “Afonso Celso de Assis Figueiredo was born in Ouro Preto, MG, on February 21, 1837, and died in Petrópolis, RJ, on December 21, 1912. He graduated in Law from the Faculty of São Paulo in 1858. At the age of 29, in 1866, he became Minister of the Navy during the height of the war against Paraguay. In 1889, during one of the most challenging periods of imperial politics, he assumed the presidency of the Council of Ministers. He faced fierce opposition from supporters of the republican regime, including Rui Barbosa, Benjamin Constant, José do Patrocínio, Father João Manuel de Carvalho, and others, both in the Chamber and especially in the press. The crisis stemming from the ‘military question’ reached its peak, and the Viscount of Ouro Preto (a title he was granted in 1888) handed over the leadership of the Cabinet to the Emperor in the early hours of November 15, 1889. The “military coup” also toppled the monarchy. Following the proclamation of the Republic, Ouro Preto was arrested and exiled to Europe, along with his brother, Counselor Carlos Afonso de Assis Figueiredo” (Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, 2023, n. p.).

was undoubtedly intensified for a Black man in a society that had only recently emerged from the shackles of slavery. If the deep impacts of the slave regime still resonate today, one can only imagine the pervasive effects it had in the early 20th century.

As an alcoholic, Barreto was hospitalized multiple times at the D. Pedro II Asylum for the Insane. His bohemian lifestyle offered him a front-row seat to the transformations brought about by the “Paris in the Tropics” project⁸ which profoundly affected the city and its inhabitants, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status like himself. A prime example is the displacement of the population from the city center to Cidade Nova and the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, driven by the expansion of railway lines. Lima Barreto himself resided in Todos os Santos, a suburban neighborhood.

Thus, we connect Lima Barreto’s thoughts and writings to the social portrait he established and the memory he entrusted to the future through these accounts, emphasizing their social impact. Elements of his biography illuminate his thoughts, his work, and the transformations of both the city and the country.

Finally, this study aims to examine the goals and intentions of the Memory of the World Programme, its social impact, and how its guidelines influence how society engages with memory records designated as “Memory of the World.”

The methodology employed was bibliographic research, seeking to understand Lima Barreto’s personal archive and its relationship to social memory, with an emphasis on aspects of what Michael Pollak (1989) terms subterranean memory. This form of memory challenges official state narratives, as the documents belong not to a prominent member of the elite, but to a marginalized writer who was undeniably subjected to racial and social prejudice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Lima Barreto Collection encompasses not only the original manuscripts of numerous works by the writer but also correspondence spanning from 1892 to 1922, the year of his death. “ O acervo documental de Lima Barreto (1881-1922) consta de originais de livros, contos, artigos para periódicos, anotações, recortes de jornais, algumas correspondências enviadas e várias recebidas, no total de 1.134 registros do período de 1892 a 1922” (Nogueira, 2023, p. 10).⁹ These documents provide glimpses into various aspects of Lima Barreto’s life and times. They reveal requests for favors, such as soliciting books or securing employment at newspaper offices, as well as comments on his works and texts. They also contain greetings from friends and colleagues and engage in discussions about the national political and literary landscape, notably in letters exchanged with his friend and publisher Monteiro Lobato.¹⁰

8 This term refers to the architectural style of Paris’s urban reforms of the 19th century. These reforms significantly influenced those of Pereira Passos in Rio de Janeiro and similar urban renewal projects around the globe.

9 Translation: “The documentary collection of Lima Barreto (1881-1922) consists of original books, short stories, articles for periodicals, notes, newspaper clippings, some sent correspondence, and several received, totaling 1,134 records from 1892 to 1922” (Nogueira, 2023, p. 10, editorial translation).

10 “Monteiro Lobato (1882-1948) was a prominent Brazilian writer and publisher, best known for his beloved children’s book series ‘O Sítio do Pica-pau Amarelo.’ He founded the publishing houses ‘Editora Monteiro Lobato’ and later the ‘Companhia Editora Nacional.’ A pioneer of children’s literature in Brazil and across Latin America, his impact on the literary landscape remains significant.” (Frazão, 2022).

As a journalist, Lima Barreto provided a narrative of the changes sweeping through the federal capital. Many of his texts vividly portray daily life in Rio de Janeiro, always with a sharp and critical focus on the plight of the most vulnerable and the underlying motivations behind the major reforms implemented by Pereira Passos in the early 20th century.

A staunch critic of the Europeanization of the then-federal capital, Lima Barreto did not spare even the National Library from his scrutiny, despite its newly erected building on Avenida Central (now Avenida Rio Branco) between 1905 and 1910. In a 1915 article, he condemned the opulent palace it now occupied, arguing that it was not welcoming to the public (Barreto, 2017a).

Therefore, the perspective that emerges from Lima Barreto's personal archive clashes with the narrative established by the status quo. The city's remodeling, while ostensibly aimed at urbanizing the space and addressing rampant sanitary crises, had a dark underbelly. The tenements, often overcrowded and home to many, were demonized and demolished. The population, predominantly poor, was displaced to the city's outskirts, the suburbs, or forced to relocate to the hills, particularly Morro da Providência, in order to remain in proximity to the urban center. Thus:

[...] essas memórias subterrâneas que prosseguem seu trabalho de subversão no silêncio e de maneira quase imperceptível afloram em momentos de crise em sobressaltos bruscos e exacerbados. A memória entra em disputa. Os objetos de pesquisa são escolhidos de preferência onde existe conflito e competição entre memórias concorrentes (Pollak, 1989, p. 2)¹¹.

According to Pollak (1989), these subterranean memories inherently challenge the official narrative, unearthing facts that the established elites may prefer to suppress, thus creating an unofficial counter-narrative. Once institutionalized, the archive integrates into the national memory. However, its content may not always align with the collective narrative propagated by the state.

Personal archives, like Lima Barreto's:

[...] contêm a visão individual das experiências da vida; afastam-se, portanto, da formalidade coletiva e da organização sistêmica presentes em outros tipos de documentos. Há nos arquivos pessoais uma intimidade inexistente no sistema formalizado, coletivo e corporativo de arquivamento. [...] No caso dos arquivos de escritores, as experiências registradas no material arquivístico incluem não apenas os atos e acontecimentos concernentes ao seu trabalho, mas também suas ideias,

11 Translation: "[...] these subterranean memories, which continue their work of subversion in silence and almost imperceptibly, surface in times of crisis with abrupt and exacerbated jolts. Memory enters into dispute. Research objects are preferably chosen where there is conflict and competition between competing memories" (Pollak, 1989, p. 2, editorial translation).

opiniões, preconceitos e reações emocionais com relação ao circuito literário, atividades de ensino, de publicação, participação em júris e exercícios da crítica, além de toda a experiência do próprio ato de escrever (Hobbs, 2018, p. 262-263)¹².

Thus, Lima Barreto's archive serves as a window into his worldview, political leanings, and his network of relationships (and adversaries). Oliveira, Macêdo, and Sobral (2017, p. 2)¹³ echo Hobbs' perspective, stating that:

Arquivos pessoais são produtos socioculturais que constituem referenciais para a memória coletiva e para a pesquisa histórica. Esses conjuntos documentais, além de refletirem as funções desempenhadas por seu produtor e seus interlocutores, contêm vestígios do seu caráter individual, ou seja, não só possuem apenas documentos considerados "oficiais" e públicos, mas também, por sua natureza, são fontes sobre a vida, os relacionamentos, o indivíduo e sua intimidade; em última análise, traduzem a sua identidade ou identidades.

Regarding identities, the documents depict Lima Barreto's multifaceted life as a public servant, journalist, and writer. Above all, these documents coalesce into an involuntary portrait of the society of his time. Correspondence with Monteiro Lobato, for instance, unveils the behind-the-scenes workings of his book publications, the anxieties and frustrations of an underappreciated author, and commentary on the state of the country as a whole.

Furthermore, his original works, even those unpublished during his lifetime, expose the turmoil he endured due to prejudice and social alienation, particularly during his confinement at the Asylum of the Insane, where he penned "Diário do Hospício" and "Cemitério dos Vivos." These unfinished works offer profound insights into Lima Barreto's personal struggles, his keen intellect, and—if the reader will indulge the expression—his genius as a writer. The originals, now published, provide a raw and unvarnished look at the Brazilian healthcare system for psychological ailments. A victim of alcoholism, Lima Barreto lived amongst all manner of patients during his stays in mental institutions, conducting an anthropological study of his experiences and the diverse characters he encountered. (Barreto, 2017b).

Thus, his inscription for the Memory of the World Programme derives from expert opinions on Lima Barreto, highlighting that:

Trata-se de coleção preciosa, rara por sua composição, reunindo manuscritos do escritor e várias outras documentações, preservada pela Biblioteca Nacional do Brasil, com grande parte do acervo já disponibilizada via internet. A memória do escritor, intelectual negro e pobre, vivendo em subúrbio da cidade do Rio de Janeiro, é

12 Translation: "[...] contain the individual perspective of life experiences; thus, they diverge from the collective formality and systemic organization present in other types of documents. There is an intimacy in personal archives that is absent in the formalized, collective, and corporate archiving system. [...] In the case of writers' archives, the experiences recorded in the archival material encompass not only acts and events related to their work but also their ideas, opinions, prejudices, and emotional reactions concerning the literary circuit, teaching activities, publications, participation in juries, and critiques, as well as the experience of the act of writing itself." (Hobbs, 2018, p. 262-263, editorial translation).

13 Translation: "Personal archives are sociocultural products that constitute references for collective memory and historical research. These documentary sets, besides reflecting the roles played by their creator and interlocutors, contain traces of their individual character. They not only possess 'official' and public documents but, by their nature, also serve as sources about the individual's life, relationships, and intimacy, ultimately translating their identity or identities.." (Oliveira; Macêdo; Sobral, 2017, p. 2).

documentação não só de sua obra mas de toda a realidade social do Brasil durante a Primeira República, revelando questões relativas a raça e diferenças sócio-econômicas que ajudam a compreender o país.

Dentre os documentos de importância decisiva para o estudo e a pesquisa, não só do autor como da própria cultura brasileira, estão os manuscritos escritos a lápis, no dorso de papel oficial do Hospício Nacional, com o relato dos três meses de internação do escritor naquela instituição. Lúcido, o escritor analisa as condições dos internos, dele mesmo, e reflete de forma muito especial sobre a realidade dos hospícios durante a década de 1920 (Resende, 2017, n. p.)¹⁴.

Deus (2017, n. p.)¹⁵ supports Resende (2017) and observes that:

Cabe ressaltar a singularidade deste acervo, que permite aos pesquisadores de diferentes áreas entrar em contato com uma história do Brasil “vista de baixo”, através da perspectiva de quem observava o mundo e os acontecimentos da época a partir dos subúrbios do Rio de Janeiro e da condição de homem negro que vivenciou a transição da monarquia à república e da escravidão à liberdade, atento aos processos de reiteração dos mecanismos de exclusão e desigualdade preservados – e perpetuados – no início do século XX.

Lima Barreto fez dos seus romances, contos, crônicas, artigos, diários e correspondências – documentos que integram o seu arquivo sob custódia da Biblioteca Nacional – uma forma de intervenção e participação nos embates da época em que viveu, o que torna esses registros documentais fonte preciosa para o estudo e a compreensão do agenciamento da história por parte de um homem negro no Brasil do pós-abolição. Denunciou incansavelmente as mazelas do regime republicano nos moldes em que foi implantado e concretizado ao longo de suas primeiras décadas de existência, expondo suas contradições e refletindo sobre os desafios que se configuravam naquele tempo. Além disso, acompanhou atentamente os desdobramentos de acontecimentos como a Revolução Russa, a Primeira Guerra Mundial e tantos outros. Autor de vasta produção literária, abordou os mais variados temas e se empenhou em fazer o debate público das grandes questões da época.

14 Translation: “This is a precious collection, rare in its composition, gathering the writer’s manuscripts and various other documents, preserved by the National Library of Brazil, with a large portion of the collection already accessible online. The memory of Lima Barreto—a Black, impoverished intellectual residing in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro—is not only a testament to his work but also a documentation of the broader social reality of Brazil during the First Republic. The collection unveils issues related to race and socioeconomic disparities, contributing to a deeper understanding of the country. Among the documents of decisive importance for study and research, not solely of the author but of Brazilian culture as a whole, are the manuscripts penned in pencil on the back of official paper from the National Asylum. These manuscripts detail the writer’s three-month internment at the institution. In a lucid state, Lima Barreto analyzes the conditions of his fellow inmates, including himself, and offers a unique perspective on the reality of asylums during the 1920s.” (Resende, 2017, n. p., editorial translation).

15 Translation: “This unique collection offers researchers from various fields a glimpse into a ‘history of Brazil from below,’ through the lens of an individual who observed the world and events of his time from the vantage point of Rio de Janeiro’s suburbs. Lima Barreto, a Black man who experienced the transition from monarchy to republic and from slavery to freedom, was acutely attuned to the processes that perpetuated mechanisms of exclusion and inequality in the early 20th century. Through his novels, short stories, chronicles, articles, diaries, and correspondence—the very documents that comprise his archive at the National Library—Lima Barreto actively intervened in and participated in the struggles of his era. These records serve as an invaluable resource for studying and understanding history from the perspective of a Black man in post-abolition Brazil. He tirelessly denounced the ills of the republican regime as it unfolded in its early decades, exposing its contradictions and reflecting on the challenges of that time. Moreover, he closely followed global developments such as the Russian Revolution, World War I, and many others. As a prolific author, he tackled diverse themes and actively engaged in public discourse on the major issues of his day.” (Deus, 2017, n. p., editorial translation).

The “Memory of the World” prestigious label, bestowed by UNESCO, aims to preserve and safeguard the documentary heritage of humanity. The mission of the Memory of the World Programme is:

[...] facilitar a preservação, com as técnicas mais apropriadas, da herança documental do mundo; [...] facilitar o acesso universal ao patrimônio documental; [...] aumentar em todo o mundo a consciência da existência e importância do patrimônio documental. (Organização das Nações Unidas para Educação, Ciência e Cultura, [2023], our translation)¹⁶.

Thus, one of the responsibilities undertaken by institutions honored with UNESCO’s designation of their documentary sets is to publish and disseminate information about these materials through catalogs, inventories, guides, and other means. Whenever feasible, digitizing the data, either in full or in large part, to facilitate online consultation must be another goal.

A careful analysis of UNESCO’s proposal reveals that the organization cannot guarantee the absolute integrity of these sets. Despite numerous international treaties aimed at safeguarding heritage during times of war, there are countless instances of destruction of built heritage (monuments and buildings), as well as natural heritage (Eco, 2014), including documents. However, by creating and disseminating sources

A practical illustration of this is the survival of numerous catalogs and inventories despite the destruction of libraries and archives over time. These surviving documents allow for the partial reconstruction of the collections these institutions once held.

The analytical inventory of the author’s personal archive at the National Library Foundation, titled “Lima Barreto: no curso da vida e das leituras,” was published in 2023 and is available exclusively in an interactive digital format (access link in footnote 4). However, this was not the first attempt to catalog the documents within the Lima Barreto Collection. A previous effort was made in 1985 with the publication of volume 105¹⁷ of the “Anais da Biblioteca Nacional do Catálogo do Arquivo Lima Barreto”.

As a source of information, a catalog or inventory fulfills the social function of making the described documents known, acting as a bridge between the researcher and their desired materials.

CONCLUSION

For a considerable time, archivists overlooked personal archives and techniques. However, when examined through the lens of memory studies, researchers consistently reaffirm their significance. Even if imperfect, these primary sources are indispensable for reconstructing historical events. Memory’s role is not to provide a comprehensive, macro-

¹⁶ Original: “[...] facilitate preservation of the world’s documentary heritage. [...] Catalyse universal access to documentary heritage [...] Enhance public awareness worldwide of the significance of documentary heritage”. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023).

¹⁷ Site: http://memoria.bn.br/pdf/402630/per402630_1985_00105.pdf.

level reality, but rather a micro-level perspective, characterized by the absence of totality and the presence of competing narratives. Elites have traditionally enjoyed the privilege of having national institutions preserve their memories, leaving ordinary individuals with the responsibility of honoring the nation's celebrated figures.

In the case of Lima Barreto, Monteiro Lobato, his publisher, and Francisco de Assis Barbosa, his first biographer (Nogueira, 2023), played crucial roles in ensuring the writer was not forgotten. Lobato tirelessly promoted Barreto's works even after his death, elevating his presence in national literary circles. Barbosa, on the other hand, secured the immortality of Barreto's legacy beyond his written works. He facilitated the sale of the writer's documentary collection to the National Library by his family.

Preserving Lima Barreto's personal archive equates to preserving the memory of the Black community, the suburban residents of Rio de Janeiro, and those who have experienced psychiatric institutionalization. This documentary collection represents the highest embodiment of the concept of social memory as defined by Halbwachs (2006), and crucially, of subterranean memory (Pollak, 1989) that has been brought to the surface. It stands as an exception to the norm within institutions and places of memory, where a poor, Black, and marginalized individual can achieve the immortality denied to him in life.

In conclusion, this article recalls the social function of archives as enshrined in Law No. 8,159 of January 8, 1991: "Art. 12 Private archives can be identified by the Public Authority as being of public and social interest, provided they are considered as relevant sources for national history and scientific development." While citing this legal instrument in the case of Lima Barreto may be anachronistic, it underscores the importance of recognizing the broader societal role of archives as repositories of information about the past. These archives elevate numerous individuals and events to a state of enduring remembrance.

Therefore, it is imperative to bring forth from obscurity the memories of countless groups that constitute society but remain unrepresented in memory institutions.

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