

**DECOLONIZING BRAZIL:  
MINOR HEROISM IN MÁRIO DE ANDRADE'S *MACUNAÍMA***

**João Albuquerque**

Postdoctoral fellow

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

**ABSTRACT:** This article intends to discuss what is specifically at stake in what concerns a possible epic feature found in *Macunaíma* marked by protest and non-conformity. As follows, *Macunaíma* is envisaged as hero who represents a minor culture, not in the sense of being the culture of a minority of the population, but rather in the sense of being the culture of a minoritized people, subjected to a grinding power. Analyzing how parodical and satirical aspects of the narrative relate to some indigenous legends, I argue that *Macunaíma* criticized the cultural and economic (neo)colonialism to which Brazil was (yet) subjugated in the early twentieth century, while destabilizing the rational, realistic and logical-positivist categories of colonial thought.

**Keywords:** Epic; Minor; Decolonialism; Indigenism; Carnavalization.

**Resumo:** Este artigo pretende discutir o que está especificamente em jogo em *Macunaíma* no que diz respeito a uma característica épica marcada pelo protesto e pela não-conformidade. Por conseguinte, *Macunaíma* é visto como um herói representativo de uma cultura menor, não no sentido de ser uma cultura de uma minoria da população, mas antes no sentido de uma cultura de uma população minorizada, sujeita a um poder molar. Analisando como os aspectos paródicos e satíricos da narrativa se relacionam com algumas das lendas indígenas ali presentes, o argumento central deste artigo consiste na ideia de que *Macunaíma* se erige como uma crítica ao (neo)colonialismo cultural e econômico que (ainda) subjugava o Brasil no princípio do século vinte, ao mesmo tempo que desestabiliza a racionalidade, o realismo e o lógico-positivismo inerente às categorias de pensamento colonial.

**Palavras-Chave:** Épico; Menor; Decolonialismo; Indigenismo; Carnavalização.

## Introduction

In 1926, immediately after finishing the first draft of *Macunaíma*, Mário de Andrade wrote a preface in which he relates the writing of this narrative to his research on Brazil:

O que me interessou por Macunaíma foi incontestavelmente a preocupação em que vivo de trabalhar e descobrir o mais que possa a entidade nacional dos brasileiros. Ora depois de pelejar muito verifiquei uma coisa me parece que certa: o brasileiro não tem caráter. Pode ser que alguém já tenha falado isso antes de mim porém a minha conclusão é (uma) novidade pra mim porque tirada da minha experiência pessoal. E com a palavra caráter não determino apenas uma realidade moral não em vez entendendo a entidade psíquica permanente, se manifestando por tudo, nos costumes na ação exterior no sentimento na língua na História na andadura, tanto no bem como no mal. O brasileiro não tem caráter porque não possui nem civilização própria nem consciência tradicional. (ANDRADE, 2017: 190-1)

By the year 1926 Mário de Andrade was already conscious of the relativity and singularity of his conclusions about the *national entity*. The assertion of the Brazilian people's lack of character is the result of a *discovery* and of the *work* of an individual, that is to say, of an inextricable conjunction of re-searchable elements with a creative, playful, inventive and transforming personal vision about Brazil. Since the inextricability of that conjunction has its origin in a two-way relation, which covers the contingencies and mutual transformations arising from the interactions between the national entity and the individual, Brazil is solely liable to be represented as a living being, able to obtain singularity in its inseparability from the historical becoming of the individual that provides its representation.

Regarding the substantial characterization of the *national entity*, it could not be more complex. The Brazilian's lack of character comes from an impermanence of its psychic entity, resulting from the sparse consolidation of historical processes on the former. All this is a consequence of colonial politics of economic extraction and human predation, which guaranteed to its agents the success of the activity and the preservation of the *status quo* through the organization of the population into a structure of hierarchical domination established resorting to racial criteria. In concomitance, the population was kept under a widespread educational underdevelopment which generated in it an inability to depart

from the categories of thought that kept it debased. These historical consequences of colonial politics remained active in Brazil<sup>1</sup> not only because they were present in the forms of habits of action and structures of thought (moral, political, cultural, etc.), but also because they were (and are) reintroduced economically and ideologically in the post-colonial societies through the phenomenon of globalization<sup>2</sup>.

In *Politiques de l'Inimitié* (2016), Achille Mbembe exposes, through the decolonial psychiatric critique of Frantz Fanon, the difficulties of the colonized subject to achieve emancipation, which do not consist solely of “avoir été assigné à une race, mais d'avoir intériorisé les termes de cette assignation; d'en être arrivé à désirer la castration et à s'en faire complice. Car la fiction que l'Autre avait fabriquée à son sujet, tout ou presque tout incitait le colonisé à l'habiter, à en faire sa peau et sa vérité.” (12) [“one's being assigned a race but one's internalizing of the terms of this assignation, that is, one's coming to the point of desiring and becoming the accomplice of castration. For everything, or nearly everything, encouraged colonized peoples to inhabit as their skin and their truth the fiction that the Other had produced in their regard.” (2019: 5)] In other words, the representations that the colonized subject has of himself, when he has them, are exclusively conceived by a power that at no time gave him an active role, a voice, a participation in such conception. Condemned to a sole and absolutist vision of History, whose documentation befalls on a writing which operates anthropological reductions, cultural appropriations, and, in the best of cases, exotic visions of the Other tinged with condescension, such representations end

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1920s are precisely the decade which mark the beginning of the secular tendency for Brazil's literacy, which nevertheless was never extended, throughout the 20th century, to the entire country. During this historical period, Brazil kept a continuous regime of blatant discrimination of the deep rural areas exerted by the centers of power, which have always channeled the entirety of the country's resources towards the urban centers and the economically developed regions or with potential for industrial development. These are the conclusions of the study “Analfabetismo no Brasil: configuração e gênese das desigualdades regionais”, from Alceu Ravanello Ferraro and Daniel Kreidlow, summarized in the following terms: “The factors that have been reducing the illiteracy rates in Brazil are mainly the concentration of public administration (first in Rio de Janeiro and later in Brasília), the small farmers (in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina), the combination of urbanization and industrialization (in São Paulo and more recently in Minas Gerais and Paraná), the geographical closeness to the centers of political and economic power. But illiteracy has never been reduced by the latifúndia, not even those used for coffee plantations.” (179)

<sup>2</sup> Analyzing the thought of Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo defends that the modern colonialism reinvented itself to the point of dispensing the effective human presence in post-colonial territories, thus surpassing the phenomena of “decolonization and nation building; coloniality is the machine that reproduces subalternity today in the form of global coloniality in the network society.” (426)

up being very unrepresentative. This unsatisfactory quantity and quality of the representations of the immense multiplicity of populations, groups and ethnicities which constituted the totality of the Brazilian people provide a full justification for the insufficient consolidation on the latter of historical processes, something which according to Mário de Andrade is the cause for their lack of character.

Prevented from self-representing themselves in their differentiated multiplicity, the Brazilian people therefore have an essential human faculty stunted: memory. Memory is the faculty which guarantees a minimum of continuity in the impermanence of things in order for us to (re)make sense(s) out of them, a faculty which connects and untangles, in a process which goes from what we were until what we are, what remains and what changes, repetition and difference.

Born from a wide research and work on the national entity of its author, *Macunaíma* attempts to counter this “unmemory” of the popular, regional, non-white Brazilian civilizational traditions. Taking inspiration, on the one hand, from the Brazilian literary traditions with a decolonizing potential, and incorporating, on the other hand, sayings, proverbs, vocabularies, legends, grammatical structures with roots in oral tradition, diverse elements from fauna and flora, and a wide variety of customs from the peoples of Brazil, Mário de Andrade creates, as paradoxical as such formulation may seem like, a radically historical narrative “debaixo de um carácter sempre lendário porém como lenda de índio e de negro.”<sup>3</sup> (ANDRADE,1996: 492) With this gesture, the work ends up containing, in a certain way, a proposal for a refoundation of the Brazilian nation in terms which are completely alien to those commonly used to narrate its History in official documents.

Despite the strong presence of legendary elements associated to the Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures in *Macunaíma* being a fact easily confirmed, to this must be appended the information that the weight of the first element prevails, in a significant way, in relation to the weight of the second. Much of this is due to chance, since the idea to write *Macunaíma* was born from the correspondence that Mário de Andrade found between the lack of character that he saw in the Brazilian people and the heroic Amerindian

---

<sup>3</sup> Letter from the March 1, 1927, addressed by Mário de Andrade to Luís da Câmara Cascudo.

figure Makunaíma, from the studies of Theodor Koch-Grünberg<sup>4</sup>. From the bibliographical sources directly used for the conception of the narrative, it is consensual that the most important was the second volume (and, secondarily, the third volume) of the work *Vom Roraima zum Orinoco* (1917), from the German ethnologist<sup>5</sup>. There are several myths and legends from the Taulipang and Arekuná indigenous groups narrated in the aforementioned work to which Mário de Andrade makes an allusion or recreates, to a greater or lesser extent and faithfulness to the original, in the process of composition of his narrative.

In light of the foregoing, it follows that *Macunaíma* translates into conscious memory the unconscious memory of a Brazil and a homophone hero which are profoundly traditional. As such, the work critically recreates the uncritical unconsciousness that the Brazilian individual has of his traditions and also of himself. On this process, a refoundation of Brazil at the linguistic level also takes place. The narrative carries to the extreme the project for creating a Brazilian language (freed from the *enslavement* imposed by the Portuguese grammar) that its author had been developing since the early 1920s, combining the languages of all those traditions and the forms of perceiving the world which are inherent to the latter in a sole language, characterized by Haroldo de Campos in the following terms: “Uma das riquezas de *Macunaíma* é justamente essa “fala nova” (“impura” segundo os padrões castiços de Portugal), feita de um amálgama de todos os regionalismos, mescla dos modos de dizer dos mais diferentes rincões do país, com incrustações de indigenismos e africanismos, atravessada por ritmos repetitivos de poesia popular e desdobrada em efeitos de sátira pela paródia estilística.” (1992: 179)

---

<sup>4</sup> In the unpublished preface from 1926 previously cited, Mário de Andrade reveals how the idea to write *Macunaíma* came about: “quando matutava nessas coisas [ie, na falta de carácter do brasileiro] topei com Macunaíma no alemão de Koch-Grünberg. E Macunaíma é um herói surpreendentemente sem carácter. (Gozei.) Vivi de perto o ciclo das façanhas dele. Eram poucas. (...) Então veio vindo a ideia de aproveitar pra um romancinho mais outras lendas casos brinquedos costumes brasileiros ou afeiçoados no Brasil. Gastei muito pouca invenção neste poema fácil de escrever.” (“*Macunaíma*” 2017, 191) I shall analyze with more detail, throughout this study, some aspects of the Macunaímic indigenism.

<sup>5</sup> *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco* (1917) emerges from the trip of Theodor Koch-Grünberg to the Amazon (1914-17). The work is divided into five volumes, which include the following contents: travel diary: description of the journey through the Branco river until Roraima, the Uraricuera, the Ventuari and the Orinoco (v. 1), collection of narratives: myths and legends of the Taulipang and Arekuná Indians (v. 2), ethnographic observations, songs, healing formulas, maps and drawings made by the indigene (v. 3), dictionary (v. 4), and photographic archive (v. 5).

Regarding the racialized psychic alienation of the colonized subject which Achille Mbembe elaborates from the thought of Frantz Fanon, Mário de Andrade satirizes it in *Macunaíma* through its systematic representation in the action of the protagonist as well as of the other characters which belong to subjugated economical classes (as the relatives of Macunaíma, for example), reproducing to the point of absurdity the colonial oppression in its iniquitous, vexatious, merciless and without remorse attitude towards the Other. Read from this angle, *Macunaíma* cynically highlights its determinations, putting forward an unequivocal protest directed at the Brazilian reality.

Simultaneously, in the inevitable quality as victims of this system which they intensify themselves, Macunaíma and the other (neo)colonized subjects adopt, not always consciously, subversive behaviors in relation to the oppressive structures of such system, thus drawing escape lines from where they might get away. Such escape lines go through imaginary and magical strategies, becomings, deceptions, camouflages, the creation of other forms of action and thought which are not only the rational, the realistic and the logical-positivist. By destabilizing the categories of colonial thought with its uncertainties, *Macunaíma* shows them a non-conformist narrative and, consequently, not liable for being reappropriated.

This psychological paradox of the colonized subject, which mirrors the uncritical mutability of the Brazilian collective psychic entity, its character without a character, is thus reconverted through literature into an instrument which generates an emancipating movement, without which the Brazilian sees himself unable to create his own *civilization* and a *traditional conscience*.

### **A Minor Heroism: Carnivalization and Indigenism**

Among the several categorizations that Mário de Andrade attributed to *Macunaíma* (1928) in several moments of his life, *rhapsody* was the one that ended up prevailing, at least in the eye of literary critique. And rightly so, it should be added, due to the strong presence of oral, popular and musical traditions in the narrative, along with an inescapable

epic<sup>6</sup> dimension. Narrating the life of its homonymous hero, the plot begins with the advent of Macunaíma's birth, in the middle of the Brazilian Amazonian jungle, in the State of Roraima, and ends (if we exclude the epilogue) with his death, in the same location. In between, there are multiple episodes and adventures which are told of a character who is in constant movement throughout the most diverse places of the Brazilian geography, with some sporadic incursions into neighboring countries.

Some of the narrative's most pronounced characteristics are a dynamic and magical causality between events and short episodes, and concision in contextual information and in the characters' physical and psychological characterization (done predominantly through the description of the action). The exception to this focus on a narrative sequentiality in constant mutation is chapter IX, "Carta pras Icamiabas", consisting of an epistle, which besides being extensive and prolix, is poured in a language widely incongruous in relation to the one used in the remaining chapters, where Macunaíma addresses the Icamiabas with the trivial motivation of asking for money.

The axis of the narrative spins around the muiraquitã, an indigenous amulet which is offered to Macunaíma by the amazon Ci before she dies (at the end of chapter III), and in the sequence of the romantic envelopment between these characters. After it was offered to him, Macunaíma loses the muiraquitã, which ends up falling into the possession of his antagonist, Venceslau Pietro Pietra, the Giant Piaimã, who lives in São Paulo. Unresigned with the disappearance of the gift from his late wife, Macunaíma sets off on a search for the muiraquitã, which is filled with tribulations and conflicts. When the amulet is finally recovered and his antagonist is defeated, Macunaíma decides to return to the jungle. The reacquisition of the muiraquitã ends up not being an auspicious one and the return to his place of origin is marked by a series of unfortunate events, which culminate in the hero's tragic ending. In the last chapter of the story, Macunaíma is the victim of a trap set up by

---

<sup>6</sup> In the *E-Dicionário de Termos Literários*, it is stated in the entry for the word "rapsódia", elaborated by Latuf Isaias Mucci: "Originário do grego *rhapsodía*, significando "canção costurada" (...), o termo "rapsódia" designa, desde a Grécia arcaica, tanto cada um dos livros de Homero (século VIII a.C) quanto os poemas épicos cantados por alguém que não fosse o criador dos poemas, como o aedo o era. Rapsodo (em grego clássico *ραψωδός* / *rhapsôidós*) é o nome dado a um artista popular ou cantor que, na antiga Grécia, ia de cidade em cidade recitando poemas, principalmente epopéias. Diferia-se do aedo, que compunha os próprios poemas e os cantava, acompanhado de um instrumento (lira ou fórnix)."

Vei, the sun-goddess, who performs an act of vengeance due to the fact that the hero had broken the promise (in chapter VIII) of marrying – with an oath of faithfulness included – one of the goddess’ three daughters, preferring a Portuguese woman over one of them. Vei causes a heatstroke that leads Macunaíma to fall into the temptation of diving into a cold lake, where Uiara, the Mother of Waters, rips apart the body of the hero and makes him lose the *muiraquitã* once more. Tired of life, Macunaíma goes to meet the sorcerer Pauí-Pódole, who turns him into the constellation of Ursa Major, and thus ends the story.

On this macro-structural narrative axis, which constitutes a unified totality, there are several micro-narratives grafted with a relative autonomy however, and which, despite being centered in the celebration of the individual hero (Macunaíma), possess a secondary role in the progress of the main action. Such characteristic allows us to point out a common feature between *Macunaíma* and the European medieval epic tradition. However, the similarities are far from stopping here.

Manoel Cavalcanti Proença, with *Roteiro de Macunaíma* (1955), a fully detailed and erudite study, was the first critic to point out the similarities of Macunaíma with the heroic figures of the *chansons de geste*, thus adding further elements for the comparison in general of the work of Mário de Andrade with medieval epic poetry. The aspects in common listed by the critic are a causality of events and a depiction of magical characters, which differ from historiography due to the absence of explanations in a space-time context which is aprioristic to the sensitive (Kantian) experience<sup>7</sup>. In an essay from 1936, entitled “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, Walter Benjamin extends the understanding of this dialectic between magical and historical narratives, by stating that historiography represents, in its relation with epic forms, an undifferentiated creation zone, from whence it is established the need, in the study of any of those forms, to research the relation between that form and historiography. The differences between both types of

---

<sup>7</sup> “[Macunaíma] Tem de comum com aqueles heróis [as figuras de gesta medievais] a sobre-humanidade e o maravilhoso. Está fora do espaço e do tempo. Por isso pode realizar aquelas fugas espetaculares e assombrosas em que de São Paulo foge para a Ponta do Calabouço, no Rio [de Janeiro] (...). E as fugas são várias, são motivo frequente no livro, e sempre com essa revolução espacial, e absoluto desprezo pelas convenções geográficas. Enquanto subverte itinerários, zigzagueia no tempo em avanços e recuos que só um herói de gesta pode ter. Como aquele Carlos Magno da *Canção de Rolando* que era um ancião de barba florida quando apenas – historicamente se sabe – tinha trinta e cinco anos.” (7-8).



discourse can be scrutinized through a comparison between the chronicler and the historian. While the historian is constrained to explain, whatever the case, the events which he is working on, the chronicler, free from such constraints, may present such events as models representing the flow of the becoming of the world. Walter Benjamin adds that this was the procedure of the chroniclers in the Middle Ages, who were the forerunners of contemporary historians:

By basing their account of history on a divine plan of salvation – an inscrutable one – they [the chroniclers of the Middle Ages] have from the very start lifted the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders. Its place is taken by interpretation which is not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of history. (91)

In the wake of this dialogue between *Macunaíma* and medieval epic discourse, Gilda de Mello e Souza, in *O Tupi e o Alaúde* (1979), proceeds to a comparative reading between *Macunaíma* and *La Quête du Saint Graal*. Not limiting herself to simply point out the influences and similarities between the texts, Souza clarifies the parodic dimension of *Macunaíma* in relation to the epic code of *La Quête du Saint Graal* in every respect, by analyzing in detail the plans of the plot, the description of the heroic character, and the object itself that is the motivation for the quest – muiraquitã *versus* holy grail. It is a study which highlights the way how the several forms of humor and comicality permeate the heroic elevation of the characters, the rhetorical grandiloquence, and the seriousness which characterize the aforementioned code, hybridizing it<sup>8</sup>.

In fact, the study from Gilda de Mello e Souza falls within the robust tradition of reading *Macunaíma*<sup>9</sup> in the light of Bakhtinian theories. In the introduction to his book from 1965, *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin advocates the existence of a popular European comical and carnivalesque medieval culture which continued throughout the renaissance. According to this Russian theorist, this medieval carnivalesque culture had essentially three modes of manifestation: forms and rituals of spectacle (carnavalesque

---

<sup>8</sup> The separation between the epic speech and the comical speech was firstly theorized in *Aristotle's Poetics*.

<sup>9</sup> This tradition was initiated by Mário Chamie, with the study *Intertexto* (1970), and had continuation in: *Macunaíma – Ruptura e Tradição* (1977), from Suzana Camargo; *O Tupi e o Alaúde* (1979), from Gilda de Mello e Souza; *Macunaíma: Carnaval e Malandragem* (1982), from Robson Pereira Gonçalves; and also *Ruínas de Linhas Puras: quatro ensaios em torno a Macunaíma* (1998), from José Luiz Passos.

celebrations, comical works represented in public squares, etc.); verbal comical works (where parodies are included) of a diverse nature: oral and written, in Latin or in the common language; several forms and types of familiar and rude vocabulary (insults, oaths, popular mottos, etc.).

In its parodic and satirical manifestations, such culture reflected an opposition to the official culture of that epoch (which included the epic), characterized by a serious, religious and feudal tone, that was used for the preservation of the structures and figures of power in the very same positions they had always held. The carnivalesque culture was, therefore, a minor culture, not in the sense of being the culture of a minority of the population, but rather in the sense of being the culture of a minoritized people, subjected to a grinding power. *Macunaíma* is precisely the prototype of the fusion of all the minoritized people of Brazil, constituted by ugly, poor, fatherless, black, indigenous people – in the very first chapter, the protagonist is presented as being an ugly child, a “preto retinto e filho do medo da noite” (ANDRADE, 1996: 5), born from an Indian woman, and who does not know who his father is nor does he care, in other words, his orphanhood is a naturalized condition.<sup>10</sup>

From the point of view of the epic nature of the narrative, to proceed with a Bakhtinian reading of *Macunaíma* implies, therefore, a comprehension of the operativeness which the parody of the epic medieval code embodied in *La Quête du Saint Graal* has in the satire of the official coeval Brazilian culture of Mário de Andrade. The purpose of such endeavor is not to revisit the theme of parody in all its extension, but rather, through the use of an example, to analyze how *Macunaíma* draws some escape lines from the mechanisms of oppression which were at the center of Mário de Andrade’s concerns in relation to the Brazilian reality from the beginning of the twentieth century. Let us quote a passage of the study from Gilda de Mello e Souza:

As ações cujo encadeamento constitui a narrativa arturiana fixam um tempo e um lugar estáveis, de paz e justiça, de onde o agente principal parte no começo da trama e para onde retorna no fim, reintegrando-se à antiga ordem. *Macunaíma* é em larga medida a paródia desse esquema: o Uraricoera é apresentado em várias instâncias como o espaço das privações, da fome, da disputa com os irmãos, da luta com a própria mãe, da aventura erótica tumultuosa e sangrenta. É desse lugar

---

<sup>10</sup> It is curious to observe that *Macunaíma*'s family shares the characteristic of single parenthood with the mulatto family of Mário de Andrade, “não incomum entre as classes mais pobres daquele tempo” (TÉRCIO, 16).

carente, punitivo, injusto que o herói parte em busca da muiraquitã; é a ele que retorna no final, para ser expulso e destruído.” (285)

As I had the opportunity to point out above, the Uraricoera is the place where both the beginning of the narrative and the birth of the protagonist coincide. *Macunaíma* does not begin *in media res*, but rather in this moment of origin, wherefore such needy, punitive and unfair place is its “natural” context. The hunger which plagues the mocambo<sup>11</sup> leads the protagonist to participate, from an early age (chapter I), in the family activities in search for food. However, when Macunaíma uses his intelligence to hunt a tapir, his own family wields a form of domination over him, denying him the tastiest parts of the meat during the division and only allowing him to have the guts. The social and family context of Macunaíma block his desire, submit him to humiliating oppressions; which the protagonist himself reproduces in a mimetic, gratuitous and vengeful fashion: in chapter II,

---

<sup>11</sup> To name the place of origin of Macunaíma, where the latter lived among his community, Mário de Andrade alternates between the use of two words: “mocambo” (Chapters I, II, XI e XVII) and “maloca” (Chapters I, II, III, V, VIII, X, XII, XVI, XVII and Epilogue). According to Manuel Cavalcanti Proença, “maloca” is an indigenism, and has the following significations: “Aldeamento de índios. Theodoro Sampaio o deriva do tupi, como corruptela de *mâr-oca* – a casa de guerra. Significa aldeia, ranchada de índios.” (apud 2017: 249) In what “mocambo” is concerned, Diléa Zanotto Manfio, in the glossary of the digital edition of *Macunaíma*, assigns to it, with basis on the work from Manuel Cavalcanti Proença and from Aurélio Buarque de Holanda Ferreira, an African origin “do quimbundo *mu’kambu*, ‘cumeeira. Habitação pobre, feita de folhas de palmeira. Palhoça, choça’ ” (in 2017: 252-3) The linguist José Horta Nunes adds further meanings of the word relevant for this study, by also associating it to the Afro-Brazilian communities. By means of interpreting a merciless colonial portrait of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nunes attributes to “mocambo” two additional designations: a refuge for black enslaved individuals; and an agglomeration of precarious habitations located in the woods where the black communities lived in clusters. This researcher emphasizes that the colonial account associates to such place the notions of “desordem” and “ladroeira”, since the *settlement* of Brazil is at stake in relation to such matters and “os mocambos são vistos como obstáculos a esse povoamento, de maneira que, diferentemente dos brancos que vivem nas fazendas, a formação dos mocambos não é considerada um processo de povoamento.” Being seen as a place of gathering rather than a settlement, the “mocambo” acquires the connotation of site of resistance, being distinguished from the word usually used as its synonym, “quilombo”, which points towards the idea of a place for settling, with an ingrained sense of community. The words “maloca” and “mocambo” thus designate precarious, isolated or group habitation sites associated to warrior (or resistance) activities from minor communities which are eventually (semi-)nomad.

I suppose that Mário de Andrade was at least partially conscious of these significations when he wrote *Macunaíma*. This supposition is based on the use by the latter of the word “tapera”, which only occurs at the end of the narrative (Chapters XV, XVI, XVII), mostly when Macunaíma returns to the jungle and sees himself in a situation more precarious than the initial one, scarred by diseases and with his group reduced to the nearest familiar nucleus. According to Diléa Zanotto Manfio, “tapera” is a word of indigenous origin: “do tupi *tape’ra*, aldeia extinta. Casa pequena, pobre ou abandonada em lugar ermo.” (in ANDRADE, 2017: 264) In the second paragraph of the Epilogue, the narrator tells the fatal fate of the tribe from which the protagonist descended: “Dera tangolomângolo na tribo tapanhumas e os filhos dela se acabaram de um em um. Não havia mais ninguém lá. (...) Um silêncio imenso dormia à beira-rio do Uraricoera.” (ANDRADE, 1996: 167)

Macunaíma moves, through an act of magic, the house of his own family to the other margin of the river, where there is plenty of food, but, observing that his mother does not limit herself merely to eat the food and accumulates bananas to feed the other members of the family clan, he undoes the magic and lets everyone starve; in the first episode of chapter XI, Macunaíma goes out to hunt with his brothers, Jiguê and Maanape, but the enterprise goes wrong and everything he manages to hunt, through the use of fire, are two charred rats, which he proceeds to eat without sharing with his brothers. Despite the failure of the initiative, Macunaíma returns to the inn where he was lodged and lies shamelessly to the people who were there, claiming that he had hunted two deers, and had shared the food with his brothers. When the latter return to the inn, the lie is promptly uncovered, and, when he is confronted about it, Macunaíma confesses that he had lied without any objectifiable goal or any intention to gain an advantage from such attitude.

The proof that the precarious economic context directly influences the limitation to a minimum of connections arising out of desire is the sexual involvement of Macunaíma with the wives of Jiguê, his brother. The cheating of his first wife, Sofará, with Macunaíma (chapter I) is not what leads Jiguê to beat her first and foremost, but solely the fact that she had not work to bring food home: “Nem bem [Macunaíma e Sofará] voltaram do passeio, tardinha, Jiguê já chegava também de prender a armadilha no rasto da anta. A companheira não trabalhara nada. Jiguê ficou fulo e antes de catar os carrapatos bateu nela muito.” (ANDRADE, 1996: 11) Later on, when Macunaíma gets involved with Iriqui (chapter II), the second wife of Jiguê, the latter understood what had happened, but makes an assessment of the balance of power – Macunaíma by then has the body of an adult – and decides that it is not worth picking up a fight, since there is an abundance of food on the site: “Jiguê viu que a maloca estava cheia de alimentos, (...) todos esses comes e bebes bons... Jiguê conferiu que não pagava a pena brigar com o mano e deixou a linda Iriqui pra ele. Deu um suspiro catou os carrapatos e dormiu folgado na rede.” (ANDRADE, 1996: 19-20)

If the maloca in Uraricoera is so precarious, why does the protagonist return to this place at the end of the narrative? Well, the fact is that his experience in the urban centers, and especially in São Paulo, is in the antipodes of having proved itself to be auspicious,

notwithstanding the recovery of the *muiraquitã*, since it was marked not only by precariousness but also by conflicts, tribulations and deceptions (which led, among other nefarious events, to two deaths and resurrections by *Macunaíma* himself). Although the experience of an unsuccessful migration was not *the* Brazilian reality, it was certainly *a* truly Brazilian reality. For the poorer classes that lived in very difficult contexts in the rural zones, the city was the promise of a better life<sup>12</sup>, a promise which justified significant migratory movements. Nevertheless, such promise was far from being fulfilled for most people, and it was not infrequent for many to find, in an urban environment, equal or even greater ordeals, submissions and even death. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other notable narratives, such as the theatrical play *Morte e Vida Severina* (1955), from João Cabral de Melo Neto, or the documentary-film *Brasília, Contradições de uma Cidade Nova* (1967), from Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, went on to depict the egregious ordeals inherent to these migratory movements converging to the big cities, in other regions of Brazil (Northeast and Center respectively).

I believe that the listed examples sustain the argument that *Macunaíma* exhibits a critical portrait of Brazil, with determinations which are relatively easy to identify to whoever has the minimum of knowledge about the country. Nonetheless, to limit the reading of the narrative to a portrait of Brazil, even though a partial one, would mean that it is solely being attributed to it a mere function of protest.

Since *Macunaíma* is a literary work, it makes sense for the analysis of the transposition of the medieval carnivalesque culture to the Brazilian context of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to instinctively point towards the parodistic questions, as I have underlined previously. However, since this narrative contains representations of forms and rituals of spectacle, as well as of coarse vocabulary, the attention of the critique cannot ignore them. With the aim of demonstrating how *Macunaíma* also exhibits a potential for non-conformity, let us proceed to an analysis of the two episodes which constitute chapter X, whose scenery is the center of the city of São Paulo.

---

<sup>12</sup> In chapter III, *Macunaíma* exerts an exaggerated (o)ppression on his newborn son in order for him to grow up fast with the purpose of “ir pra São Paulo ganhar muito dinheiro.” (ANDRADE, 1996: 26) The baby does not resist to life's hardships on the jungle and dies, poisoned, immediately afterwards.

In the micro-narrative which opens “Pauí-Pódole”, a flower vendor crosses paths with Macunaíma. Such vendor places a flower in the hero’s lapel with the aim of forcing a sale, and the latter, feeling quite thwarted for not knowing how to name the hole where the flower now rested – named *botocira* in urban culture – and after considering several possibilities for naming it, decides to use a word originating from the Taulipang Amerindian culture of the Guiana: *puíto*, which in that context means *anus*<sup>13</sup>. Ignoring such signification, the flower vendor is seduced by the word and starts using it, leading to its dissemination, in the short period of a week, throughout the general population of São Paulo (demonstrating that the latter also ignored the Amerindian cultures). The brief episode ends with a satire of the Brazilian academia, which, also in that same short span of time, had already produced research results on the word *puíto*, attributing to it a (fake) Latin root, in common with the word *botocira* [buttonhole].

This episode around the word *puíto* shows how language, whether regarded as creation or as the aspects which determine its daily use, is subject to factors of indetermination, to an incalculable contingency at the outset. Furthermore, it introduces a familiar and coarse vocabulary in the representation of the spoken form of the language, and does it in a jesting manner, by contrasting the actual creation of the Brazilian speech (of popular provenance, with a root which is specifically indigenous), based upon simple analogies and which correspond to practical needs of oral communication, with the scientific, bookish and erudite pseudo-justifications of an academia disconnected from the events of the real world, and which have the practical effect of leading to a colonial cultural appropriation.

Something more might be added to this interpretation through the analysis of the Amerindian scatological legend of the Puíto itself, of which Mário de Andrade became aware, wherefore I shall quote a translation, from the quill of Henrique Roenick (with proofreading from Manoel Cavalcanti Proença), of the tale collected by Theodor Koch-Grünberg in 1905, transcribed in *Vom Roraima zum Orinoco* (1917):

**Pu’iito, como as pessoas e os animais receberam o seu ânus**

---

<sup>13</sup> In *Namoros com a medicina*, Mário de Andrade proposes a free translation of the scatological Amerindian legend of Puíto (98-9) told by the German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg in *Vom Roraima zum Orinoco* (1917).

Antigamente, os animais e as pessoas não tinham ânus para defecar. Acho que defecavam pela boca. Pu'iito, o ânus, andava por aí, devagar e cautelosamente, peidando no rosto dos animais e das pessoas, e depois fugia. Então os animais disseram: "Vamos agarrar Pu'iito, para dividi-lo entre nós!". Muitos se juntaram e disseram: "Vamos fingir que estamos dormindo! Quando ele vier, vamos pegá-lo!". Assim fizeram. Pu'iito veio e peidou na cara de um deles. Então correram atrás de Pu'iito, mas não conseguiram pegá-lo e ficaram para trás.

Os papagaios Kuliwaí e Kaliká chegaram próximos de Pu'iito. Correram muito. Finalmente o pegaram e o amarraram. Então vieram os outros, que tinham ficado para trás: a anta, o veado, o mutum, o jacu, o kujubim, o pombo... Começaram a reparti-lo. A anta pediu logo um pedaço para ela. Os papagaios cortaram um grande pedaço e o jogaram para os outros animais. A anta imediatamente o pegou. Por isso ela tem um ânus tão grande.

O papagaio cortou para si um pedaço pequeno, como lhe era adequado. O veado recebeu um pedaço menor que o da anta. Os pombos tomaram um pedaço pequeno. Veio o sapo e pediu que lhe dessem também um pedaço. Os papagaios jogaram um pedaço na sua direção, o qual grudou nas suas costas: por isso o sapo ainda hoje tem o ânus nas costas.

Foi assim que adquirimos nossos ânus. Se hoje não o tivéssemos, íamos ter que defecar pela boca, ou então arrebentar." (apud "O medo dos outros", 890-1)

This Taulipang narrative presents a process of mythical speciation common to virtual proto-humans and proto-animals, when they still denoted preorganic states. In "O medo dos outros", the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro denotes that the story focuses on the moment when an organ (the anus) with a life of its own:

deixa sua existência intensiva, de parte idêntica a seu próprio todo, e é extensivizado, coletivamente investido e distribuído (repartido) entre as espécies animais. (...) Note-se que não se trata, no mito, de dar a cada indivíduo um ânus idêntico mas que lhe seja *próprio*, no sentido de ser sua propriedade privada, mas de dar aos representantes de cada futura espécie um órgão que lhes seja *específico*, isto é, que caracterize cada espécie como multiplicidade distinta; ainda não estamos no regime do equivalente geral. Mas toda espécie terá um ânus – porque, como o mito faz questão de esclarecer *in fine*, toda espécie tem uma boca. E é pela boca que se travam as relações mais decisivas entre as espécies no mundo pós-mítico: pela devoração intercorporal. (893)

A metaphorical interpretation of this legend may allow the proposal of a theory of (re)creation of the Brazilian language of Mário de Andrade, supported by an Amerindian cosmology which is opposed to an organic State<sup>14</sup>. It should be understood that I propose the rejection of the abstract idea of language as an organ which articulates itself with other organs (borders, territories, religion, History, mythologies, etc.) in an organicity enclosed in itself, imposed, coordinated and subsumed by a body-State to form a national unity (one *country*, one *nation*, in the hegemonic pragmatic meaning that such concepts historically imply worldwide). Thus, in this scope, the listed organs are viewed under a monochromatic vision, solidified: each and every single one of them becomes easier to

---

<sup>14</sup> A formulation inspired on the thought of the ethnologist Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État* (1974).

manage, to control and to manipulate if they hold a well-known definition, established and unequivocal limits, particular roles in the functioning of society – one interested in perpetuating power and privilege. Conversely, we shall have a much more democratic idea of language, plural and suchlike to the world's own otherness, if we envision it from the perspective of this Amerindian mythology, conceiving it in the capacity of a preorganic intensive organ which is subdivided (into several languages) by the multiplicity of the several “species” (I place this word between quotation marks to give it a symbolic meaning of groups, communities, ethnicities, etc.), and always resisting to the statute of private property (the equivalent to the language of a single man, which, due to its absolute incommunicability, would be doomed to die along with that same man), hybridizing itself permanently by the phenomenon of deglutition. And this is how a language-other, unidentified from the languages which gave it origin, requires an organ-other unidentified from the organ which ingested them, because if that did not happen the result would be defecation through the mouth (*talking shit*), or a burst due to maladjustment, that is to say, due to a double inability for processing: the adjustment of the used language to the representation of the world's otherness; and the ability to propose the world's own otherness (ethic, aesthetic, politic, etc.) through the transforming imagination of language.

In the second micro-narrative of that very same chapter X, there is a reversion of the process of colonial cultural appropriation carried out by a State institution (the academia) in the episode of the *puíto*, with Macunaíma interrupting a public speech exalting the “official” mythology associated to the Southern Cross in order to convey the Amerindian mythology, by telling the legend of the Pauí-Pódole, the Father of the Curassow. There is, in this performance by Macunaíma, a demonstrable parallel with the comical forms and rituals of the medieval spectacle, which Mikhail Bakhtin claims to be noticeably different from the official Church or Feudal State ceremonies and forms of cult. The aforementioned forms and rituals offered a vision of the world, of man and human relations completely different from the official version, in particular predefined periods of time. Due to its specific and sensitive character, and on account of a powerful element of *gameplay*, these carnivalesque forms, notwithstanding having great affinities with art (in particular with theatrical plays), are however distinguished from the latter, being located in



the frontier between art and life, in an indiscernible zone: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.” (Bakhtin, 7)

The observation of these manifestations in the episode of the legend of Pauí-Pódole renders the approximation of *Macunaíma* to this carnivalesque medieval and renaissance culture intuitive. Although the episode does not constitute the formal representation of Carnival, it does represent, however, a festive day (day of the Crux) where the carnivalesque culture blends itself. First and foremost, precisely due to the intervention of the people in a space where everyone is potentially both a spectator and an actor. The first speaker, who intends to convey the official mythology, is not a politician or other figurehead from society, but rather an anonymous mulatto who improvises his own stage on the public square, by climbing on top of a statue. Macunaíma, who is there by chance and has, at the beginning of the scene, the contemplating stance of a mere spectator, ends up inadvertently assuming the role of protagonist quite easily.

The second aspect of the carnivalesque culture we should highlight in the episode of Pauí-Pódole (but also in the puíto one) is its important civilizational element. The official celebration only looked at the past, which was used to consecrate the current social order. It tended to consecrate, therefore, the stability, the immutability and the perpetuity of the rules that governed the world. It was the triumph of a dominant, victorious, prefabricated truth, which assumed thereby the appearance of being eternal, immutable and peremptory. Conversely, death, resurrection, successions and renovation always constituted the essential aspects of the carnivalesque celebration, where, due to the effect of the strong presence of these concepts, there was an abolition of hierarchies, values, norms and religious taboos, and where the presence of a critical conception of the past can be found, as well as a transformation of the present and a construction of the future on a

basis of uncertainty<sup>15</sup>. Since the performance by Macunaíma fulfills its goal, by convincing and moving the crowd, who returns home “feliz no coração cheio de explicações e cheio das estrelas vivas” (ANDRADE,1996, 93), even the perceptions usually associated to the contextual scenario (the urbanity of the city of São Paulo) undergo an alteration, with the power of the machine which prevails there being converted into the refreshing Amerindian mythology: “Pauí-Pódole estava rindo pra ele [Macunaíma], agradecendo. De repente piou comprido parecendo trem de ferro. Não era trem era piado e o sopro apagou todas as luzes do parque. Então o Pai do Mutum mexeu uma asa mansamente se despedindo do herói. Macunaíma ia agradecer, porém o pássaro erguendo a poeira da neblina largou numa carreira esparramada pelo campo vasto do céu.” (ANDRADE, 1996: 93)

Macunaíma thus fulfill, in both episodes of chapter X, a role of transformation of the world analogous to the hero which is his homophone in Amerindian civilization, described by Lucia de Sá, in “*Macunaíma e as fontes indígenas*”, as: “um herói transformador, em grande medida responsável pelo mundo ser como é. Suas motivações para transformar o mundo são variadas, e podem incluir tanto a necessidade legítima de melhorar as coisas, como o desejo pelo poder, a busca de vingança, a maldade, e o tédio. A maior parte do tempo, no entanto, Makunaíma transforma o mundo por acaso, quase sempre na tentativa de consertar erros que ele próprio cometeu.” (207) Inspired by this description, Mário de Andrade puts into practice the carnivalesque civilizational impetus through an active forgetfulness, a form of learning to unlearn, by representing his Macunaíma as a character who is impertinent, impetuous, circumstantial, untimely, uncapturable, senseless, and ignorant of the urbanized wisdom of State, who, due to these same characteristics, is capable to destabilize the signification of language, myths, and

---

<sup>15</sup>The abolition of the social rules in effect, along with the ideas of perpetuity, improvement and predictability of the future created “(...) during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. (...)”

This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression: it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.” (Bakhtin, 10)

structures as well of the official hegemonic, allegedly immutable, and homogenizing values of the Brazilian culture of colonial origin.

## WORKS CITED

ANDRADE, Joaquim Pedro de. *Brasília, contradições de uma cidade nova* [film]. Filmes do Serro, 1967.

ANDRADE, Mário de. *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter*. Estabelecimento do texto: Telê

Ancona Lopez, Tatiana Longo Figueiredo. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2017. Kindle Edition.

ANDRADE, Mário de. *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter*. Edición crítica: Telê Porto Ancona Lopez. ALLCA XX, 1996.

ANDRADE, Mário de. *Namoros com a Medicina*. Porto Alegre: Livraria do Globo, 1939.

ARISTOTLE. *Poetics*. Translation and Commentary: George Whalley. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

BENJAMIN, Walter. "The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov." Translation:

Harry Zohn. *Chicago Review*, v.6, n.1, p. 80-101. doi:10.2307/25293714.

CAMPOS, Haroldo de. *Metalinguagem & outras metas*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1992.

CASTRO, Eduardo Viveros de. O medo dos outros. *Revista de Antropologia*, Universidade de São Paulo, v. 54, n.2, p.885-917, 2011

CLASTRES, Pierre. *La société contre l'état*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974.

FERRARO, Alceu Ravanello; Kreidlow, David. 2004. Analfabetismo no Brasil: configuração e gênese das desigualdades regionais. *Educação & Realidade*, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, v. 29, n. 2, p. 179-200, 2004.

GALVÃO, Walnice. Modernismo: intertextos. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Desconversa*. Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 1998. p. 29-43.

GONÇALVES, Robson Pereira. *Macunaíma: carnaval e malandragem*. Santa Maria: Imprensa Universitária, 1982.

KOCH-GRÜNBERG, Theodor. *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco: Ergebnisse einer Reise in Nordbrasilien und Venezuela in den Jahren 1911-1913 –Mythen und Legenden der Taulipang und Arekuna Indianer*. Stuttgart: Verlag Strecker und Schröder. Band 2. [https://ia801402.us.archive.org/5/items/bub\\_br\\_1918\\_01011120/bub\\_br\\_1918\\_01011120.pdf](https://ia801402.us.archive.org/5/items/bub_br_1918_01011120/bub_br_1918_01011120.pdf) Web: Dec. 6. 2021.

MBEMBE, Achille. *Politiques de l'inimitié*. Paris: Éditions de La Découverte, 2016.

MBEMBE. *Necropolitics*. Translator: Steven Corcoran. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

MIGNOLO, Walter. Coloniality of Power and Subalternity. In: *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

MUCCI, Latuf Isaias. Rapsódia. In: <https://edtl.fcs.unl.pt/encyclopedia/rapsodia/> . Web: 26 Nov. 2021.

NETO, João Cabral de Melo. *Poesia completa: 1940-1980*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 1986.

NUNES, José Horta. Mocambo. In:

<https://www.labeurb.unicamp.br/endici/index.php?r=verbete%2Fview&id=246> . Web: 14 Sep. 2021.

PASSOS, José Luiz. *Ruínas de linhas puras: quatro ensaios em torno a Macunaíma*. São Paulo: Annablume, 1998.

PROENÇA, Manuel Cavalcanti. *Roteiro de Macunaíma*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978.

SANTIAGO, Silviano. *Nas malhas da letra*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2000.

SÁ, Lúcia de. *Macunaíma e as fontes indígenas*. In: ANDRADE, Mario de. *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter*. Estabelecimento do texto: Telê Ancona Lopez, Tatiana Longo Figueiredo.

São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2017. Kindle Edition.

SOUZA, Gilda de Melo e. O tupi e o alaúde. In: ANDRADE, Mario de. *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter*. Edición crítica: Telê Porto Ancona Lopez. ALLCA XX, 1996.

TÉRCIO, Jason. *Em busca da alma brasileira: biografia de Mário de Andrade*. São Paulo: Estação Brasil, 2019. Kindle Edition.

**João Albuquerque** holds a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literatures at University of California Los Angeles (2022). He is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Instituto de História da Arte, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. His research project undertakes a comparison between Mário de Andrade's and Almada Negreiros' aesthetic theories. He published several peer-reviewed articles in Brazil, Portugal, United Kingdom and United States of America. In 2020, he selected and translated the Rubén Darío's anthology of poetry and prose, *O Sátiro Surdo* (Editora Labirinto).  
mailto: [ccralbuquerque@g.ucla.edu](mailto:ccralbuquerque@g.ucla.edu)

Artigo recebido em 10/05/2022.      Aprovado em 20/06/2022.