Devouring Brazilian Modernism: The Rise of Contemporary Indigenous Art

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In Brazilian cultural life, the year 1922 is a landmark. On one hand, it marked a full century of independence from Portuguese oppression. On the other hand, it marks Brazilian modernism's rise with the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week), which celebrates its 100th anniversary in February 2022. The festive movement, filled with painting, poetry, music, and performances is considered pivotal to "awake Brazil from a state of stagnation" (Bopp 1977, 37). The Week was the trigger for new aesthetics that would permeate most of the artistic manifestations of future Brazil. In poetry, Mário de Andrade, Ronald de Carvalho and Guilherme de Almeida stood out. Literary criticism was brought about by Oswald de Andrade, Graça Aranha, and Menotti del Picchia. Regarding music, Vila Lobos had conducted the orchestra. Anita Malfatti's expressionism and Di Cavalcanti's art nouveau shocked the conservative elite, as it did Victor Brecheret's sculptures.

The movement, which sought to turn São Paulo into a new Paris, was financed by the "cream of the coffee oligarchy" (Gonçalves, 2012, p. 30), which, in order not to displease the conservative elite in the audience, it had Guiomar Novaes playing Debussy's solos on the piano. Although Brazilian modernists sought to break with European aesthetic colonialism, paradoxically, they were the adapted version of Italian futurist rebelliousness, Tristan Tzara's Dadaism, Picasso's Cubism, and the nascent French Surrealism. They lacked a genuinely Brazilian allegory to embody the national aesthetic revolution. Artistic authenticity surfaced in the following years with the publication of the *Manifesto da Poesia Pau Brasil* (1924), and the *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), both by Oswad de Andrade and *Macunaíma: O herói sem nenhum caráter*, a Mário de Andrade's novel.

It was in a restaurant, whose specialty was frog cooking, that Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral and other friends started their first conversations about Anthropophagy. In good spirits, they recollected Hans Staden's book and Montaigne's essays. The German mercenary's bestseller tells the story of the two occasions when he was in Brazil. The first was in 1547 and then in 1550, when he was captured by the *Tupinambá* indigenous people and witnessed the details of the mythical cannibal banquet. Anthropophagy became the strong trope to describe the modernist movement: devouring the enemy to absorb their qualities. In the words of Jáuregui (2012, 22),

…anthropophagy has become an obligatory genealogical foundation for contemporary academic debates on hybridity and postcolonialism. However, anthropophagy was not an academic movement, a theory of identity formation through consumption, or a social emancipation program. It was a heterogeneous and often contradictory aesthetic venture.

While in France, Picasso found in African aesthetic a pivotal element for his Cubist transgression, for Brazilian modernists encountered the touchstone at home. Sarcastically, they transformed anthropophagy from a taboo into a totem (Abdenur 2019). Thus, the purpose of this article is not to celebrate 1922 but to critically serve as a two-fold revisit. In the first moment, I have attempted to problematize primitivism incorporation by Brazilian modernism. I argue that, in addition to the important discussion about the cultural appropriation of elements of indigenous populations, it was the impossibility of indigenous self-representation due to elitist, racial and colonial issues that shaped the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1920s. Then, I aim to demonstrate how contemporary indigenous art is devouring, digesting, and regurgitating new ways of critical art in Brazil.

Decolonial theory, colonial habits? Ambiguities of Brazilian modernism

Recently, the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in an interview given to Adèle Van Reeth, in the program *Les Chemins de la philosophie*, on France Culture radio, declared: "Oswald produced, perhaps, the first decolonial theory, to use a fashionable term, the first consistent decolonial theory made in Brazil, perhaps even in Latin America, the most original, the most original contribution". I tend to agree with that statement, but it also opens up a new avenue for thinking critically about colonial remnants from that era. In the *Manifesto Antropófago*, Oswald clearly reveals the desire to destroy the established order, standing against the colonial system that never allowed Brazil to become truly independent. "We want the *Caraíba* Revolution. Greater than the French Revolution"

Oswald repeatedly invokes a mythical past of a pre-Columbian Brazil, inhabited by indigenous peoples who lived in *Caraíba* Brazil before the European invasion (Cardoso 2020). In this centenary of 1922, it is time to reconsider anthropophagy in a more critical vein. In February 1922, there are numerous debates on this topic, but this time the indigenous peoples represent themselves. Universities, museums, and various cultural institutions are revisiting the legacy of Modern Art Week. One of these events is *Mekukradjá – círculo de saberes* which held several online debates on the role of indigenous peoples in 1922. Naine Terena, indigenous activist and curator of the event, mediated a roundtable that had the suggestive title: "I've been here all the time, but you haven't seen".

This sentence leads us to a reflection that needs to be better elaborated: If in theory, anthropophagy was successful for the Brazilian intellectual elite to digest European artistic colonialism, in practice no indigenous people were invited to the banquet. Indigenous absence is nothing new. Since the colonizers arrived here (1500), native peoples have been excluded from the main events of national formation. Modernism, therefore, cannot pass this criticism unscathed. As Cardoso (2021, 14) argues, the adoption of primitivism by Mário and Oswald de Andrade or artists such as Tarsila do Amaral and Lasar Segall should be celebrated as a symbol of cultural modernity? Can they speak for the subaltern?

As highlighted by Mário de Andrade in a lecture at Itamaraty Palace: "I believe we the modernists of the*Semana de Arte Moderna* should not serve as an example to anyone. But we can serve as a lesson." Modernism did not build any channels of dialogue with deep Brazil. This myth has been undone by Mário, who highlights the destructive essence of the movement, which in no way contributed to "the socio-political advancement of man" (Andrade 1974, 255). Hyperbole aside, Brazilian modernism is aristocratic at its core and has never had to work on the fringes of official power.

Indigenous and Afro-Brazilians do not participate in this aesthetic rebellion. Some think that Tarsila do Amaral's*A Negra* represents the "depths of Afro-Brazilianness" (Schwartz 2013, 30). But, as Santos (2019, 363) states: "Tarsila expropriates this woman of her humanity and identity". *A Negra* is "a Trojan horse of a picture, capable of worming its way into the ingrained prejudices of its respective audiences and deftly playing the notions of native and exotic off each other" (Cardoso 2020, 113). The exoticizing gaze upon the black body also extends to other modernist painters (Araújo 2000). Just as whitewashing accompanied the formation of Brazil republished in all social fields, indigenous peoples are rendered invisible, excluded for a longer time (Sá and Pereira 2020).

First of all, it is necessary to be categorical: indigenous peoples were not present at the 1922 Modern Art Week What happened in the following years, especially with the anthropophagic phase of modernism, can be read as an exercise in the expropriation of a non-Western way of life. The clearest manifestation of that moment is *Macunaíma* (indigenous people write Makunaima or Makunaimî with the letter K), when Mário de Andrade mixed Afro-Brazilian and indigenous people in 1928. Ailton Krenak, one of Brazil's most respected indigenous leaders stated: "Mário de Andrade successfully kidnapped Makunaima. And to this day everything that is reproduced still comes from there." (Diniz 2020). Mario had as inspiration for his novel the accounts of the explorer Theodor Koch-Grünberg. Mário lacked listening to the voice of indigenous peoples to know that: "A meaning for the existence of the Pan-Amazon and its people passes into Makunaima's hands" (Esbel 2018, 13). Instead of establishing a dialogue with deep Brazil, Mário excluded from his novel what indigenous peoples such as Taurepáng,*Arekuná*, *Makuxi,* and *Wapichana*, for whom *Makunaima* is linked to the idea of existence. Thus, one of the main novels of Brazilian literature was born colonized.

I needed to listen to the indigenous voice about Makunaima. So, I went to the Portuguese Language Museum, where indigenous artists and activists held a meeting entitled *Ajuri de Makunaimî*. Right at the opening, I heard Julie Dorrico, a writer of the Makuxi ethnicity, declaim the 'Manifesto of Contemporary Indigenous Literature', in which an excerpt says: "Enough with anthropophagic excuses, good intentions, full of praise and inspirations. Enough of taking our identities and narratives, transforming them into a space of white occupation. Enough of appropriations. We want self-determination!" (Dorrico 2022).

Moara Tupinamba, an outstanding visual artist, also recited verses from "Piracaia: An avant-garde manifesto of anti-futurist indigenous people". The event was also attended by Pajé Vanda (shaman), poets Sony Ferseck and Gustavo Caboco, and musician Ian Wapichana. It was a critical, decolonial exercise, in which I could see the indigenous body in action, telling its own stories. It was a moment when everything was devoured: German mercenary, Mário de Andrade, and elitist modernism. It was the first time I met Makunaima through the voice of his grandchildren, indigenous peoples of the circum-Roraima region.

And what about Oswaldian anthropophagy, what kind of indigenous is this mentioned in the manifestos? In the modernist circle, indigenous was always a distant image, they were never physically present, making his voice heard or bringing out the colors of his art. In the 19th century, this image was mobilized by Brazilian Romanticism, who contributed to reinforcing the myth of the noble savage, pure and naive indigenous. The anthropophagic modernism only reversed the allegorical representation. In the 1920s the indigenous became cannibals, devourers, and heroic. Although the modernists had anti-colonial rhetoric, they were never sensitive to the point of rescuing indigenous people as 'the other' of national history.

The fact is that the modernists did not establish contact with the real world of indigenous populations. Everything was relegated to an aesthetic abstraction, to anthropophagy without alterity. As Cardoso (2020, 134) highlights: "Tarsila and Oswald consciously played the native for a foreign audience, staging their alterity as an enactment of auto-exoticism". It was the indigenous populations that rebelled against Western subalternity and, even with fear, entered the white world. Now, one hundred years later, it is the moment to review and repair these historical mistakes, as stated by Denilson Baniwa (2022): "To re-anthropophagize is to review – to see again – what has not been seen. Perhaps to reveal – to remove the veil – of what was hidden from us when ancestral voices had no echo in a Brazilian society…" Regarding indigenous art or contemporary indigenous art, as *Makuxi* artist Jaider Esbell (2018) used to call it, it appears as a powerful manifestation in the national and international arena only at the beginning of the 21st century.

Reanthropophagy: indigenous decolonial praxis

In Brazil, we are having the opportunity to witness the rise of an indigenous movement involving art and activism. Centuries of silencing and cultural marginalization are being destroyed with the poetic help of contemporary indigenous art. Shocking the western artistic canon, indigenous art has been breaking the barriers imposed by Eurocentric standards to reveal to the world that "Indigenous and art are of common and inseparable origin" (Esbell 2019, 99). This is part of Amerindian perspectivism: "a state of being where bodies and names, souls and actions, egos and others are interpenetrated, immersed in one and the same presubjective and preobjective milieu" (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 68). In this case, there are no binarisms when thinking about art from this cosmology, as explained by Ailton Krenak (2017, 78):

The separation between living and making art, I do not perceive this separation in any of the matrices of thought of native peoples that I have known. Everyone I know dances, sings, paints, draws, sculpts, does everything that the West attributes to a category of people, who are artists. But in some cases, they are called artisans, and their works are called handicrafts, but again, they are categories that discriminate what is art, what is handicraft, what is an artist, what is a craftsman. Because art history is the art history of the West.

In this sense, I would like to address some moments to show how contemporary indigenous art acts as an "antidote to the metaphysics of separation and isolation" (Escobar 2020, xxxiii). Based on self-representation and the circulation of Amerindian knowledge, artists are breaking the binarism characteristic of modernity. In 2019, for the

first time in Brazil, we witnessed an exhibition curated by an indigenous person and composed only of indigenous artists. *Reantropofagia*, curated by Denilson Baniwa and Pedro Gadelha, took place 91 years after the launch of *Manifesto Antropófago*, at the Fluminense Federal University, Rio de Janeiro. According to curatorial text by Baniwa and Gadella (2019), *Reantropofagia* is "a Manifesto, a cry of urgency about the art produced by native peoples, thus breaking centuries of silencing and exoticizing those who have always been here"

Among the canvases in the exhibition, attention was drawn to one in which Baniwa offers a head in an indigenous basket for his fellow artists to devour. It is *Reantropofagia*, a banquet with a head that mixes the features of Mário de Andrade with the skin color of Grande Otelo, an actor who played Macunaíma in the homonymous film by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade (1969). Corn, manioc, pepper, and coffee decorate the painting, and beside the severed head a version of the book Macunaíma and a note in which it is written:

… here lies the macunaíma simulacrum
together lie the idea of a Brazilian people
and temperate anthropophagy
with Bordeaux and pax mongolica
from this long digestion
Makünaimî shall be reborn
and the original anthropophagy
belonging to Us
indigenous people.

(Baniwa 2021)

Jaider Esbell, who recently passed away, was another brilliant artist who sought to confront artistic Eurocentrism. One of his most powerful interventions was *Carta ao Velho Mundo* (Letter to the Old World), in which the Makuxi artist makes a decolonial intervention in a 396-page book, an encyclopedia of Western art, called*Galeria Delta da Pintura Universal* (Delta gallery of Universal Painting). With irony, humor, and protest, Esbell denounced centuries of indigenous genocide by scribbling and rewriting art history from the indigenous cosmovision. "The letter is addressed to European homes and its content is a full denunciation of the centuries of devastating colonization in the Americas" (Esbell 2019). One example is Esbell's intervention on Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist by Rene Guido. The artist drew a headdress on the head of João Batista. Next to Salome's head it reads: "Violence is a long cycle. Ancient orders continue to echo and have now arrived in the world's last virgin forests. The order? Exterminate!".

In 2020, Daiara Tukano, of the Tukano indigenous people, painted the largest mural by an indigenous artist.*Selva Mãe do Rio Menino* (Mother Nature and the River boy) has 1006 m^2 and remember the relationship of interdependence between rivers and forests in the preservation of the environment. The vibrant and colorful mural, in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, shows the jungle mother holding river boy. In addition to being a visual artist, Daiara is a teacher indigenous rights activist and communicator. She created the radio *Yandê*, the first indigenous online radio in Brazil. In artistic terms, Daiara denounces what she calls *articídio* (a combination of the words art and genocide):"art as a field of ethnocide, manipulation, and deception" (Goldstein 2019, 90). Furthermore, Daiara rejects having her works labeled as "art" in the western sense of the term. She claims to produce "messages" that go beyond aesthetic enjoyment.

Baniwa, Esbell, and Tukano are references to the indigenous struggle that seeks to decolonize or re-indigenizing modern art in Brazil. What is taking place is a collective struggle against the power relations that silence and make indigenous peoples unfeasible. Indigenous art, in this sense, has been more than a form of resistance, as it presents us with new ways of being in the world and being with others.

In Conclusion

This article offers a provocation amidst the centenary celebrations of 1922 Modern Art Week. It is clear that

modernism was remarkable and directly impacted Brazilian cultural life. However, it is time to look more critically and less festively at the actors who were subalternized during this process. Even though the traditions, beliefs, and values of the indigenous peoples were invoked, at no time were they included in the artistic circuit of the São Paulo elite. This invisibility allowed others to speak on behalf of native peoples. The result was an aesthetic being permeated by stereotypes and exoticization.

Now, a century later, contemporary indigenous art intervenes in places that make it possible to reverse the old status, leaving the margins and establishing connections: "these artists creates a dialogue between their indigenous origins and mainstream Brazilian society" (Goldstein 2021, 114). However, it is necessary to pay attention, because this is a path that still imposes a series of challenges to indigenous art. As Pitman (2021, 13) warns: "This is an art world still very much in the thrall of Euro-American values and trends". There is no radical change regarding the status quo, but the question is raised. Contemporary indigenous art rescues a series of ethical values that can help the world to overcome the civilizational crisis, and help Brazil to overcome serious political and environmental setbacks.

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