

Freudian Wordplay in *Macunaíma*

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Abstract: This essay approaches Mário de Andrade’s use of Sigmund Freud’s writings as a tool for linguistic exploration in his 1928 novel, *Macunaíma*. Drawing upon previous research into Andrade’s personal study of psychoanalysis, I first analyze the explicit reference to Freud in the novel’s “Carta pras Icamíabas” as a critique of uninformed and mechanical citations of psychoanalytic theory. This launches me into an analysis of Andrade’s recurrent use of two sexually charged words, *brincar* and *graça*, and how they demonstrate a much more creative dialogue with Freud’s work. I conclude by considering Andrade’s characterization of *Macunaíma* as a “symptom” rather than a “symbol” of Brazilian culture, reflecting on how we can read his use of Freud within a larger negotiation of the European literary canon and colonial forces of repression.

Keywords: modernism, psychoanalysis, literature, Brazil, Mário de Andrade

In December 1926, in a six-day rush of free association, anthropological fascination, and creative plagiarism, the 33-year-old Mário de Andrade penned a Brazilian classic. In his first unpublished preface to *Macunaíma: o herói sem nenhum caráter*, Andrade affirms that the book was written as a summer-vacation “brinquedo,” composed “in the midst of mangos pineapples and cicadas” (217), a sentiment he echoes in a second unpublished preface, calling the book a “livro de pura brincadeira” (225).¹

Andrade’s “rhapsody,” as he referred to the book, perfectly distills this sense of play. Published in 1928, *Macunaíma* tells the story of the titular “hero without character,” an indigenous man with magical shapeshifting powers and little

¹ Neither of these prefaces were published by Andrade, but they can be found in the appendix to several editions, including Agir’s 2008 edition. Also worth noting, all translated quotes in this essay are mine. Here, the lack of comma between “mangos” and “pineapples” is preserved from Andrade, who often defied literary conventions.

sexual inhibition, from his birth in the Amazon to his ultimate conversion into the constellation Ursa Major. Throughout, Andrade uses the verb “brincar” (to play) to refer to sexual acts, a fusion of the infantile and the erotic that captures Macunaíma’s unrepressed, childlike nature. From the first chapter when six-year-old Macunaíma shapeshifts into a full-grown man to “play” with his brother’s girlfriend, we see that play gives structure to the novel. Indeed, the central plot revolves around his trip to São Paulo to recover his lost *muiraquitã*, an amulet given to him by his dead lover, Ci, Mother of the Forest, before her conversion into a star. Even as he longs for their passionate love and schemes to wrestle the *muiraquitã* from the hands of the wealthy Venceslau Pietro Pietra, who has stowed it away in a private collection, Macunaíma finds time to get to know the city through its women. His unfettered desire ultimately proves to be a fatal flaw, as a near-death experience with the siren-like Uiara, a man-eating creature disguised as a beautiful woman, represents the end of playtime, impelling him to join Ci in the firmament.

Andrade’s playful writing derives, in part, from his style of copying without citation. He lifts the title character and many passages directly from German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg’s ethnographic accounts of myths and creation stories belonging to the Pemon people in the Amazon. Facing accusations of plagiarism, Andrade published a letter in *Diário Nacional* in 1931, in which he not only defended his work, but embraced these critiques emphatically:

O que me espanta e acho sublime de bondade é os maldizentes se esquecerem de tudo quanto sabem, restringindo a minha cópia a Koch-Gruenberg, quando copiei todos. (...) Confesso que copiei, copiei às vezes textualmente. Quer saber mesmo? Não só copiei os etnógrafos e os textos ameríndios, mais ainda, na Carta pras Icamiabas, pus frases inteiras de Rui Barbosa, de Mário Barreto, dos cronistas portugueses coloniais, e devastei a tão preciosa quão solene língua dos colaboradores da *Revista de Língua Portuguesa*.
(*Macunaíma* 233)

This proud, wide-reaching copying fits in with the larger aims of Brazilian modernism, an artistic movement that sought, in broad strokes, to depict Brazil as *more* than a copy of Europe by turning towards the nation’s “other” roots,

namely Black and indigenous. Freely “cannibalizing” Europeans and Americans alike, authors sought to recreate their national melting pot through thematic and linguistic experimentalism that skirted colonial conventions, prioritized orality, and elevated the figure of the “primitive” supposedly baked into all Brazilians via miscegenation. Andrade, one of this vanguard’s founding members, sought to capture the multitude of Brazilian sounds in his work, referring to his writing musically as *poetic polyphony* (Chamie 95-96). Certainly, this is evident in *Macunaíma*, a book that not only “copies” anthropology and indigenous mythology, but also incorporates hundreds of indigenous words, disorienting unfamiliar readers. Indeed, the title character seeks to dominate “as duas línguas da terra, o brasileiro falado e o português escrito” (*Macunaíma* 113).

This brings me to the topic of this essay: the voice of Sigmund Freud in this polyphony. The influence of Freud on Andrade and the modernist movement is well documented (Facchinetti “Modernist Pills,” “O modernismo,” “Psicanálise Modernista”; Torquato & Rocha; Riaviz). While medical spheres were slow to accept Freud’s theories, the modernists, much like their surrealist counterparts in Europe, were among Brazil’s first readers of psychoanalysis, seeing in it a useful means for their subversive ends. Even Oswald de Andrade’s classic *Manifesto Antropófago*, with its fervent advocacy for Brazilian art, calls for the “transfiguration of taboo in Totem,” expressing the potential to repurpose Freud’s scientific writings for aesthetic and political means.

Freud offered a new vocabulary—words like *drive*, *libido*, *unconscious*, and *subconscious* (Torquato & Rocha 431). More importantly, though, he offered the possibility to express “aquilo que o ... inconsciente grita” (Facchinetti “O modernismo” 134). Mário de Andrade’s personal library reveals the acquisition, between 1923 and 1927, of several of Freud’s books in French translation: *Introduction à la Psychanalyse*, *Trois essais sur la théorie de la sexualité* (gifted to him by Paulo Prado, to whom *Macunaíma* is dedicated), *Cinq leçons sur la Psychanalyse*, *Toten et tabou*, and *Essais Psychanalyse* (Lopez 105). The timeframe is significant, as it shows that the period during which he wrote and revised *Macunaíma*—as well as the poetry collection *Clã do Jabuti* and the novel *Amar, verbo intransitivo*, both published in 1927—was marked by intense curiosity in psychoanalysis. In a letter to fellow author Carlos Drummond de Andrade (no familial relation) on February 20, 1927, Mário notes the obviousness of his Freudian inspiration in *Amar, verbo intransitivo*, which tells the story of a German governess hired by a wealthy family in São Paulo to initiate

their adolescent son into the world of sex. He writes: “as observações mais comuns e francamente burras são: que tem muito Machado de Assis e muito Freud no livro. Tem, meu Deus! Que tem eu mesmo sei? É evidente que tem” (Andrade & Drummond 277).

Notably, Andrade used Freud as a basis for creating new concepts. Much has been written about his invention of the word *sequestro* as a translation of the French word *refoulement*, from Freud’s *Verdrängung*—*repression* in English, but with the connotations of *sequestration*, a word with clear resonance in the decades following abolition in 1888 and Brazilian independence in 1889 (Facchinetti “Psicanálise Modernista” 136, Lopez 105-107). Similarly, over the course of twenty years of research into manifestations of *saudade* and sexual longing in popular culture, Andrade postulated a psychoanalytic complex unique to Lusophone societies, the *complexo da Dona Ausente*. As he describes in a 1943 article: “Complexo inicialmente marítimo, porém que, no Brasil, tornou-se terrestre também. A Dona Ausente é o sofrimento causado pela falta de mulher nos navegadores de um povo de navegadores” (“Dona Ausente” 213). Indeed, rather than simply importing Freud’s supposedly universal theories, Andrade strove to make them his own.

With this in mind, I return to *Macunaíma*. Approaching this “livro em que tudo é segunda intenção,” as Andrade writes to Alceu Amoroso Lima (8/16/30, Andrade & Lima 151), I ask: How does Andrade use Freud as a source of linguistic experimentalism and wordplay? How does he “cannibalize” Freud, rather than rigidly apply his theories? Furthermore, how does Freud serve Andrade’s larger objectives, especially given the book’s initial inspiration in Koch-Grünberg and its overarching search for identity in Brazil?

Rather than looking comprehensively at the influence of psychoanalysis on Andrade’s language, I focus on a few examples from *Macunaíma*, additionally drawing on some of Andrade’s paratextual writing and correspondence with contemporary authors. First, I analyze the explicit reference to Freud in “Carta pras Icamíabas,” where Macunaíma creates his own Freudian-sounding terms in an attempt to sound cultured. Second, I delve into the use of the verb *brincar* throughout *Macunaíma*, and how its fusion of the infantile and the sexual reveals an appropriation of Freudian perversion that maps on to the main character’s disjointed body. Third, I consider the word *graça*, used throughout the book to designate female genitalia, as an inventive dialogue with the notions of taboo and shame. This all leads me to Andrade’s appropriation of the Freudian terms

character and *symptom*, which raises a larger question: how is his Freudian wordplay symptomatic, rather than symbolic, of a troubled but productive relation to the local and international canon?

“Libido saudoso,” “influxo metapsíquico,” Freud Beyond Fad

In “Carta pras Icamias,” a central chapter for any reading of *Macunaíma*, the title character takes over the book’s otherwise third-person narration to pen a card to the women of the Amazon as their emperor, describing the strange customs of the people of São Paulo. In this parody of letters of colonial discovery, such as Pero Vaz de Caminha’s letter to the Portuguese king in 1500, the indigenous Macunaíma adopts a mock erudite Portuguese as he makes sense of the city. Yet just as Andrade’s language always contains layers of meaning, this inverted colonialism comes with a hidden intention: to request money. It is expensive to “play” with urban women, who levy a price through wining-and-dining and sex work, and he needs sponsorship for his continued sexual exploits.

Towards the beginning of the “Carta,” Macunaíma explains how he arrived in São Paulo in explicitly Freudian terms:

Estávamos ainda abatidos por termos perdido a nossa muiraquitã, em forma de sáurio, quando talvez por algum influxo metapsíquico, ou, *qui lo sa*, provocado por algum libido saudoso, como explica o sábio tudesco, doutor Sigmund² Freud (lede Fróide), se nos deparou em sonho um arcanjo maravilhoso. Por ele soubemos que o talismã perdido estava nas dilectas mãos do doutor Venceslau Pietro Pietra... (98)

Immediately, I am drawn to the cramming of Freudian theories—metapsychology, libido, dream theory, etc.—into these few lines, as if urban erudition required the conversion of “playing” into “libido.” It also suggests a back-translation of sorts: in adopting this language, even incorrectly, Macunaíma is divulging some of the theories that influenced Andrade’s writing.

² Interestingly, Raúl Antelo (“Lixeratura”) and Dalma Nascimento cite from an edition that spells “Sigmund” with an *o* at the end: “Sigmundo.” I have maintained “Sigmund” from the 2008 edition, largely because it makes more sense with my reading: whereas “doutor Sigmund Freud” operates as proper written Portuguese, “Fróide” is a transliteration of spoken language.

Scholarship that includes this quote has tended to focus more narrowly on the unexpected nature of the reference (Melo 37), Andrade's general wordplay (Nascimento 100), and the juxtaposition of spoken and written Portuguese (Antelo "Archifilología" 264; Silva Parente 195). Furthermore, "Lede Fróide" has been read as evidence of a contemporary literary trope that domesticates Freud through phonetics (Antelo "Lixeratura" 36-37).³ My intrigue lies, however, in Macunaíma's citational mania as he rattles off concepts that are not actually Freudian, but Freudian-sounding. Andrade mixes and matches concepts to generate *libido saudoso* and *influxo metapsíquico*, inventions that Macunaíma attempts to pass off as legitimate with "qui lo sa" (a misspelling of the Italian "chi lo sà"). The character thus utilizes Freud as a cosmopolitan vocabulary that can be interspersed into conversation to sound cultured without truly understanding the meaning.

While these terms are certainly intended to be humorous, it is worth taking them seriously for a moment to understand how they were composed and what they could mean. *Libido saudoso* inherently Brazilianizes *libido* by modifying it with the "untranslatable" emotion *saudade*. It is also a rather good description of Andrade's *complexo da Dona Ausente*, discussed in this paper's introduction, which Andrade understood as core to the Brazilian psyche: the longing for a lover while apart, much like Macunaíma's search for Ci's amulet. *Influxo metapsíquico*, in turn, brings together a medical *influx* with the ideas of *psyche* (a fixed structure, not subject to influxes) and *metapsychology* (speculation on mental processes; theorization on structure). One possible definition, then: a bombardment of psychoanalytic theories. This, of course, is an accurate description of Freud's fleeting appearance in "Carta pras Icamiabas."

These comical inventions therefore appear to be a subtly reproving comment on the fad of psychoanalysis at the time *Macunaíma* was written. Of note, in 1927, during Andrade's revision of the book, the first Brazilian psychoanalytic society was founded in São Paulo. Spearheaded by several of Andrade's modernist colleagues, the society's meetings were social happenings, publicized in magazines and social columns (Facchinetti "O modernismo" 135).

³ Antelo references other examples, such as the letter in Oswald de Andrade's *Serafim Ponte Grande* addressed to "prezado e grandíssimo Sr. Sigismundo." It is also worth mentioning Andrade's references to Freud by name in other works from this time period, such as his 1927 photograph of white sheets blowing on a clothesline, which he titled "Roupas Freudianas" (*Fotógrafo e turista aprendiz* 14-15). Additionally, in *Amar, verbo intransitivo*, also published in 1927, the narrator refers to Freud by name in a passage on the wholeness of people (71).

Macunaíma's invented terms, read alongside their conjectured meanings, suggest a critique of a merely citational use of Freudian vocabulary for cultural cachet.

This reading is bolstered by a letter from Andrade to Manuel Bandeira. Discussing the meaning of "Carta pras Icamiabas," he writes: "Freud, toda a gente sabe da existência de Freud porque ele está na moda porém outras doutrinas porque não estão na moda ninguém não conhece. Dói. Vim falando sobre isso" (11/27/1927, Andrade & Bandeira 366). Andrade is "pained" by this "fashionable" use of Freud at the expense of lesser-known "doctrines." In a letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima, he expresses a similar sentiment as he rejects the idea that he used Freud satirically in *Amar, verbo intransitivo*:

Não é bem isso. Admiro profundamente Freud e, tirando a generalidade sexualista, mais dos seguidores dele do que dele próprio (Freud que nem Darwin está sendo vítima dos que não o leram, ou o tresleram, você já reparou?), é incontestável que ele deu um passo imenso na psicologia. Ele cientificou o sherlokismo, foi o Sherlock da alma, e não me lembro bem das datas agora, mas seria engraçado a gente fazer um estudo sobre a influência de Conan Doyle sobre Freud... De Freud acho que me utilizarei sempre que se trata de psicologia. (3/25/1928, Andrade & Lima 103-04)

The explicit reference to Freud in *Macunaíma*, then, has embedded within it a larger critique of the corruption and commodification of Freud by blind "followers." Andrade distances himself from this: he *admires* Freud, seeing in him a "Sherlock of the soul," a fellow researcher and intellectual. He is not reverential, but informed, having read enough Freud to both praise and critique the theory of sexuality.

Andrade's engaged study of psychoanalysis (detailed in both Lopez and Riaviz) thus leads to an inspirational, rather than explicit or citational, use of Freud in *Macunaíma*. He is not in your face about it. Yet, in the book's first few paragraphs alone, the discerning eye can spot a range of Freudian references in quick succession:

- a) *The opening line*: "No fundo do mato-virgem nasceu Macunaíma, herói da nossa gente" (13). Here, Andrade activates the reader's primitivist

imagination. Given that the primitive was believed to be “Brazil’s unconscious,” it follows that the Amazon represented the country’s psychological depths. Macunaíma is the “hero of our people,” perhaps, because he acts on instincts repressed by most Brazilians through factors such as Iberian guilt, Victorian sexual inhibitions, and class differences (Facchinetti, “Modernist Pills” 52-56).

- b) *From the second paragraph:* “Passava o tempo do banho dando mergulho, e as mulheres soltavam gritos gozados por causa dos guaiamuns diz-que habitando a água-doce por lá” (13). Andrade depicts Macunaíma grasping at women’s genitalia under the water while they swim in the Uraricoera River. This certainly resonates with Freud’s analysis of young children’s “curiosity to see other people’s genitals,” an instinct that should eventually be repressed by “a sense of shame” (*Three Essays* 58).
- c) *From the second paragraph:* “No mocambo si alguma cunhatã se aproximava dele pra fazer festinha, Macunaíma punha a mão nas graças dela, cunhatã se afastava. Nos machos guspia na cara” (13). In this quote, Andrade seems to be playing with the Oedipus complex, as Macunaíma demonstrates sexual interest in adult women (reaching for their “graças”) and disgust with adult men (spitting on them). This also may dramatize an incest taboo—more on this below.
- d) *From the third paragraph:* “Então adormecia sonhando palavras-feias, imoralidades estrambólicas e dava patadas no ar” (13). Here, as Macunaíma goes to bed in his hammock, his sexual fantasies clearly get displaced into his dirty dreams—a likely application of Freudian dream theory.
- e) *From the fourth paragraph:* “As mulheres se riam, muito simpatizadas, falando que ‘espinho que pinica, de pequeno já traz ponta’” (13). Finally, in this quote, the women in the tribe jokingly refer to Macunaíma’s “thorn,” which even at his young age has a “point.” They seem to understand something about childhood sexuality that Freud spent a long time studying.

These coded references are a useful counterpoint to the psychoanalytic parody from “Carta pras Icamiabas.” Here, too, Andrade crams a range of theories into

a short passage, but they do not alienate the reader because they are thoughtfully applied for narrative potential, character development, and humor.

To this final point, a reader does not need to understand Freud to find these sentences funny. The subversion of notions of childhood purity already does that work. As such, we might read Andrade's wordplay in terms of Oswald de Andrade's *antropofagia*. Andrade does not copy Freud; he consumes, digests, and incorporates him into language.

“Brincar” and a Disjointed Body

The sexual content of the opening paragraphs sets up a longer narrative centered on sexual development. In a letter to Manuel Bandeira, Andrade describes Macunaíma's “fundo sexual” (10/31/27, 359-360), a conception of the title character's psychology that aligns with Freud's idea of the primacy of libido. Indeed, in Macunaíma's statement that a “libido saudoso” guided him to São Paulo in search of the *muiraquitã*, the book implicitly acknowledges the role of Freudian theory in shaping the narrative. This is consistent with Andrade's careful notes in the margins of his copy of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which point to his interest in sexual development as a story and puberty as a drama (Riaviz 56). This permits us to read *Macunaíma* beyond the loss and recovery of the *muiraquitã*, which occupies just ten of seventeen chapters. Rather, it is “play” that gives structure to the book, from Macunaíma's first uninhibited gestures to his final death at the hands of a sexually alluring monster. I dedicate this section to Macunaíma's playing and to how the verb *brincar* distills his psychology.

Before delving into the word's use, however, an understanding of how the narrative of sexual development unfolds on Macunaíma's body is valuable. While the book's opening paragraphs portray Macunaíma in the throes of early childhood sexuality, by the time he reaches age six a few paragraphs later, he should be entering a phase of sexual latency. As Freud details in *Three Essays*:

It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow—disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals. One gets an impression from civilized children that the construction of these

dams is a product of education, and no doubt education has much to do with it. But in reality this development is organically determined and fixed by heredity (...). (43)

Yet it is at age six, an age that easily situates Macunaíma within the latency period, when he first has sex. Leapfrogging over latency, Macunaíma sets his eyes on his brother's girlfriend Sofará, demonstrating a precocious ability to focus on a sexual object. While biology should inhibit him from acting on this impulse, Macunaíma shapeshifts into an adult—the first of many examples where Andrade uses magic to overcome biological obstacles to sexual development. According to Freudian logic, this bypassing of latency would deny Macunaíma the opportunity to develop repressive “dams,” a fact we find reflected in his continued habit of stealing his brother's girlfriends and, more generally, his lack of sexual restraint.

As the chapters progress, magic continues to literalize the accelerated development of Macunaíma's body ahead of his brain. In Chapter 2, fittingly titled “Maioridade” (Maturity), an older woman views Macunaíma's outsmarting of the man-eating Currupira as evidence of intelligence beyond his age. She resolves to “igualar o corpo com o bestunto” (to equalize his body and head) by throwing a magical stew on him. Yet in aging every part of his body but his head, she ironically achieves the opposite of her desired balancing:

Macunaíma fastou sarapantado mas só conseguiu livrar a cabeça, todo o resto do corpo se molhou. O herói deu um espirro e botou corpo. Foi desempenhando crescendo fortificando e ficou do tamanho dum homem taludo. Porém a cabeça não molhada ficou pra sempre rombuda e com carinha enjoativa de piá. (25)

We see something similar in the fifth chapter, as his body transforms in response to the loss of the *muiiraquitã* given to him by his lover Ci before her ascension to the stars. With “desejo” (a word with Freudian implications) beating in his chest, he begins to cry, and the tears dripping down his face “baptize” his chest hair:

De vez em quando Macunaíma parava pensando na marvada... Que desejo batia nele! Parava tempo. Chorava muito tempo. As lágrimas

escorregando pelas faces infantis, do herói iam lhe batizar a peitaria cabeluda. Então ele suspirava sacudindo a cabecinha:
— Qual, manos! Amor primeiro não tem companheiro, não!... (45)

In both cases, knowledge of sexual development is used to create a character whose inner state is magically reflected on his body, exacerbating and physicalizing his infantile fixation. Gilda de Mello e Souza speculates that just as these scenes allegorize “a permanência da criança no adulto, do alógico no lógico, do primitivo no civilizado,” they also contain a reference to Achilles in the River Styx (43-44). If her speculation is correct, not only does it suggest a lack of repression as Macunaíma’s fatal flaw, but it also reveals something about Andrade’s creative process. Just as Freud uses Greek mythology (famously, Oedipus) in his creation of theories, Andrade invokes the Greeks in his own reading of the sexual content of indigenous mythology. And even if Andrade was not intentionally referencing the story of Achilles, we may still see how a Freudian reading of Koch-Grünberg’s anthropological studies—the original inspiration for *Macunaíma*—was a tool in Andrade’s belt.

The verb *brincar* has a parallel function to Macunaíma’s mind-body disharmony. This verb—used for the first time in the aforementioned scene with his brother’s girlfriend Sofará—captures the protagonist’s sexual precocity and subsequent fixation in an early stage of development by uniting a mature meaning (sex) with a childish one (play). Sex becomes the adult equivalent of a playdate: not single-mindedly goal-driven, but something to do for fun, to pass the time.

These meanings are reinforced and heightened with the violent description of his play with Sofará, which does not build towards orgasm, but repetitive destruction:

Brincaram. Depois de brincarem três feitas, correram mato fora fazendo festinhas um pro outro. Depois das festinhas de cotucar, fizeram a das cócegas, depois se enterraram na areia, depois *se queimaram com fogo de palha*, isso foram muitas festinhas. Macunaíma pegou num tronco de copaíba e se escondeu por detrás da piranhiera. Quando Sofará veio correndo, *ele deu com o pau na cabeça dela. Fez uma brecha que a moça caiu torcendo de riso* aos pés dele. Puxou-o por uma perna. Macunaíma gemia de gosto

se agarrando no tronco gigante. Então a moça *abocanhou o dedão do pé dele e engoliu. Macunaíma chorando de alegria tatuou o corpo dela com o sangue do pé.* Depois retesou os músculos, se erguendo num trapézio de cipó e aos pulos atingiu num átimo o galho mais alto da piranheira. Sofará trepava atrás. O ramo fininho vergou oscilando com o peso do príncipe. Quando a moça chegou também no tope eles brincaram outra vez balanceando no céu. Depois de brincarem Macunaíma quis fazer uma festa em Sofará. Dobrou o corpo todo na *violência dum puxão* mas não pôde continuar, galho quebrou e ambos despencaram aos embolésus até se esborracharem no chão. (26, italics mine)

They set each other on fire, crack open each other's heads, bite off and swallow toes, tattoo each other with blood, push each other out of trees. Lacking proof that Andrade read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* before writing *Macunaíma*, I will resist the temptation to call these kinks an application of the death drive. *Totem and Taboo*, however, would certainly have offered insight into cannibalism in primitive societies. This violence is also consistent with Freud's *Three Essays*:

The history of human civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct. (...) According to some authorities this aggressive element of the sexual instinct is in reality a relic of cannibalistic desires (...). It has also been maintained that every pain contains in itself the possibility of a feeling of pleasure. (25)

In this way, *brincar* brings forward not just the infantile in Macunaíma's sexual instinct, but also the primitive. A playful application of theory, *brincar* denotes a relationship to women, and by extension the outside world, structured by the pleasure principle.

“Graças,” “vergonhas,” Reformulating Shame

As we can see in the contrast between Andrade's take on Freudian vocabulary in “Carta pras Icamíabas” and his recurrent use of *brincar*, Andrade prefers

language that evokes layers of meaning. This is further evident in Freudian slips throughout the “Carta,” which belie Macunaíma’s struggle to focus on anything but sex, as Andrade admits in a letter to Bandeira: “Que ele não sabe bem a língua acentuei pelas confusões que faz (testículos da Bíblia por versículos etc. e o fundo sexual dele se acentua nas confusões, testículos, buraco por orifício, etc)” (10/31/1927, 359).

With this in mind, I approach another recurrent word that often appears in conjunction with *brincar*: the noun *graça* (and its plural *graças*). Used by Andrade to refer to female genitalia, *graça*, in and of itself, already has many meanings. It has a religious significance: *grace*, as in the Hail Mary. More colloquially, *tem graça* means that something is pleasing or fun; *não tem graça*, that it is boring or unfunny. Furthermore, like *gracias* in Spanish, *graças* can mean thanks. Andrade’s humorous layering of *vagina* on top of all this merits interrogation.

The word first appears in the book’s opening paragraphs, pages before the first use of *brincar*. Andrade writes, “No mocambo si alguma cunhatã se aproximava dele pra fazer festinha, Macunaíma punha a mão nas graças dela, cunhatã se afastava” (a rough translation might be helpful: “In the hut if a woman came and tickled him, Macunaíma put his hand on her *graças*, she pulled back”) (13). Here, Andrade paints a humorous picture: looking to play with the young Macunaíma, these women are instead confronted with overt childhood sexuality, an act that the toddler himself perceives as an attempt to get his hands on *graças*, on something fun and perhaps sacred. Just as the repeated use of *brincar* appears to highlight a fixation in an infantile stage of sexual development—a fixation made physical on his disjointed body—the repeated use of *graça(s)*, which reads like a childish euphemism, suggests he will never grow past this initial impulsive gesture or into more “adult” words.

Throughout the book, Andrade seems to play with these layers of meaning. For example, when Macunaíma breaks his agreement with the sun god Vei by sleeping with a Portuguese woman (she had promised him immortality, so long as he married and remained faithful to one of her three daughters), Vei puts a curse on him: “Agora você fica pouco tempo moço talqualmente os outros homens e depois vai ficando mocetudo e sem graça nenhuma” (92). Most obviously, “sem graça nenhuma” indicates that he will lose his immortality and, with age, his attractive qualities and youthful looks, his *graça*. Yet the previously established sexual implication of *graça* suggests an additional meaning: he will

end his life without *graça*, that is, without sex. This prophecy proves true in the final chapter. Returning from São Paulo to an Amazon devoid of people, Macunaíma encounters the siren-like Uiara who seduces him by exposing her “*graça*,” and then tears him apart limb from limb (206). Soon after, as he collects his dismembered body parts (but is unable to relocate his leg or the reclaimed *muiraquitã*), he chooses to ascend to the sky and become a “uselessly shiny” star with a simple reflection: “Não achou mais *graça* nesta Terra” (repeated twice on 207). A life guided by the pleasure principle finally succumbs to Freud’s reality principle. The repetition of *graça* helps us trace this line.

Careful attention to the word *graça* also leads us, seemingly, to instances of wordplay for wordplay’s sake. In Chapter 16, for instance, Macunaíma tells his brother a story about bumping into a deer’s behind while wandering through the woods, a moment which he finds “*engraçado*” (an adjective that, derived from *graça*, means *funny*):

Fui andando por um caminho, vai, topei rasto dum... catingueiro não era não mas era mateiro. Me agachei e fui no rasto. Olhando olhando, sabe, dei uma cabeçada numa coisa mole, que engraçado! sabem o que era! pois a bunda do viado, gente! (Macunaíma deu uma grande gargalhada.) (190)

Here, the most obvious reading corresponds to the common definition of *engraçado*: Macunaíma finds it hilarious that he bumped into the deer’s behind. Yet the sexual implications of *graça* suggest an additional meaning, perhaps a hidden joke, which might jump out to a reader who recognizes the word “viado”—most clearly a transliteration of the word *veado* (“deer”) as it sounds in spoken Brazilian Portuguese—as a slang insult for a homosexual man. The hidden joke: the “viado” has become “engraçado,” in the sense that his “bunda,” or butt, has been rendered a *graça*. While such wordplay has no bearing on the story, it certainly makes Macunaíma laugh, and perhaps Andrade too.⁴

With these sexual connotations in mind, I return to the word’s first appearance in the book: “No mocambo si alguma cunhatã se aproximava dele pra fazer festinha, Macunaíma punha a mão nas graças dela, cunhatã se afastava. Nos

⁴ Andrade would likely have been aware of this use of “viado,” which came into usage, according to James N. Green, in the 1920s, if not earlier. Notably, Andrade himself maintained relations with men, an aspect of his sexuality he largely kept hidden (Green 80-85).

machos guspia na cara” (13). As I noted above, this appears to be a dramatization of the Oedipus complex, in that he admires women and spits on men. Yet the use of *graça* also resonates, perhaps less obviously, with another Freudian text: *Totem and Taboo*, specifically the first chapter on incest taboos.⁵

According to Freud, primitive groups are organized into clans that tend to have a “horror of incest.” Freud describes this fear as overblown, given these clans are formed not around blood relations, but shared ancestry with a sacred animal, or totem. Despite this irrationality, their horror often leads to strict “exogamy” laws, or incest taboos, preventing sex between clan members. We might read the above scene, then, as a dramatized incest taboo. While we know nothing about these women, we do know they are in Macunaíma’s family hut, suggesting clan membership, or at the very least closeness to his clan. And while, incest or not, jumping back would be a reasonable reaction to Macunaíma’s gesture, an incestuous reading raises the stakes, as he would be defying a deeply entrenched social law. It is worth noting the parallels between the words *graça* and *taboo*. According to Freud, *taboo* has a “double significance,” referring simultaneously to the *sacred* and the *unclean* quality of people or things (and to the prohibition that emerges from them) (*Totem and Taboo* 29). *Graça*, of course, has similar implications.

When considering *graça*, an additional reference becomes relevant: Pero Vaz de Caminha. As previously referenced, Caminha’s letter to the Portuguese king following his first contact with Brazil in 1500 provided inspiration for “Carta pras Icamiabas.” Significantly, in the letter, Caminha describes indigenous people’s indecent exposure of their private parts, which he calls “vergonhas” (shames): “Eram pardos, todos nus, sem coisa alguma que lhes cobrisse suas vergonhas.” Andrade clearly plays with this passage in “Carta pras Icamiabas,” as Macunaíma uses similar language to describe the women of São Paulo: “Andam elas vestidas de rutilantes joias e panos finíssimos, que lhes acentuam o donaire do porte, e mal encobrem as graças, que a de nenhuma outra cedem pelo formoso do torneado e pelo tom” (99). While Andrade is certainly aiming for comedy by putting an indigenous man in the role of explorer observing the habits of scantily clad urban women, it is also worth addressing the use of *graças*

⁵ *Totem and Taboo* was an important reference for Andrade and the modernists, as explored by Telê Porto Ancona Lopez, Vanessa Riaviz, Cristiana Facchinetti, and others. We see this in the very title of Andrade’s poetry collection *Clã do Jabuti* (1927), which offers the “jabuti,” a kind of tortoise, as the totem of the Brazilian “clan.” Indeed, in the final chapter of *Macunaíma*, as the title character ascends to the stars, he encounters the “Jabuti Grande” (210).

instead of *vergonhas*, two words that function as virtual opposites. Certainly, this switch fits in with our larger discussion of Macunaíma's unrepressed nature.

Andrade's dialogue with Caminha appears to gain a psychoanalytic dimension if we take into consideration his 1943 essay on the *complexo da Dona Ausente*, mentioned earlier. Drawing on 20 years of research into his proposed Brazilian psychical complex, he cites the "vergonhas" passage:

Já o nosso Gregório de Mattos repetira isso mesmo com salgadíssima aspereza, que não quero citar. Mas não quero esquecer que esta condescendência provocada pelo rito da castidade marinha, é risonhamente encontrável no entusiasmo com que os nossos primeiros cronistas elogiaram as índias. Em Vaz de Caminha a preocupação chega à impertinência, e mulher não vê que não lhe cite logo "as vergonhas." ("A Dona Ausente" 214)

Considering the psychoanalytic nature of the essay, we can extrapolate how Andrade might have recognized the Freudian concept of shame as a force of sexual repression in Caminha's use of "vergonhas." Stepping back, we can see that *graça* generates a dialogue, explicit or not, with both primitive and colonial forms of sexual repression. Ultimately, it is unimportant whether Andrade is actually drawing upon *Totem and Taboo* or Caminha in his use of the word because what matters is the effect. What we see is a character who, from an early age, refuses to deem any manifestation of sexuality unclean, off-limits, or unworthy of play.

This reading resonates with José Miguel Wisnik's interpretation of *Macunaíma* as a meditation on Freudian foreplay. In kids, before genitals become fully developed for sexual use, libido's goal is not orgasm, but discovery and exploration, a full-bodied experience of pleasure. Reading Andrade's use of *brincar* through a Marxist lens, Wisnik argues that the book upholds a nonproductive, non-goal-driven lifestyle as an alternative to modernity and capitalism at a time of intense urbanization in Brazil. In this way, the title character's recurrent cries of "ai! Que preguiça" (itself a play on the Tupi and

Portuguese words for *sloth*⁶ would be a sort of call to (in)action that recasts the stereotype of the lazy, promiscuous Indian in a positive light.

Graças could be read as a similar intervention. Fooling around with shames and taboos, Andrade seems to tap into a pre-colonial vision of sex. Yet part of Andrade's genius lies in his ambiguity. Macunaíma's compulsion to play with every woman he meets, to see shameful parts for their *graça*, is his fatal flaw. This is evident in the final scene with the man-eating Uiara, who completely dismembers him, prompting him to ascend to the stars as the narrator reflects: "Não achou mais graça nesta Terra" (207). Faced with the mortal consequences of his drive for pleasure, he finds no compelling reason to stick around in a boring, sexless world.

"Sintoma," "caráter," Final Thoughts

In this essay, I have shown three instances of Freudian wordplay in *Macunaíma*. First, I discussed *libido saudoso* and *influxo metapsíquico* as inventions that humorously demonstrate the linguistic barriers to partaking in elite city life and implicitly critique a mechanical use of Freudian vocabulary. Second, I considered the synthesis of various psychoanalytic theories in *brincar*, a verb that gives structure to both character and narrative. Finally, I offered the Freudian resonances contained in the word *graça*. Zooming out, what we see is a Brazilian intellectual navigating his relationship to an imposed European canon, both modern (in my analysis, Freud and Koch-Grünberg) and colonial (Caminha). By skirting the rigorous application of Freud's theories, and instead using them as a source of thoughtful inspiration, Andrade offers one path for mediating diverse influences.

This brings me to two more terms: *character* and *symptom*. The easiest interpretation of *Macunaíma: o herói sem nenhum caráter* would be to view the titular hero as a symbol of Brazil's unrepented and fatally flawed spirit. Yet

⁶ Though beyond the scope of this essay, Macunaíma's catchphrase "ai! Que preguiça!" also contains a bit of wordplay. In Portuguese, *ai* is an exclamation much like *oh* in English. It is also the Tupi word for the animal *sloth*. Similarly, the word *preguiça* refers both to the sensation of *sloth* or *laziness* and to the animal itself. In other words, while this phrase most clearly means "oh, what laziness!", it could also mean "sloth, what sloth!" Maria Augusta Fonseca makes a convincing case: Andrade's library contained a copy of Padre Anchieta's *Cartas Inéditas*, published in 1900, in which a 1560 letter written by Anchieta describes an animal "que os índios chamam *Aig*, e nós 'Preguiça' por causa de sua morosidade realmente vagarosa" (Fonseca 288-289). Again, a colonial text offers an opportunity for linguistic exploration.

Andrade rejects this reading across a range of letters to friends and drafted prefaces to the book. In one exchange, Manuel Bandeira discourages the use of national symbolism, specifically discarding a reading of Macunaíma's undeveloped head as a symbol of tradition: "Macunaíma é gostosíssimo como Macunaíma. Agora se é símbolo de brasileiro, se a cabeça é tradição, etc., etc., isso me amola" (11/6/27, 361). In response, Andrade agrees, asserting that Macunaíma is too individual to be a symbol: "Vive por si, porém possui um caráter que é justamente o de não ter caráter" (11/7/27, 363).

In *Three Essays*, Freud defines the term *character* as:

What we describe as a person's 'character' is built up to a considerable extent from the material of sexual excitations and is composed of instincts that have been fixed since childhood, of constructions achieved by means of sublimation, and of other constructions, employed for effectively holding in check perverse impulses which have been recognized as being unutilizable. (104-05).

While Freud may have informed Andrade's use of "character" in the book's subtitle, his first drafted preface to *Macunaíma* shows him drawing on Freudian terminology to generate his own definition of the term:

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 pelear muito verifiquei uma coisa que me parece 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, entendo 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*. Os franceses têm caráter e assim os jorubas e os mexicanos. Seja porque civilização própria, perigo

iminente ou consciência de séculos tenha auxiliado, o certo é que esses uns têm caráter). (*Macunaíma* 217, italics mine)

Describing “lack of character” as “lack of a permanent psychical entity” is not only inconsistent with Freud’s definition of *character*, but also with the core psychoanalytic notion of the psyche as a fixed apparatus. We see this in *Macunaíma* itself, where the psyche is depicted as extractable. Before going to São Paulo, for instance, Macunaíma removes his “consciência”⁷ and leaves it on the Ilha de Marapatá (49); later, unable to relocate this “consciência,” he replaces it with one belonging to a Spanish-American that he finds on the forest floor (188). Suffice it to say, while *brincar* and *graça* playfully follow Freudian logic, Andrade’s definition of *character* defies Freud, revealing his conception of an impermanent and extractable psyche much more fitting for a fractured land lacking, in his eyes, both great civilizational history (putting Brazil closer to the primitive) and tradition (the Portuguese initially conceived of Brazil as a place for extraction, not settlement).

This brings me to Andrade’s description of *Macunaíma* as “symptomatic,” rather than symbolic, of Brazil. As he reflected in 1943:

Agora: não quero que imaginem que pretendi fazer deste livro uma expressão de cultura nacional brasileira. Deus me livre. É agora, depois dele feito, que me parece descobrir nele um sintoma de cultura nossa. Lenda, história, tradição, psicologia, ciência, objetividade nacional, cooperação acomodada de elementos estrangeiros passam aí. Por isso que malicio nele o fenômeno complexo que o torna sintomático. (*Macunaíma* 236)

For Freud, a symptom is “a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression” (“Inhibitions” 91). Much like a dream image, it is the visual manifestation of

⁷ Andrade’s use of “consciência”—which means both “consciousness” and “conscience”—may be an allusion to the 16th century saying that explorers left their moral values on the other side of the Equator. Consider Caspar Barlaeus’s famous description “ultra aequinotialem non peccavi,” which can be translated as “There is no sin below the Equator” (as immortalized in Chico Buarque’s song “Não existe pecado ao sul do Equador”). I am intrigued, however, by a third possible translation: “conscious,” in the sense that *Macunaíma* is not just removing his moral compass, but indeed a part of his psychical apparatus.

latent processes. Macunaíma's disjointed body, for example, would be a symptom of his leapfrogging over latency and avoidance of important repressive forces. For Raúl Antelo, the symptom classification offered Andrade an escape from the apparent arbitrariness of literary symbolism, since symptoms are manifestations of real phenomena (*Marapatá* 50). Alexandre Nodari builds on Antelo by engaging the Freudian nature of symptoms, noting that Andrade's writing itself may be seen as a symptomatic response, rather than a clear symbolic answer, to his interrogation of Brazilian identity. If this is truly a "livro em que tudo é segunda intenção," as Andrade writes to Amoroso Lima (151), then the act of writing itself is overdetermined with meaning. Pointing to the earlier citation, Nodari offers the book as symptomatically overdetermined by the range of cultural elements listed by Andrade: "lenda, história, tradição, psicologia, ciência, objetividade nacional, cooperação acomodada de elementos estrangeiros" (45-53).

Ultimately, *Macunaíma* is the symptom, not Macunaíma. It follows that in this book written as "pura brincadeira," wordplay, too, is more than a vehicle for sublimated pleasure, but symptomatic of a larger cultural disease. Indeed, instead of succumbing to colonial *sequestros*, Andrade plays with them.

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