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# PART II: “MACUNAÍMA AND THE NATIVE TRICKSTER”

BY LÚCIA SÁ

When one thinks of the Amazon, art is rarely the first thing that comes to mind. But it was the Amazon—and specifically, the bustling, ethnically diverse port city of Manaus—that gave Brazil one of its most famous contemporary poets, Thiago de Mello, and world-renowned orchestra conductor, Claudio Santoro. Manaus is also the birthplace of Milton Hatoum and Márcio Souza, novelists whose creative work have brought renewed attention to Amazonian cultural production.

Portrayed in the media either as terra incognita or a zone of violent conflict between the forces of economic development and environmental preservation, the Amazon has produced vibrant literary works that remain largely unknown outside Brazil. To dispel these misconceptions and highlight the richness of Amazonian culture, the Brazil Institute and the Brazilian Embassy in Washington organized a discussion on September 16, 2008, with one of the most celebrated Amazonian authors, Márcio Souza. Born and raised in Manaus, he is the author of picaresque, satirical novels like *The Emperor of the Amazon* and *Mad Maria*. Souza was joined by Lúcia Sá, a visiting professor of Literature at the University of Manchester, England and author of *Rain Forest Literatures: Amazonian Texts and Latin American Culture*, and Regina Igel, professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature at the University of Maryland.

This two-part special report—published as two separate issues—includes the original writings on Amazonian literature of Márcio Souza and Lúcia Sá. In this issue, “From the Amazon to São Paulo: Macunaíma and the Native Trickster,” Sá synthesizes two chapters from her book *Rain Forest Literatures* and reconceptualizes how indigenous texts are viewed and used in literature, seeing the texts as creative works rather than source material. Souza’s issue on “[Literature in the Brazilian Amazon](#),” can be downloaded from our “publications” section at our website [www.wilsoncenter.org/brazil](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/brazil).



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#### AMAZON FOREST, OCTOBER OF 1911:

As he was about to leave Koimelemong to visit the great Mount Roraima, Theodor Koch-Grünberg was contacted by Mayuluaípu, a Taurepang Indian “dressed in a clean linen suit” (Koch-Grünberg 1928, 138). Mayuluaípu (or José, his Brazilian name) offered the German naturalist his services, which included his wide knowledge of different Pemon dialects and a good command of Portuguese. A few weeks later, the expedition would gain yet another important member: Mõseuaípu, better known by his nickname Akúli (agouti or cutia, a small rodent), a young Arekuna shaman who could not speak a word of Portuguese. This encounter between the two Carib Pemon Indians and the German naturalist would later play an important part in the Brazilian literary scene: the stories that Mayuluaípu and Akúli told Koch-Grünberg, collected in the second volume of the naturalist’s *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco* (1924), became the basis of Mário de Andrade’s 1928 *Macunaíma*, a turning point in the history of Brazilian contemporary narrative.

*Macunaíma* is the biography, so to speak, of its eponymous protagonist, “a hero with no character” (sem nenhum caráter), as the subtitle has it. He is born in the region of Roraima, near the Uraricoera river, into the Tapanhumas, a native Amazonian tribe with Carib name yet unusually dark skin which was described by the German traveler von den Steinen. The hero reveals his special nature from birth and in childhood adventures with his mother, brothers and their wives, setting up sibling rivalries that run through the novel. He marries Ci, the Mother of the Forest, who died of sadness upon losing their only son: before dying, Ci gives him a green stone amulet or *muiraquitã*, which brings him power as “Emperor of the Forest” as well as luck; but the amulet then falls into the river to be swallowed by a turtle.

Macunaíma and his brothers then embark on a journey south to São Paulo in order to recover the amulet, which had fallen into the hands of the Peruvian (with an Italian name) Wenceslau Pietro Pietra, also known as the ogre Piaimã. After many adventures in the metropolis, with its strange language and customs, they recover the amulet and go back north to the Amazon. Back home, Macunaíma finds his people gone, gets into a new dispute with his brother Jiguê, who changes into the vulture-king, and destroys all members of the family, except for Macunaíma. Plagued by Vei, the sun, for having spurned one of her daughters, he loses his right leg and is badly mutilated. The amulet is again swallowed by a water beast, this time for good. Lonely, and “tired of this life,” he decides to become a star, but not before telling his life story to a parrot, who tells it to the author of the book.

This summary alone cannot do justice to *Macunaíma*, which was called by its author not a novel, but a rhapsody, and could be better described as a complicated net of plots and subplots, etiological narratives and multiple encounters between the protagonist and a myriad of other characters. The majority of these plots and subplots were taken from previous sources, most of them native, which are then combined with popular sayings and songs, data from Mário’s own life and, of course, the author’s own inventions.

Cavalcanti Proença’s *Roteiro de Macunaíma* (1955) carefully mapped the sources of Mário’s novel. This important study allowed readers to visualize more clearly Mário’s monumental project: to bring Brazilian *belles lettres* into a fruitful, dynamic contact with heterogeneous and diverse forms of popular culture. And as we can see in the *Roteiro*, from the complicated fabric of texts that compose *Macunaíma*, the indigenous ones (“Amerindian text” in the words of Mário) stand out, providing the novel with its main characters and the great

majority of its plots. Most of these plots were taken from Koch-Grünberg, but some also came from Capistrano de Abreu, Barbosa Rodrigues, Brandão do Amorim, Couto de Magalhães, and others. In 1931 Mário himself acknowledged his literary debts, in an ironic response to Amazonian folklorist Raymundo de Moraes, who earlier had claimed to be “defending” Mário from accusations of plagiarism (the “defense” was, of course, a way of exposing Mário’s use of native sources as plagiarist):

Yes, I copied, my dear defender. What shocks me—and I find this supremely generous—is that my detractors forgot all they know, restricting my copying to Koch-Grünberg, when I copied them all. And even you, in the Boiúna scene. I confess I copied, and copied sometimes verbatim. You really want to know? Not only did I copy the ethnographers and the Amerindian texts, but further, in the Carta pras Icamíabas, I took whole sentences from Rui Barbosa, Mário Barreto, and the Portuguese colonial chroniclers, and I tore apart the ever so precious and solemn language used by the contributors to the *Revista de Língua Portuguesa*<sup>1</sup>. (Lopez 1974, 99-100)

By defining his literary creation as re-creation, as copying, Mário aligns himself with several writers and theorists of the 20th-century—from Brecht and Borges to Kristeva and Derrida—who see literature as an intertextual practice. Differently from them, however, he is less concerned with intertextuality as such than with the possibilities of intercultural relations opened by the intertextual dialogue.

In *Macunaíma: a Margem e o Texto* (1974) Telê Porto Ancona Lopez went on to discuss Mário’s

marginalia in his own copy of Koch-Grünberg’s *Vom Roroíma zum Orinoco*. And she suggested that after Proença’s *Roteiro*, and her own work, there was little else left to do with regard to the indigenous sources of the novel<sup>3</sup>. We need, however, to consider the aesthetic and cultural implications of this intertextuality, to relate Macunaíma closely to the Amazonian texts that informed it, going beyond the first (and extremely important) step taken by both Proença and Lopez, of locating the specific intertextual dialogues at play. For if the influence of the indigenous texts on *Macunaíma* is not usually denied, the engagement with them is most often considered superfluous, given their status as “raw data,” or “ethnographic material.” My objective is to question the economic discourse of a critical tradition that tends to see native Amazonian texts as unworked raw materials that only become manufactured in the hands of non-indigenous intellectuals. That Mário himself disagreed with these assumptions we can see in the following letter to the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1928):

You say that there is no interest in the Indians...From the artistic point of view, I imagine. I really don’t know how to make myself clear, really not. I have an artistic interest in them. Now and again they do amazing things. Certain ceramic bowls from the North, certain Marajoara vases, certain linear designs, certain music and above all certain legends and tales are stupendous, Carlos...I believe this propensity of mine is not just of the moment or the result of fashion. I always had it and for me these great traditional legends of the tribal peoples are the finest histories, tales and novels there can be. (Lopez 1988, 394-395)



From left to right, Regina Igel, Marcio Souza, Lúcia Sá and Paulo Sotero

## A TRICKSTER HERO

*Macunaíma's* debt to the Pemon narratives published by Koch-Grünberg begins, of course, with the protagonist, whose name and ways of behaving are most strongly related to the trickster-hero of the Pemon, Makuaima. The similarities between the actions and behavior of the two characters can be more fully appreciated, in the first instance, if we compare excerpts from the texts. Here the novel describes, in the first chapter, how Macunaíma goes with his sister-in-law to the forest:

The next day he [Macunaíma] waited, watching with half an eye for his mother to start work, then he begged her to stop weaving split cane into a basket, so she asked her daughter-in-law, Jiguê's wife, to take the little boy. Jiguê's wife was a nice girl called Sofará who came rather apprehensively; but Macunaíma was behaving himself; and didn't try to put his hand where he oughtn't. Sofará gave the lad a

piggyback till she came to a place where a giant arum lily was growing on the riverbank. . . . The girl put Macunaíma down on the bank but he began to whine - too many ants there, he said - and he begged her to carry him to the crest of a ridge hidden behind the trees. Sofará did this, but as soon as she laid the child down on the litter of dry leaves carpeting the forest floor among the sedges, eddoes and creeping spiderwort, he transformed himself into a comely prince. There they made love... many times<sup>5</sup>.

The same sequence of events was narrated by Akúli, as we can see in Koch-Grünberg's text:

When Makunaíma was still a boy, he would cry all night long and would ask his oldest brother's wife to take him outside of the house. There he wanted to secure her and force her. His mom wanted to take him out, but he didn't want her to. Then his

## Macunaíma and the Native Trickster By Lúcia Sá

mom told his sister-in-law to take him. She carried him out, for quite a distance, but he asked her to take him even farther. Then the woman took him even farther, until they were behind a wall. Makunaíma was still a boy. But when they arrived there, he turned into a man and he forced her. It was then always like that with the woman, and he would use her every time his brother went out to hunt. The brother, however, knew nothing of this. At home, Makunaíma was a child. When outside, right away he would turn into a man. (2: 46)

The novel goes on to tell us how the boy Macunaíma tried to convince his brother to make him a trap:

Jiguê suspected nothing and began plaiting some fiber drawn from the leaves of the wild pineapple to make a cord. He had come across the fresh tracks of a tapir and wanted a noose to trap it. Macunaíma asked for some of the cord for himself, but Jiguê said it wasn't a baby's toy, which caused him to start blubbering again and giving them all a sleepless night.

Macunaíma then begged again for some of the fiber. Jiguê eyed him with distaste but sent his wife to fetch some yarn for the boy, which she did.

Dawn had barely climbed above the tree-tops on the following day when Macunaíma woke everyone with hideous bawling. (6)

Once again, the text closely resembles Koch-Grünberg's:

The oldest brother went to look for caroa fibers in order to make a trap for a tapir.

He said that he had found fresh tapir tracks and he wanted to make himself a trap. Makunaíma also asked for a trap, but the brother told him no, saying: "What do you want it for? Traps aren't for children to play with. This is only for those who know how to handle it." But the boy insisted and he absolutely wanted to have it. He asked for it every day. Then the oldest brother gave him a few caroa fibers and asked the mother: "What does the boy want the trap for?" (46)

But the boy is more successful in his hunt than the brother expected, as we can see in both the novel and in Koch-Grünberg's text:

"Hey! Someone go down to the water-hole! There's a beast caught in my trap!" But not one believed him, and they all started their day's work. Macunaíma, really miffed, begged Sofará to make a quick visit to the drinking place just to have a look. She did so and came racing back shouting to everyone that there was indeed a huge tapir in the trap, already dead. The whole tribe turned out to fetch the animal, dumfounded by the brat's cunning. Jiguê, with nothing in his own noose, met them all carrying the carcass and let them a hand. As he cut it up and shared out the flesh he didn't give Macunaíma any of the meat, only the innards. The hero swore he'd take revenge. (M. Andrade 1984, 7)

...

The next day, Makunaíma sent his mother to go see if any tapir had fallen into the trap. One really had. The mother returned and said that the tapir was already dead. Then the boy told his mom to go let his

oldest brother know, so that he would take out the tapir and distribute it. She had to repeat herself two times, because the oldest brother didn't want to believe her and said: "I'm much older; no tapir fell into my trap, how is it possible that there is one in the little one's trap?" Makunaíma said to the mother: "Tell him to take his wife, so that she can carry the meat!" When the brother and his wife had gone, Makunaíma told the mom not to go there. When the brother had already cut up the tapir, Makunaíma sent the mother to tell him to bring the tapir back home whole, because he wanted to distribute the meat himself. But the oldest brother didn't want to give him a portion of the meat, saying that he was still too young. He carried all of the meat home and left only the intestines for the boy. Makunaíma was furious. (Koch-Grünberg 1984: 2, 47)

In the novel, Jiguê finally suspects that his wife was having sex with his younger brother:

The Evening Star was already bright in the sky when the girl returned, pretending to be tired out from carrying the child on her back. However, though Jiguê was a witless sort of chap, he had become suspicious and had followed the couple into the forest, where he saw the transformation and all that followed. He was hopping mad with fury when they arrived, and snatching up a thong he plaided rawhide called an armadillo's tail, he walloped the hero until his arse was skinned. (M. Andrade 1984, 7)

Jiguê's realization is also based on Akúli's story:

The oldest brother figured out that Makunaíma was sleeping with his wife. He went out to hunt, but he came back after going halfway, to spy on the boy. He waited close to the place where the woman would always go with Makunaíma. She came with the little one in her arms. When she got behind the wall, she sat the child on the floor. Then Makunaíma turned into a man. He grew bigger and bigger. (The boy was very fat.)

He lay down with the woman and he possessed her. The brother saw everything. He took a stick and beat Makunaíma terribly.

(Koch-Günberg 1984:2, 47)

Comparing both texts, we can see that Macunaíma's basic qualities, as they are defined in the first chapter of the novel, are already present in the native text: his childish behavior and capacity to transform into an adult, his lust, his ability to deceive, his innate talents (for hunting), and his dispute with the older brother. In the novel's next chapter, the family is suffering from hunger, and Macunaíma asks the mother to imagine that their house is on the otherside of the river. The house is then magically transported, and they have plenty to eat. However, Macunaíma's mother cuts some bananas to give to Jiguê and his wife, who remained on the other side of the river, hungry. Macunaíma got angry and transported the house back again to its original place. The same sequence is found in Koch-Grünberg's narratives, with the difference that the house is transported not to the other side of the river, but to the top of the mountain. Many other examples of close intertextuality with the

adventures of Makunaíma, the Pemon hero, could still be described. Besides Makunaíma, other Pemon characters from Koch-Grünberg's collection influenced Mário de Andrade in the creation of his protagonist, suggesting not only modes of behavior, but story lines to be enacted by the "hero of our people" as well: Konewó, from whom Makunaíma inherited his capacity as a verbal deceiver, as an illusionist; Kalawunseg, who made him a gratuitous liar; the lustful Akalapijeima; and the lazy, envious and excessively curious Etetó's brother-in-law. However, it is Makunaíma who gives Mário de Andrade's protagonist his most important qualities: his name, his ability to transform into other beings, a good portion of his malice and mischief, his capacity for boredom, and his status as a hero.

Like his literary descendant, the Pemon Makunaíma can be cruel, selfish, lustful, and readily bored. But he can also be smart and sensitive, and above all he is creative, and the culture hero of the Pemon, the one who defined their land, gave them tools and fire, and made them what they are. He prepared the way for agriculture and hence human society, according to the native American norm, and introduced knowledge of poisons, one of the defining features of tropical America in world history. The contradictions in Makunaíma force us to consider him in the light of a definition stemming from a North-American indigenous character, but now applied to different literatures around the world: the *trickster*. Interest in this character began with the first steps of North-American anthropology, and as Ellen Basso points out in the book *In Favor of Deceit*:

Writers were impressed then, as now, by the contradictions in Trickster's moral character, by what Boas called the "troublesome psychological discrepancy"

between the apparently incongruous attributes of the "culture hero" (who makes the world safe and secure for human life) and the "selfish buffoon" (who ludicrously attempts the inappropriate). (4)

Paul Radin's classical study of the trickster considers the "culture hero" aspect of the trickster stories as intrusive (167), and his/her divinity, when it occurs, as secondary and "largely a construction of the priest-thinker, of a remodeler" (164). For Carl Jung, the trickster represents the shadow aspect of humanity (211), and more recently Michael P. Carroll has defined the trickster as an attempt to recast "Freudian reality" through the "psychological association between the two things—the immediate gratification of sexual desires and "culture"—that all human beings would like to have associated" (115).

As Ellen Basso points out, such works derive from "very general theories about human psychology, and about myths and their symbolic functions" (6). The fact that a character can be at the same time a culture hero and a "selfish buffoon" is taken as a universal anomaly, and not enough effort is spent on relating tricksters to the cultures that gave birth to them.

After studying several trickster stories narrated by the Carib speaking Kalapalo of the Xingu, and the cultural context in which they were produced, Basso arrives at a very different conclusion:

If the idea of fixed psychic structure is questioned (and some psychologists have questioned it), then the contradictions in the patterns of a trickster's action need not be viewed as anomalous or paradoxical. In fact, to the Kalapalo, those characters whose action is stable and falls into a general pattern, whose goals and modes

of orientation to them seem not to vary, are regarded as excessively compulsive and inflexible, and ultimately, as failures of imagination. Pragmatic creativity and flexibility, the ability to conceive of more than a single kind of relation with other people, and the ability to fashion or invent a variety of thoughts about one's capacity as an agent, is, on the other hand, entirely human. (356-7)

Looking at Makunaíma's cycle one can see that the Pemon culture hero, in spite of being terribly lustful and selfish, is less a "buffoon" than certain of his fellow tricksters in North America. There are no episodes in the cycle that resemble the one in which the Winnebago trickster, for instance, helplessly watches a fight between his two hands; nor do we see a solitary Makunaíma surprised at the size of his own phallus erectus. Actually, Makunaíma is never presented in these stories as a loner. His adventures generally emphasize the relationship between him and his brothers, and it is in the context of that relationship that his tricksterness has to be analyzed.

In the first narrative of the collection, the Food Tree episode, for example, Makunaíma is usually the one who makes the most important decisions, the one who operates the key transformations in the life of the Pemon. He decides to look for signs of food in the agouti's teeth, and he is also the one who sends his older brother after the rodent in order to find out where the food is coming from. In Akuli's version<sup>2</sup>, the felling of the tree is his responsibility, and the Great Flood happens because Makunaíma uncovers the hole in the fallen tree trunk so as to let more fish come out. On the other hand, he is also the one who saves them from the Flood, by planting the inajá palm trees in the ground. That Makunaíma,

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the youngest brother, should be the one to make all those decisions is thus explained by Akuli: "Makunaíma, the youngest of the brothers, was still a boy, but he was 'más zafado' than all the others" (2:40). The expression "más zafado" comes from the Portuguese *mais safado*, used by Mayuluaípu, the translator (Koch-Grünberg, who employs the term *verschlagener*, feels the need to supply his readers, in a footnote, with the Portuguese expression). The first meaning given to *safado* in the *Novo Michaelis Portuguese/English dictionary* is *trickster*.

While some of Makunaíma's actions could certainly be called gratuitous tricks, others reveal a clear, well planned, and conscious struggle for power. According to the Pemon hierarchy, Makunaíma, as the youngest brother, owes the older ones respect (Thomas 55-56)—a respect that he is not willing to show. His domination over the oldest brothers, on the contrary, demonstrates the subversive tone of these narratives insofar as the Pemon sibling hierarchy is concerned. It is not that Makunaíma replaces the older brothers, or that he simply shows he knows more and therefore deserves respect as if he were in fact older: in some stories the culture hero is still depicted as a spoiled child who gets into trouble for his excessive curiosity or lack of obedience, and has to be saved (from death,

## Macunaíma and the Native Trickster By Lúcia Sá

even) by the older brothers. But the fact that the Pemon culture hero—i.e., the one who caused the Flood and created new human beings, the one who brought them fire, defined their territory and taught them how to live in a society—should be portrayed as the youngest brother, and a rebel, shows that in the Pemon history of social organization the definition of rules and the possibility of subverting them are seen as the creation of the same being. This is not simply a matter of dialectics: Makunaíma, like the Kalapalo tricksters mentioned by Basso, is averse to any kind of rigidity.

In fact, if we were to look for a characteristic of Makunaíma's present in most, if not all of his stories, we would probably find it to be his adaptability—what Ellen Basso calls the “pragmatic creativity and flexibility” of the Kalapalo tricksters, and culture. If as we read those stories we stay away from fixed categories such as good and evil, we will see that Makunaíma is simply more adaptable and more creative than his brothers or the other characters around him. He is the one who has the idea of following the agouti in order to find out what this rodent has been eating; and it is because he pretends to be asleep that they can actually scour the agouti's mouth for hints of food. It is also Makunaíma who ties the rope to the *mutug* bird's tail with the purpose of discovering where fire was hidden; and according to Akuli's version of the *Wazaká* narrative, he is also responsible for the decision to cut down the tree.

As with “pragmatic creativity” at any level, while some of his solutions work, others do not. And it is exactly when the solutions do not work that we can see Makunaíma's creativity and adaptability at their best. After cutting down the tree, for instance, he does not let Zigé and Akuli cover the stump immediately: “Let some more

fish come out for these streams. Then we will cover the stump” (2:41). It is that decision of his which causes the Great Flood. But faced with this new and serious problem, Makunaíma immediately finds a solution, by planting the inajá palm tree in the ground.

Here, another problem: the fruit has no flavor. But Makunaíma does not give up, rubbing the fruit against his penis so as to give it a better taste. Similarly, when the rivers and lakes were low in water and fish were abundant, Makunaíma created a wax fishing hook, which for obvious reasons did not work. He then saw a man fishing with a metal hook and tried to steal it, by transforming himself into a huge aimará fish. But once again the plan did not work: Makunaíma opened his mouth after being caught, letting the hook go. He then turned into another aimará, and the same happened. Finally, he went into the water as a pirana, and was able to take away the fisherman's hook, which was eventually captured by the aimará. “What are we going to do now?,” he asked his brother after losing the hook. But the solution this time was not to be found locally: he and his brother transformed themselves into crickets, got into the fisherman's basket, and followed him to the other side of Roraima (then British Guyana), where the man was going to work in order to acquire a new hook.

The trickster Makunaíma is not a problem solver, but a restless transformer, who often creates the problems which he will then have to solve. There are several reasons for his doing so: sometimes he wants power, as in the dispute for his brother's wife and hunting status; sometimes he wants revenge, as in the story in which a man who stole some urucu from him is cut into pieces and transformed into stone; and sometimes he is just bored, as when he “gets tired of this life” and decides to move his house to the top of the

mountain, or when he covers his own body with wounds and then decides to get rid of them.

Neither is Makunaíma above good and evil. Quite on the contrary: in the curative formulas or *taren*, transcribed by Koch-Grünberg in the third volume of his collection, Makunaíma and his brothers are often held responsible for diseases and problems the Pemon have to deal with in their daily life, and those texts do not omit any complaints about “Makunaíma, the evil one.” But “being evil” and “being a culture hero” do not have to result in a contradiction, as in so many studies about tricksters. As Makunaíma’s restlessness and creativity seem to suggest, for the Pemon adaptability and capacity of transformation are more important attributes of a culture hero than rigid conceptions of bad and good.

Thomas sees the same lack of rigidity in several aspects of the Pemon society, such as family relations, trade partnerships, and social leadership: “the Pemon social system cannot be encompassed by any strict dualism which splits the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Just as the continuously rolling savanna spreads far and wide, so the continuous Pemon social field spreads over it” (234). The consequence, according to him, is an acute sense of the ever-changing order of things—a sense that clearly defies, I would add, Lévi-Strauss’s definition of *hot* and *cold* societies.

As constructions of a fictional “self,” the Makunaíma stories told by Mayuluaípu and Akuli reveal this same fluidity, this same lack of rigidly defined traits. Makunaíma can be extremely brave on certain occasions, and a perfect coward on others; he can solve problems brilliantly and later be deceived in the most stupid way; he is a hero and, at the same time, a villain. These incongruities would cause no surprise if used to describe most human beings,

but they seem to go against certain received expectations with respect to traditional narratives, according to which heroes and villains should be depicted as such, as truly good or truly bad characters. In the native American case, such expectations derive from the imposition of models normally used in the study of traditional European oral tales. A trickster like Makunaíma, however, is closer to the contradictory and de-centered characters of 20th-century fiction than to traditional models of heroism. Mário de Andrade was the first to make this point, in a letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima the year the novel was published:

In general, my acts and my work are far too deliberate to be artistic. But not Macunaíma. I decided to write then because I was overcome with lyric emotion when upon reading Koch-Grünberg I realized that Macunaíma was a hero without any character either moral or psychological, I found this hugely moving, I don’t know why, surely because of the newness of the fact, or because he so fully suited to our times, I don’t know. (Lopez 1988, 400-401)

As a culturally defined study of human nature, Makunaíma depicts several of its impulses: from the most quotidian needs such as sexual pleasure and the satisfaction of hunger, to more complex feelings such as boredom and sado-masochism. Like a latter-day Gilgamesh, he is prompted to action through being “bored with life” (“des Lebens überdrüssig” in Koch-Grünberg’s German); and he tends to sado-masochism when, in an attempt to seduce his sister-in-law, he covers his own body with wounds to amuse her.

## SUBVERTING THE LANGUAGE OF THE METROPOLIS

As with any trickster-hero, the job of Mário de Andrade's Macunaíma is to transform the world he sees. And his most significant transformation, one could argue, is to the language of the metropolis. At the moment when Macunaíma arrives in São Paulo, looking at all the things that he had never seen before (automobiles, skyscrapers, elevators, etc.) he explains them in the terms of his own culture, and has therefore to be taught, by the prostitutes, a new, powerful word:

The women told him laughing that the sagüi monkey wasn't a monkey at all, it was called an elevator and was a machine. From first light they told him that all those whistles shrieks sighs roars grunts were not that at all, but were rather bells klaxons hooters buzzers sirens, everything was a machine. The brown jaguars were not brown jaguars, they were called fords hupmobiles chevrolets dodges and were machines. The anteaters the will-o-the-wisps the inajá palms plumed with smoke were really trucks trams trolley-buses illuminated billboards clocks headlights radios motorcycles telephones mailboxes chimneys...they were machines and everything in the city was just a machine! (34)

The machine, the prostitutes also explain to the hero, is not a god nor a woman: it is made by humans and moved by energy. Macunaíma, however, does not accept the explanation, and after a week of abstinence from food and sex, a week in which the only thing he does is to think (*maquinar* is the expression used in Portuguese) about the "bootless struggle of the children of manioc against the machine," he starts to feel:

That the machine must be a god over which humans had no true control since they had made no explainable Uíara<sup>3</sup> of it, but just a world reality. In all this turmoil, his mind found a ray of light: "Humans were machines and machines were humans!" Macunaíma gave a great guffaw. He realized he was free again, and this gave him a huge lift. (36)

In other words, Macunaíma discovers that the only way to dominate the machine is by telling an etiological tale about it—to transform it into "an explainable Uíara." Free, Macunaíma can then have his first experience dominating the machine: as he had always done in the region of the Uraricoera, where he was born as a hero and had become the "Emperor of the forest," he is able to dominate things by transforming them. Thus he turns his brother Jiguê into the "telephone-machine" and makes a phone call.

This narrative line continues in the chapter "Carta pras Icamiabas," the first attempt by the hero to show a command of written Portuguese. This chapter is a parody of the conservative way of writing that was cultivated by intellectuals such as Rui Barbosa, Mário Barreto and "those who wrote for *Revista de Língua Portuguesa*" (Lopez 1988, 427), as the author himself explains in the letter to Raimundo de Moraes quoted above. In his letter, Macunaíma describes São Paulo for the benefit of the warrior women back home, the Amazons or *Icamiabas* of the tribe of his dead wife Ci. He touches on its geography, fauna, flora, and people, adopting the colonialist tone used by the chroniclers who wrote about Brazil. São Paulo, "the strange place," is described in terms of "the known place" Amazonia. Thus, the odd habits of the inhabitants of the big city have to be

explained to the Icamiabas through comparisons with things and habits that they already know.

Part of the humor of the letter resides in the fact that it parodies the chronicles by inverting several of their references. Some of the daily habits of the *Paulistas*, therefore, appear in the text in a new light, strange and surprising. The “Imperador do Mato Virgem” (Emperor of the Virgin Forest, as Macunaíma is often called in the novel) is depicted in the text as the colonizer, the one who describes the absurdities found in the “new world.” But the “colonizer” writes in the language of the “colonized,” creating a relationship that is in itself absurd, and for that very reason, comic. And it becomes yet more comic because, as an outsider, Macunaíma is able to see that such absurdity reproduces itself in the “two languages” used by the urban Brazilians as they try to express themselves, that is, the language of the colonizer (*Português de Camões*, i.e. European Portuguese) and that of the colonized (*língua bárbara*, i. e. Barbarian language). As he describes it, *Português de Camões*, the written language, is committed to its own desire of separation from the *língua bárbara*, the oral language. Macunaíma tries in the letter to master the *Português de Camões*, i.e. he tries to reaffirm the separation that he sees as a strange cultural fact. Fortunately, however, he is not successful: another source of humor in the letter is the fact that while exaggerating the *Português de Camões*, he also makes mistakes: misused words, wrong agreements, bad spelling, etc. Not only that: *língua bárbara* invades the text all the time, through the presence of Tupi, as the hero tries to explain to the *icamiabas* some facts and things about São Paulo<sup>4</sup>.

Macunaíma’s next attempt to master the languages of the metropolis happens in the chapter that follows “Carta pras Icamiabas,” “Pauí-Pódole.” While waiting for the villain to return to

the city, Macunaíma “took advantage of the delay mastering the two languages of the land, spoken Brazilian and written Portuguese. He now had all the vocabulary.” (87) But one day, as he was invited to buy a flower on the street, he realized he did not know the word for “button hole” (*botoeira*). Ashamed of showing his ignorance to the girl who sold the flower, he introduced into Portuguese a word from his own language: *puíto* (anus). The word became current in the language, and Macunaíma realized he had been smart in creating it, and had scored a point over the language he was struggling to learn: “At first, our hero was overwhelmed and was about to take it badly, but then realised he was in fact quite smart. Macunaíma gave a great guffaw” (82). But the victory will never be recognized by the scientists, the practitioners of the *Língua de Camões*:

The fact is that “puíto” had already appeared in those learned journals that dealt with both the spoken and the written idiom, with much display of erudition. There was now a measure of agreement that by the laws of catalepsy ellipsis syncope metonymy metaphony metathesis proclisis prothesis aphaerresis apocope hapology popular etymology, by virtue of all these laws, the word “buttonhole” had been transmuted into the word “puito” via an intermediary Latin word “rabanius” (buttonhole-rabanius-puíto). Although “rabanius” had never actually been found in any medieval document, the experts swore it had certainly existed and had been current in vulgar speech. (82-3)

The passage strongly satirizes etymology as it was practiced by the writers of *Revista de Língua Portuguesa*. The false origin attributed

## Macunaíma and the Native Trickster By Lúcia Sá

by etymologists to the word *puíto* confirms the Eurocentric tendencies of those who practiced the *Língua de Camões*.

Still in the same chapter, Macunaíma makes his first public speech, in which he passionately re-defines the constellation Southern Cross (which appears on the Brazilian national flag) by giving it a Pemon name, and by narrating the Pemon story of its origin. Thus, Cruzeiro do Sul becomes *Pauí Pódole*, or *Pai do Mutum* (Father of Mutum, a bird), exactly as it is in the Pemon text. The audience was entranced, completely moved by the discovery that each star, or constellation, was the father of a living species:

Macunaíma stopped, exhausted. From the crowd there rose a long blissful murmur which seemed to reinforce the scintillation of those beings, those fathers-of-birds fathers-of-fishes fathers-of-insects fathers-of-trees, all those familiar folk up there in the sky. Great was the satisfaction of that crowd of Paulistas gazing with wonder at those people, those fathers of the living that dwelt shining in the sky...

The people left the park deeply impressed, happy in their hearts, full of enlightenment and full of living stars. No one was bothering any more about the day of the Southern Cross or about the fountain machines combined with the electric light machine. (86)

By learning with Macunaíma how to look at the stars in a native way, the people from São Paulo become less aware of certain city technologies, such as the water fountain and the electric light, that is, they become a bit less dominated by the machine. After telling the story, Macunaíma hears a bird that sounds like a train but that is

actually a bird, and all the lights of the park go out. This scene inverts the one previously described a few pages ago, in which the prostitutes explain to the hero that the “animals” he hears and sees are actually machines. Here, what is initially thought to be a machine, is actually an animal.

In the next chapter, trying to take revenge on Maanape and Jiguê for having told their neighbors that he had lied, Macunaíma (in a story once more recreated, quite closely, from one of Akuli’s Kalawuseg tales) tells them another lie: he claims to have found tapir tracks in front of the *Bolsa de Mercadorias* (Board of Trade)<sup>5</sup>. The brothers go hunt and the crowd of people that are around the building start to imitate them. Incapable of finding any tapir, however, they ask Macunaíma where he had seen the tracks. The hero answers in Arekuna: “Tetápe, dzónanei pemonéite hêhê zeténe netataíte (97),” a phrase taken from the original narrative. After receiving the same answer twice, the frustrated multitude of hunters ask him for the meaning of the phrase, and Macunaíma replies: “I don’t know. I learned those words back home when I was young (91).” The crowd gets furious, and the hero is forced to give them an explanation for the tracks that could not be found: “All right, all right! Tetápe hêhê! I didn’t say there are tapir tracks, no, I said there were! Now there aren’t any more” (91). The answer is actually the translation of the Arekuna phrase Macunaíma claims not to know<sup>6</sup>.

What follows is a massive confusion: the crowd wants to beat the hero, but he accuses his brothers of having started the hunt. A student then makes a speech against Maanape and Jiguê and somebody in the crowd starts to suggest that they should be lynched. Macunaíma tries to defend his brothers, and the multitude turns once more against him, starting a real fight. A policeman comes to solve the situation, Macunaíma hits him and is arrested.

With the arrival of other policemen, the crowd starts a riot to defend the hero. The policemen, however, all have blond hair and blue eyes, and talk in a foreign language that does not allow them to understand or be understood by the rest of the people. Macunaíma then takes advantage of the situation and escapes.

As in the “Father of the *mutum*” episode, Macunaíma’s actions have a subversive effect on the city crowd. Through his lie he is able to make a large amount of people search for a tapir in front of the *Bolsa de Mercadorias*, that is, he makes them look for a *concrete mercadoria* (commodity) in a place where the word has a purely abstract meaning. He also (and once more) brings an indigenous expression into a Portuguese-speaking context. This time, however, the expression is not assimilated by the crowd, as had happened before with the word *puíto* or the new name of the Southern Cross.

Although the people are actually told what it means, they are not conscious of that, and *Tetápe, dzónanei pemonéite hêhê zeténe netaíte* remains undeciphered: Macunaíma, who has the power to reveal its meaning, manipulates the knowledge and the crowd. Subsequently, the Arekuna phrase is matched with other non-Portuguese expressions, whose meanings are not revealed in the novel: the German words spoken by the policemen in front of the irritated crowd. At that time the policemen (according to Cavalcanti Proença *grilo* means “civil police, in São Paulo” (267); for Telê Porto Ancona Lopez it refers to “traffic police”) were mostly from Santa Catarina, and therefore of German descent (Lopez 1988, 447). Thus, through its series of misunderstandings and fights, this scene puts Portuguese face-to-face with the plurality of languages actually spoken in Brazil. Macunaíma, the hero, is responsible for exposing such plurality, and what the exposi-

tion reveals is by no means a melting pot: in the confusion caused by lack of communication, the German-speaking policemen are clearly on the side of the repressive, official power. But the crowd is not passive before the situation, and it immediately transforms Macunaíma from villain into victim. The hero, however, does not accept such a role, and in very trickster fashion Macunaíma, the subverter of order, the creator of confusion, abandons his own defenders, and flees.

Later, Macunaíma finally becomes the one who prevails: as he tells the chauffeur and his girlfriend the story about how the car came into existence, his discourse will allow him to explain, and therefore dominate the machine and “become its true owner.” The argument is actually based on Mayuluáípu’s narrative “The game of the eyes,” about how the jaguar acquired his beautiful eyes: the jaguar sees the shrimp sending his eyes to the sea (*palauá-kupe*, sea lake) and asking for them back. “Send my eyes, too,” he asks the shrimp, but the latter does not want to do it because he sees that the trahira fish is approaching, ready to eat the eyes. The jaguar insists, and the shrimp finally does it. The trahira fish eats the jaguar’s eyes, and the shrimp leaves. Later, the vulture helps the jaguar to acquire new eyes, through a medicine made with milk. In Mário’s version, the brown jaguar (*onça parda*) sends the black jaguar’s (*onça preta*) eyes to the sea. They never come back and the blind black jaguar pursues the brown one who, desperately trying to escape, gets on top of four wheels when passing by an abandoned steel mill. Little by little, she acquires different elements that end up transforming her into a car, until she can finally avoid the pursuit. As such, the mode of explanation is the same as it was with Uiara, i.e., an etiological narrative, but now he controls it. And the hero knows well how to choose his audience, telling the story just

to a chauffeur, a man who is professionally dominated by the “car-machine.” The chauffeur and his girlfriend cry with emotion:

Emotion poured from the mouths of the young couple. From across the water the breeze floated belly up. The boy ducked his head to hide his tears and came up with the flapping tail of a *tambiú* fish between his teeth. Then at the door of the house, a fiat-jaguar opened its throat and howled at the moon - a-honk-a! a-honk-a! - [and a choking stink filled the air].  
(126-7)

As soon as Macunaíma ends his account of the origin of cars, Piaimã's fiat arrives at the house, and the hero can finally kill the cannibal. It is the end of one phase of the hero's attempt to command and subvert the language of the metropolis.

But as with most native Amazonian narratives, this one does not have a neat, happy ending. After killing Piaimã, the hero goes back to his birthplace. Before leaving, he converts São Paulo into a stone sloth, matching an act of his predecessor Makunaíma. But does he really? São Paulo goes back with him, in the form of a Smith-Wesson rifle and a Patek watch (besides the pair of leg-horn chickens, imported birds). His attempts to dominate the machine thus seem to have backfired: he takes two machines back to the Amazon, and quite significant ones: the rifle (symbol of the white colonizers and their power to kill) and the watch, i.e., the time of the metropolis. He cannot forget São Paulo, and like so many people who have lived in a foreign place, he has become divided, he is incapable of deciding between the two cultures.

At first, he and his brothers are enthusiastic about their return to the Amazon. They sing

and celebrate their land of origin, and at their approach, Macunaíma is again followed by the court of parrots and macaws that characterized his reign as Emperor of the Virgin Forest. He can even control the birds, make them silent so as to hear, still far away, the subtle noise of the Uraricoera river. But at night, looking at Capei, the moon, the hero misses São Paulo and its white women, daughters of manioc. Although at this stage he is still able to have adventures and meet the princess who will be his last lover, by the time he reaches the Uraricoera the hero has contracted malaria and is still coughing because of the laryngitis, “the sore throat that everyone brings from São Paulo” (143). The trickster-hero has been irremediably modified by the time he spent in the metropolis. In other words, the transformer has been transformed. Once again, this process is not strange to most native Amazonian tricksters. Macunaíma's Pemon antecedent and his brother Zigué, for instance, after having lost the metal hook they had taken from a fisherman, transformed themselves into crickets to get inside the man's basket and follow him to Guyana, where they still live. Native Amazonian creators and transformers are far from omnipotent: not only do they often lose the disputes with their opponents, but they are also (and sometimes irremediably) affected by them.

Thus, slow and lazy because of the disease, the hero finds no more energy to have sex, and his hunting talents are replaced by those of his brother Jiguê, to whom Macunaíma also loses his lover, the princess. The disputes between the two brothers end up destroying all the members of the family, except for Macunaíma himself. Completely alone, the hero, who had learned to dominate the language of the metropolis, “was deeply upset because he could not fathom the silence. He lay like a dead man, dry-eyed, in total apathy” (155). The expres-

sion “like a dead man” (morto-vivo) indicates his state as a zombie, a dead/alive being. He has no energy to build himself a house, and the parrots and macaws, except for one, all have left him. To this single parrot Macunaíma starts telling the adventures of his life. And one day, attracted into the river by the Uiara, Macunaíma has his body badly mutilated, and loses the *muiraquitã* again.

The formula used by Macunaíma to dominate the machine had been, as we saw, the act of creating an etiological narrative, i.e. the transformation of the machine into an “explainable Uiara.” The hero was successful in it: he was capable of telling a story about the origin of the car and then killing the giant Piaimã who had just arrived in a Fiat. Yet, it was precisely the Uiara who mutilated him, and ultimately caused his death. Macunaíma’s transformations and etiological stories are thus pragmatic solutions for certain problems. They can change the world, but they do not give him power over the things or beings he explains; nor do they save his life.

So, after losing the *muiraquitã*, Macunaíma decides to die, to go up to the sky and transform himself into the “useless shine of a star”<sup>7</sup>. The Uraricoera becomes silent. All of the members of the Tapanhuma tribe have died, and “everything was the solitude of the desert” (167). Nobody else knows how to speak the language of those people, and the stories would be forever silenced:

No one on earth could speak the language of the tribe, or recount those juicy episodes. Who could know of the hero? [His brothers, transformed into a leprous ghostly shadow, have become the second head of the Father of the King Vultures; and Macunaíma became the constellation of the Great Bear] No one could any lon-

ger know that wealth of pretty stories and the speech of the extinct Tapanhumas. An immense silence slumbered on the banks of the Uraricoera. (167)

But one day a man comes to the region and finds the parrot, who starts telling him the stories of Macunaíma, the hero. The language in which the bird tells those stories is described as a “a gentle tongue, something new, completely new! that was song and was cassiri sweetened with wild honey, and had the lovely fickle flavor of unknown forest fruit.” (168). This new language, with the “lovely fickle flavor of unknown forest fruit.,” is the language used by the man, i.e. the narrator (“And that man was me, dear reader, and I stayed to tell you the story.,” 168). It is the “impure tongue” created by Macunaíma, the hero of our people.

In a quest and narrative line parallel to the story of the loss and recovery of the *muiraquitã*, Macunaíma learns, as we have seen, how to dominate the language of the metropolis, by exposing its hybridization and by hybridizing it even more through the incorporation in it of his own language. It is the narrative of Macunaíma, the storyteller, the trickster-hero who narrates to the *Paulistas* stories that tell the indigenous names of things and indigenous ways of looking at the world. And by doing that Macunaíma creates a new, “lovely and fickle” way of narrating, that is impure because it is Indian, while also being white, and black. ●

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# Notes and References

## NOTES

1. For a detailed analysis of the letter to Raimundo de Moraes see Eneida Maria de Souza.
2. The spelling of the Pemon names was adapted by Mário de Andrade. Makunaíma becomes Macunaíma, Zigé becomes Jiguê, and so on. I have respected those differences: Makunaíma, in this study, refers to Akuli and Maiuluaípu's character, while Macunaíma refers to Mário de Andrade's.
3. Uiara is a water goddess in the Tupi-Guarani tradition.
4. For the presence of Tupi in "Carta pras Icamiabas" see Maria Augusta Fonseca's "A Carta pras Icamiabas."
5. Literally "commodity exchange" (parallel to "stock exchange").
6. In the English translation of the novel the Arekuna phrase was replaced by a sentence in Welsh!
7. Walter Roth mentions a Carib (Cariña) version of the Makunaíma story in which the trickster has his leg cut off, and becomes the Pleiades.

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