

***Antropofagia* in “Crisis”: Oswald de Andrade’s Third Dentition**

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“Hora de reler Oswald de Andrade”

[It is high time we read Oswald de Andrade]

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

The year is 1928. The first issue of the Brazilian modernist avant-garde magazine *Revista de Antropofagia* comes out in May, in São Paulo, featuring poet Oswald de Andrade’s often-quoted *Manifesto Antropófago*, the *Anthropophagist* or *Cannibalist Manifesto*¹⁴. Both the magazine and the *Manifesto* initiate what would be known as the first phase, or *dentição* (“dentition”) of *Antropofagia*, de Andrade’s polemical thesis of cultural swallowing, which played on the Brazilian modernists’ interest in cannibalism as an alleged tribal ritual. Despite causing uproar and suspicion among his contemporaneous writers, de Andrade’s argument that Brazil’s history of “cannibalizing” other cultures as its only way to assert itself against European postcolonial cultural domination would eventually gain ground. Proof of this is the second *dentição*, the subsequent series of the magazine that ran between March and August 1929¹⁵.

¹⁴I have decided to keep the original Portuguese version when using particular expressions and major concepts related to the Brazilian literary and cultural histories that would otherwise lose their original connotation in English. I provide the translation in English in parenthesis after the first mention of a particular word in Portuguese as I go. Except where otherwise noted, all translations from Brazilian Portuguese to English are my own. The original quotations in Portuguese always come in the footnotes.

¹⁵The ten monthly numbers included in the first *dentição* appeared between May 1928 and February 1929. They were edited by writer Antônio de Alcântara Machado and managed by Raul Bopp. This series featured poetry, critical articles, and short stories. The fifteen numbers included in the second *dentição* were edited by Geraldo Ferraz and focused more on satire and mockery.

Though differing in terms of genre, tone, and contributors, both *dentições* provided grounds for the “all-you-can-devour” advocates to voice their concerns and lay out the principles of *Antropofagia* as an aesthetic, cultural, and political movement in the country. To de Andrade and his cannibalist fellows, the *modus operandi* of the anthropophagous artist comes down to one major concept: the appropriation of otherness—hence “I am only concerned with what is not mine. Law of Man. Law of the Cannibal”, one of the most iconic lines from the *Manifesto* (de Andrade and Bary 38)¹⁶.

At a primary level, the “Law of the Cannibal” has aesthetic implications: the masticating and digesting of otherness exemplify the non-reverential and ludic engagement with tradition, which mirrors the *Tupi-Guarani* ritual cannibalism of expropriating and de-hierarchizing the “enemy”—often white and European¹⁷. Brazilian artists then have to act like the “bad savage” and devour “First World” goods through a process of selective and differential digestion in which elements of the colonizer’s culture are creatively and critically assimilated into national paradigms. Undesirable traits of the devoured culture are spat out during this process, leaving behind a digestive residue that is, in turn, combined with autochthonous, local elements, and thus transformed into something “uniquely Brazilian”, stylistically, and finally exported back to the colonizer.

At a secondary level, cultural cannibalism has political implications as it also manifests itself as a form of resistance—hence an entry in French philosopher Albert Camus’s journal of a remark by de Andrade claiming that it is “for the best” that Brazil is “populated with primitive people” (114)¹⁸. Implicit in this “for the best” is the subversive

¹⁶ In the original, “Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropófago”.

¹⁷ Cannibalism in Brazil became famous with *True Story and Description of a Country of Wild, Naked, Grim, Man-eating People in the New World, America* (1557), anthropologist Hans Staden’s written testimony of cannibalistic rituals happening in the country. Staden’s account would significantly influence the ways Europeans perceived and represented Brazil.

¹⁸ Camus traveled to South America in 1946. During this trip, he kept a journal in which he took notes on places he visited, daily activities, and the people he met there. Among these were two entries he wrote after having dinner with de Andrade on August 3, 1949: “Dinner with Oswald de Andrade, remarkable character (develop this). His point of view is that Brazil is populated with primitive people and that it’s for the best;” and “Then Andrade tells me his theory: *anthropophagy as a worldview*. Confronted with the failure of Descartes and science, return to the primitive fertilization: matriarchy and anthropophagy. Since the first bishop to arrive in Brazil was eaten, Andrade dates his review from the year 317, the year of the ingestion of Bishop Sardine

political angle that the cannibalist drive allows the artist to pursue. By devouring the other, the anthropophagist manages not only to be aware of but to counter notions of cultural dependency. What results from this attitude—or so de Andrade believed—is a crucial reversal of the process of oppression and dominance carried out by the colonizer.

However appealing these two implications might have been to Brazilians during the modernist era, the history of *Antropofagia* went through a hiatus after its second *dentição*, in between 1929-1945. During these years, cultural cannibalism fell into gradual ostracism, negligence, and even censorship by Brazilian critics, artists, and the government itself, a fate partially explained by de Andrade's volatile Marxist-driven politics and the series of controversies and personal arguments he was involved in¹⁹. The late 1950s would put an end to this hiatus as a few Brazilian critics initiated a gradual process of recovering and resituating de Andrade's *oeuvre* and legacy within Brazilian inter-cultural history and literary criticism.

The most prominent of these critics were the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, the first to take full advantage of de Andrade's insights on cannibalism²⁰. The Brazilian critics, poets, and translators saw differential mastication as a fitting metaphor not only to redefine Brazil's relationship with its 1950s hegemonic powers, but also to *Brasilidade* ("Brazilianness") itself, Brazil's distinctive cultural identity. And so ideas such as imitation and influence—the cornerstones of *Brasilidade* and literary criticism at that time—gave way to the emergence of a pervasive critical theory of constructive incorporation in

(he was named Sardine) (114 and 117). Judging by these concise annotations, the fact remains that Camus seems to have understood de Andrade's thesis accurately.

¹⁹With the 1929 Stock Market Crash, the Brazilian coffee marketing underwent severe losses. De Andrade, then the owner of "Fazenda Santa Tereza do Carmo", a big coffee plantation, watched his fortune collapse. 1929 also marked the beginning of his affiliation with the *Partido Comunista Brasileiro* (PCB), the Brazilian Communist Party, which led to his persecution and the censorship of his works by the regime of president Getúlio Vargas (1930-45). The plays *O Homem e o Cavalo* (*The Man and the Horse*, 1934), *O Rei da Vela* (*The Candle King*, 1937), and his brief theatrical sketch *Panorama do Facismo* (*A Snapshot of Fascism*, 1937) are some of the works produced during those years that went through censorship.

²⁰*Antropofagia* is also crucial to the following artistic movements in Brazil: Neo-Concretism (1950s), *Tropicália* (late 1960s), *Marginal* Literature and Cinema (early 1970s), and the Northeastern *Mangue Beat* (1990s) music. Concerning criticism, de Andrade's theory is a vivid presence in the work of Benedito Nunes, Antonio Candido, José Miguel Wisnik, Caetano Veloso, Roberto Schwarz, among others.

which difference became the only means to understand and conceptualize Brazil's world view²¹. As critic Benedito Nunes points out in his seminal essay "Antropofagia ao Alcance de Todos" ("*Antropofagia* at Everyone's Reach"), devouring the other became "a diagnosis of Brazilian society [...] for its violent and systematic reaction against social and political apparatuses, intellectual practices, and literary and artistic expressions" (Andrade xxvi)²². So much so that this "diagnosis" has since viciously downplayed other epistemological practices to assess the country's comparative poetics and identities.

It seems that de Andrade himself was aware of how far his theory could go when he decided to revisit his ideas on cultural cannibalism, also during the 1950s. In the hopes of obtaining a tenured senior position as a professor at the *Universidade de São Paulo*, de Andrade wrote "A Crise da Filosofia Messiânica" ("The Crisis of Messianic Philosophy"), a lengthy philosophical and complex treatise that marks his return to the issue of *Antropofagia* and a shift in his intellectual trajectory. As Nunes, once again, explains: "this return to *Antropofagia* represents both his critical opposition to Marxism and his process of philosophical conversion, as he had dedicated himself passionately to the study of Philosophy since the end of the Second World War" (Andrade xvi)²³. I would go further as to claim that this "return"—or, as I prefer to call it, revival—marks the beginning of the prolific, yet unexplored, last phase of *Antropofagia*, or the third *dentição*, thus adding to Nunes's explanation and *Antropofagia*'s temporal division.

Broadly speaking, the third *dentição* is characterized by de Andrade's "crisis", or his view of the world divided into two antagonistic cultural hemispheres: Matriarchy and Patriarchy. The first implies relationships of kinship ("matrilineal descent") and production ("common right to land") among its inhabitants, which are referred to by the poet as the "primitive", or "natural man". These relationships themselves entail a society that is free

²¹In her 2014 article "Poetry is Theft", USAmerican scholar Rachel Galvin considers de Andrade's *Manifesto* as one of the "founding documents of Latin American letters" (19).

²²In the original, "diagnóstico da sociedade brasileira ... por meio dessa reação violenta e sistemática, contra os mecanismos sociais e políticos, os hábitos intelectuais, as manifestações literárias e artísticas". Nunes's essay opens the volume *A Utopia Antropofágica: A Antropofagia ao Alcance de Todos (Anthropophagic Utopia: Antropofagia at Everyone's Reach)*, published in 1990.

²³In the original, "esse retorno à *Antropofagia* [sic] efetivou-se como oposição crítica ao marxismo e como um processo de conversão filosófica do autor, que se dedicou apaixonadamente ao estudo da Filosofia, desde o fim da Segunda Guerra Mundial".

and classless, which represents in turn the basic conditions for the inexistence of a State. The primitive man thus lives in an amorphous and organic way that resembles Nature itself. It is no surprise then that de Andrade associates Matriarchy with the anthropophagous culture as both are orgiastic and Dionysian in nature and practice.

Matriarchy came to an end, de Andrade tells us, when man “stopped devouring man in order to enslave one another” (81)²⁴. This enslavement gave rise to Patriarchy, or the age of the messianic culture, which has long reigned over Western civilization—from Socrates up to modern-day Brazil. As Nunes clarifies in his book *Oswald Canibal*, “messianism is an intellectual or spiritual derivation of paternal descent, of the father’s power, which ensures both the dominance of one class over another and the political authority of the State” (60-61)²⁵. To de Andrade, the inhabitants of the messianic era—the “civilized men”—are thus advocates of monogamous marriage, the division of labor, and private appropriation of collective property, the basic elements that form the idea of a State to the poet.

Throughout his piece, therefore, de Andrade locates the most meaningful moments—or “crisis”—throughout the history of the twentieth century in which “the father’s power” is challenged. These moments foreshadow the beginning of the fall of the messianic culture of Patriarchy and the arrival of a new anthropophagic age, which he calls the “Matriarchal Society of the Machine Age”. In this new culture, the now *homem natural tecnizado* (“technicized natural man”) reintegrates primitive life within modern civilization itself precisely because of technology and progress, as it allows men to free themselves from their condition as slaves and to rejoice in their inherent *ócio* (“leisure”). As Nunes summarizes,

Oswald de Andrade’s Matriarchy also encapsulates the utopian horizon of human possibilities conditioned by the development of the machine in our time. In a prearranged society, in which material progress assures everyone a great deal of leisure, human existence, freed from the struggle for the satisfaction of its primary needs, will become a

²⁴In the original, “a ruptura histórica com o mundo matriarcal produziu-se quando o homem deixou de devorar o homem para fazê-lo seu escravo”.

²⁵In the original, “o messianismo é uma derivação intelectual ou espiritual da ascendência paterna, do poder do pai, que assegura o domínio de uma classe sobre a outra e a autoridade política do Estado”.

spontaneous and creative activity. The technicized natural man will be the *homo ludens*, the one who lays bare the *ocium cum dignitate* (67)²⁶.

Rather than proving de Andrade's "*ocium cum dignitate*" right or wrong, my intention with this introductory commentary and translated excerpts that follow is chiefly pragmatic. I intend to make part of de Andrade's "Crisis" available to English-speaking audiences for the first time, thus broadening the English record of his *oeuvre*, which is currently still largely untranslated. Secondly, I hope this gesture encourages researchers and readers to deepen their critical interest in de Andrade's later controversial, yet fascinating philosophical cannibalist writings so as to enlarge their comparative scope and scholarly approaches to the third *dentição* (the *Manifesto* and the *Magazine* still receive, by far, more scholarly and artistic attention). Finally, I hope this invitation to "read Oswald de Andrade's third *dentição*", to repurpose Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's epigraph that opens this commentary, spurs critics and scholars into revisiting the conventional idea of the poet as a mere polemicist, iconoclast, and manifesto-maker of Brazilian modernism (Castro 10).

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²⁶In the original, "o Matriarcado de Oswald de Andrade também sintetiza o horizonte utópico das possibilidades humanas condicionadas pelo desenvolvimento da máquina em nosso tempo. Numa sociedade planejada, em que o progresso material assegure a todos uma grande margem de ócio, a existência humana, desafogada da luta pela satisfação de suas necessidades primárias, passará a ser atividade gratuita e criadora. O homem natural tecnizado será o *homo ludens*, detector do *ocium cum dignitate*".

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