

# Does Mário de Andrade Live On?

## Debating the Brazilian Modernist Ideological Repertory<sup>1</sup>

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Daniel obtained the highest score in the Rio de Janeiro State University's *vestibular* (or common entrance) medical school examination, widely acknowledged as the toughest public university entrance exam. Interviewed on the Globo television network's Sunday variety/newsmagazine show *Fantástico*, the 25-year-old was undaunted by the cameras.

His hair trimmed short, a wide smile on his dark face, the young man said he had declared himself to be *pardo* [Translator's note: literally translated, *pardo* can mean both "brown" and "dusky", among other colors, shades and/or skin tones. See author's note 19, below] on the application form for the first entrance exam to include legally mandated quotas for blacks and *pardos* because he came from a family of "black origin". Because his great-grandmother was black, he felt he could not consider himself white and decided to declare himself *pardo*. Daniel could be considered typically Brazilian in appearance, a *Macunaíma*, able to choose between the categories negro, *pardo*, black, Indian, or even white, and to be recognized as such by other people. In point of fact, he stated the color of his skin because (for the first time in our history) candidates to the 2003 Uerj common entrance examination were asked to choose between two categories (black/*pardo* or white), after a 40% quota for blacks and *pardos* had been instituted in addition to a 50% quota for public school students<sup>3</sup>. The candidate in question did not really need the

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3 State university quotas were established by Rio de Janeiro's state assembly in 2000. The first racial quota law set aside 40% openings for students who declared themselves black/*pardo*. The law was

quota system to enter university, having also obtained the best overall academic performance among all the examination candidates. He had already declared himself to be against the quota system, as had many individuals who wrote to newspapers with their opinions after the system was implanted in 2002, and even when it was instituted two years earlier<sup>4</sup>.

Interviewed for yet another television program, a candidate with the same “mixed” features as Daniel said she had not declared *herself* black or *parda* for fear of being considered a liar, as the law states that candidates should provide information regarding their identities “under penalty of law”. Feeling devastated because she had not been admitted despite a grade point average that was better than those of many who stated that they were black or *pardos*, she said she was considering a lawsuit to uphold her right.

What is the meaning of such an event – the changing of a law – and how might it affect the structure of [our] Brazilian society, based as it is on a value system which does not invest in oppositions but, rather, on complementarities, on that which unites rather than on that which divides?<sup>5</sup>

My essay proposes to reflect on the hypothesis that a sort of earthquake has begun to affect the way Brazil sees itself at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The recent legislation on quotas for blacks in the universities and in Federal public service and the Estatuto da Igualdade Racial would appear to indicate that the concept of the mixed nation in the “fable of the three races” is being questioned to make way for a nation divided between blacks and whites.

For the first time in our history since the 1920s, the Brazilian elite seems to have invalidated the philosophical foundations that made possible the creation of our most radically nationalistic and cosmopolitan culture. The ideological repertory of Brazilian *modernismo* created by Mário and Oswald de Andrade, by Paulo Prado and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, by Gilberto Freyre

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modified in 2003, and candidates must now be poor in the first place and there is a 20% quota for blacks (no longer for blacks/*pardos*). On the subject of common entrance examination regulations in Rio de Janeiro universities as established by force of law, see both Elielma Ayres Machado’s doctoral thesis (2004) and the 2004 article by Carla Ramos (currently concluding her dissertation on the subject). Peter Fry has been drawing attention to the creation of racism based on racialized norms and laws, particularly in Fry (2005).

4 Maggie and Fry (2002 and 2004) have analyzed this problem and described representations of color and race as well as merit and individual effort.

5 In *Medo do feitiço* [Fear of Witchcraft] I raised this hypothesis in my discussion of accusations of witchcraft in Republican Brazil (see Maggie 1992).

and Di Cavalcanti, by Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti is under suspicion. It appeared that all the effort expended during the 1930s to make *mes-tiçagem* a positive was being defeated. The statistics of racial inequality recently divulged by Ricard Henriques and Roberto Martins of the Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas Aplicadas (also known as Ipea, the Institute for Applied Economic Research) on the occasion of the Third World Conference of the United Nations<sup>6</sup> which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, have become a nation's "truth".

Brazil must now regard itself as based on "black" and "white" categories constructed to reveal our social structure rather than on a chromatic gradient which brings black and white polarities together. The numbers describe a society split between blacks and whites, as does the introduction of quotas, or reserved openings, for "blacks" in federal public functions and in Rio de Janeiro state universities. One question, however, lingers on. Why is it that those numbers – which have been public knowledge since at least the time of the Unesco project<sup>7</sup> of the 1950s, and which were analyzed in depth during the 1970s in the work of Nelson do Valle Silva (1978), Carlos Hasenbalg (1979) e Oliveira *et al.* (1983) – have moved outside the restricted circle of a few specialists to begin appearing in the media, having become a counter-discourse or denial to a version of our nationhood which, only yesterday, was present even in the discourse of black militants?

We would do well to examine whether the segregated nation reflected in the numbers is the same one present in the peripheral neighborhoods, in the minds of the *cantadores* [Translator's note: '*cantador*' designates the street singers and poets found primarily throughout popular markets and fairs of the brazilian northeast], in the uncomfortable classrooms of the pre-vestibular courses of the Movimento do Pré-Vestibular para Negros e Carentes (literally "the movement for preparing black and poor students for pre-university

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6 The Third UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related Intolerance.

7 The Unesco project, as it became known, was based on propositions by Artur Ramos, who represented Brazil in the organization during the post-World War II period until his untimely death prompted his replacement by Luiz Aguiar da Costa Pinto. Costa Pinto proposed that the scope of research be expanded to include not only Bahia (as originally intended) but all of Brazil. The idea was precisely to explain what was considered to be a culture which had non-violently succeeded in resolving its ethnic diversities. Marcos Chor Maio's important book provides a detailed account of that story and discusses the projects that grew out of those investigations (see Maio 1997).

exams”, it is also known by its acronym PVNC). Can the myth of racial democracy as a map for social action and a commitment to egalitarianism still be interpreted as Peter Fry read it in his 2000 discussion of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant’s interpretations of affirmative action in Brazil? These two models have been discussed and minutely examined by Peter Fry in a great many works from his classic “Feijoada and Soul Food” of the 1980s to recent articles on the consequences of political colonies in the book Fry (2005b).<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I shall address our foundational heroes because I believe the debate ought to be taken up where it began. Surely, it is not easy to discuss transformations currently charged with the morality of “political correctness”. Yet one cannot possibly remain silent with regard to those events. This new version of a Brazil which is imagined or should be imagined as a nation segregated into two “races”<sup>9</sup> has seduced many followers not only among social movements but also among our society’s intelligentsia.

### **Macunaíma and the *Cannibalist Manifesto***

In 1928, Mário de Andrade published the classic *Macunaíma: um herói sem nenhum caráter* (Macunaíma: a hero without any character), dedicating it to Paulo Prado (who published his own *Retrato do Brasil* [Portrait of Brazil] later that same year). The novel is based on Brazilian legends and myths and its central character was drawn from a description found in German naturalist Theodor Koch-Grünberg’s five volume *Vom Roraima zum Orinoco* (From Roraima to the Orinoco), published from 1916 to 1924.

Mário was not alone in his generation’s endeavor. His argument, however, did not arise out of nowhere. It must be remembered that it was moored in ideas that had been rooted in our culture as early as the nineteenth century, one need only think of Carl F. von Martius’s thesis *How the history of Brazil should be written*, which won the 1836 contest of the Brazilian Historical

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8 I have worked with Peter Fry for many years since we became close friends on the occasion of my master’s dissertation thesis defense during the 1970s. In addition to being a friend, Peter Fry was my doctoral thesis advisor. He has since become an interlocutor with whom I have shared anxieties and discoveries. The ideas expressed here were discussed with him during countless, ongoing conversations and discussions in settings both formal and informal.

9 The word “race” will always appear in quotation marks in order to emphasize the fact that it is a native category and not a concept, for the modern science of genetics has already destroyed the scientific bases upon which the word was consolidated in the nineteenth century.

and Geographic Institute<sup>10</sup>. By basing its description of our history on the mixing of whites, blacks and Indians in a “brazilian race”, the monograph marked the future of our historiography by using the metaphor of the meeting of three rivers. The “race” argument was so strong that, in an early draft of *Macunáima*, Mário opted for the epithet “the hero of our race”. It was not until later that he changed that to the “hero of our people”. Nonetheless, the novel will be considered here as a sign upon which to reflect what it is, in recent times, that has changed and what remains the same in our national ideological repertory.

I realize fully that a great deal has changed from 1928 to 2000 and that one cannot say flat out that *modernismo* is our only heritage, if only because, even in those days, there were different modernists and different perspectives<sup>11</sup>. I am not saying there are only the “enthusiasts of brazilian-ness” and those who are “against” it, as some might interpret it. The modernist ideological repertory changed during these thirty years and has influenced generations since the 1920s in many different ways<sup>12</sup>. Opposition to this ideological repertory arose gradually through persistent criticism of the “myth of racial democracy” articulated by black movements since at least the mid-1950s. This is not the place to describe the process which has been so well analyzed by Fabiano Dias Monteiro (2003) in his master’s dissertation. In this article, I

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10 Mário de Andrade’s classic novel has been interpreted by many at various moments of the debate on race, veritable paradigm that it is of the brazilian mixture of whites, blacks and Indians. Lília Schwarcz has discussed the subject on two occasions. If on the first of those (in 1995), she defended the myth against those who attacked it as a lie, as false consciousness, in 1998b (the second time around), she opted for another path, attempting to reconcile the myth with the facts of racial inequalities. I disagree with the latter interpretation because I regard the myth or fable of the three races and the idea of racial democracy itself as ideals to be pursued as will or aspiration. This desire for equality; this dream is a way we have of fighting racism and it may be our most unique contribution to the struggle for the end of racism. In this article I shall attempt to put forth the arguments that lead me to believe this.

11 I am aware of modernism’s many variants and, whereas Mário de Andrade’s version of it may have been victorious, it is not the only one extant. There will be no attempt to locate the genesis of his discourse – such an undertaking would far exceed the scope of this essay. Nor am I assigning any type of supreme status to Mário de Andrade’s discourse, for I do not believe that it possessed such specificity of objective, perspective, reading or reception in its time. I do believe, however, that my invocation of the modernist ideological repertory in this discussion – one that is forged through synthesis – has allowed me, quite precisely, to appreciate Macunáima’s importance as one of the rare instances in which the ideas of authors as dissimilar as Mário de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade and Gilberto Freyre appear to be in agreement.

12 I am indebted to Lília Schwarcz for her careful, generous reading of an earlier draft of this article. Her comments helped me to re-think the [hi]story of our myth of origin and the nineteenth century legacy that marked the construction of the “hero of our people”.

shall neither deal with the lengthy process which generated the two models nor exaggeratedly seek to oppose the two versions that have been brought to the table at the start of twenty-first century.

To return to the novel *Macunaíma*, classic tale though it may be, there can be no harm in refreshing our memories. Mário began the book, which he subtitled a poem or rhapsody, by relating the birth of our hero:

Macunaíma, the hero of our people, was born deep in the virgin forest. Black as ink, he was as a son to the fear of the night. At one point, the silence was so great that, as she listened to the murmur of the Uraricoera River, Tapanhumas the Indian woman gave birth to an ugly child. This was the child they called Macunaíma. [...] Even as a boy, he did startling things. To begin with, he spent six years without speaking. Whenever people prompted him to speak, he would exclaim: “Oh, how lazy I feel!” [...] ...The women laughed sympathetically and said “It early pricks that will be a thorn” and, in a conjuration, the Nagô King made a speech and announced that the hero was intelligent.

The long tale tells how Macunaíma, born black to an Indian mother, became white when he arrived in the city after his departure from the virgin forest. The account of Macunaíma’s arrival in the city is writing of an extremely high order and describes, from the opposite perspective, the colonizers’ astonishment before Indian culture and society. In fact, the main plot unfolds in the city. Macunaíma searches for an amulet called *muiraquitã* and, as the narrative evolves, not only becomes white but is transformed into an insect, a fish and even a duck. He disguises himself as a frenchwoman the better to seduce Venceslau Pietro Pietro, the cannibal giant Piamã who is also a companion to an old *caapora* (a forest demon) named Ceiuci (likewise a cannibal and a glutton) in order to retrieve the *muiraquitã*. He resolves to seek out Aunt Ciata’s *terreiro*, where he asks Exu to help him regain possession of the amulet. The *terreiro* is masterfully described and, in one memorable scene, Aunt Ciata – a fabled *mãe-de-santo* in the history of Afro-brazilian cults – commands Exu to punish Venceslau Pietro Pietra. Macunaíma obtains a scholarship to study in Europe, and the novel ending with a myth of origin, a description of how the hero is transformed into the beautiful (albeit useless) star glow of the Ursa Major constellation.

*Macunaíma* was written in six days. Mário de Andrade describes his discovery of the hero in an unpublished preface to the novel. In a critical edition

of the book, Telê Porto Ancona Lopez transcribes the excerpt in which Mário reveals his intention and the meaning he attributed to his discovery:

What interested me about Macunaíma was undoubtedly my concern in working and discovering as much as I can about the Brazilian national character. After many struggles I realized one thing that seems certain: Brazilians have no character. Someone may have said this before me, but the conclusion is new to me because I have drawn it from personal experience. And by the word character I truly do not mean mere moral reality. Rather, I understand a permanent psychic entity, manifesting itself everywhere, in customs, in external actions, in sentiment, in language, in History, in their carriage, in good as well as in evil. Brazilians have no character because they possess neither a civilization nor a traditional consciousness.

The French have character and so do the Yoruba and the Mexicans. Whether this is on account of their own civilization, imminent danger, or awareness of centuries has helped, these have character for sure. Not so Brazilians. They are like the 20-year-old man: you can more or less make out certain general tendencies, but it's too soon to come to any definitive statements. [...] Well while I was pondering these things I stumbled upon Macunaíma in the German Koch-Grünberg. And Macunaíma is a surprisingly character-less hero. (I was delighted). (Andrade 2001: 169).

Mário and the modernist generation felt that history was moored deep in our society's unconscious, to the extent that Oswald called the novel a Brazilian odyssey. Could they have been mistaken? Could the entire invention of this mixed, *mestiço* country – the utopian heart of which was the myth of equality among “races” – be the fiction of an elite that did not know or see what was going on around it? Was it an invention or a myth (in the sense of a farce or lie) that traveled the world, transforming our destiny as an untenable society (untenable precisely *because* it is *mestiça*) into both an aspiration to and a source of all amazement?

The modernists and many who came after them thought it was necessary to transform the fields of wheat into green pineapple plantations or, as Mário wrote of verses in “Lume de estrelas” [“Starlight”] in a 1940 letter to the young poet Alphonsus de Guimaraens Filho:

As for the case of the “sugar cane field”, I do not agree with you. More universal though wheat may be (and there can be no doubt of that), it is so in a dangerous, Bible-by-way-of-Europe sort of way. Is “sugar cane field” exotic in Rilke? Doubtless it is and that is what I feel ought to be of interest to the humanity of you, to the non-stereotyping of you: had you spoken without coming through the sugar cane fields, or the coffee plantations, or the iron fields, that would be your humanity, your Minas, your Brazil, your America. In this case, “wheat” is the flapping of the condor’s wings. Observe yourself closely and you will see it is. (Andrade and Bandeira 1974: 16-17).

It was also necessary to like being brazilian by chance and by choice and not to want to be other. It was necessary to discover the universal in our particular in order to transform it into universal or, as Mário himself put it:

See here: the brazilianizing of brazilians does not mean regionalism or even nationalism Brazil for brazilians. That’s not it. All it means is that, in order for Brazil to become artistically civilized, to become part of the concert of nations that currently direct the Civilization of Earth, it must compete in this concert with its personal part, with that which makes it unique and individual, the only part which might enrich and expand Civilization (Inojosa, *apud* Moraes, 1999).

Nothing could be more contemporary and, in the light of so much politically correct morality, Mário de Andrade appears to be arguing with those who currently want to base their thinking on what is lack, absence, and emptiness here in comparison with other so-called civilized societies. The modernist proposition envisioned a nation whose uniqueness lay in its way of dealing with differences. In his *Apresentação da poesia brasileira* [Introduction to brazilian Poetry], Manuel Bandeira describes Mário’s conception of aesthetics and brazilian-ness. On the subject of brazilian identity, Mário says: “Only by being brazilian, that is, by acquiring a brazilian racial, patriotic (in the physical sense) personality shall we become universal, for then we shall compete with a new contingent, a new assemblage of psychic characters for the enrichment of the universal human” (Mário, *apud* Bandeira, n.d., 127).

As an aesthetic movement, Modernism had a very particular way of conceptualizing mixture and the search for an identity ... In the name of a radical affirmation of our identity, Oswald de Andrade penned the *Cannibalist Manifesto* the year *Macunaíma* was published (1928). Here are a few excerpts here from it:



Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. [...].

Only law of the world. Masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivism. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties.

Tupi or not tupi that is the question .

We want the Caraíba Revolution. Greater than the French Revolution. The unification of all man's efficient uprisings. Without us Europe would not have had even its sorry declaration of the rights of man. [...]

We were never catechized. What we created was Carnaval. The Indian costumed as a senator of the Empire. Dressed up as Pitt. Or as he appears in Alencar's operas, brimming with decent Portuguese sentiment. [...]

Before the portuguese discovered Brazil, Brazil had discovered happiness.

In other words, it was the need to discover happiness that led us away from the tragic destiny that european domination imposed upon us. At that point, we had experienced neither the Second World War nor the holocaust, and the declaration of the rights of man to which the manifesto alludes was produced by the French Revolution, and considered rather ineffectual by the young intellectual rebels intent on unveiling their idea of a mixed nation united by the cannibalism of the Tupi who devoured Bishop Sardinha and, with him, Europe as seen from Brazil.

But could this have been the chimera of an elite that was out of touch with our reality? Gilberto Freyre ([1933] 1995) was among those on the modernist trail and the first edition of *The Masters and the Slaves* was actually proofread by Mário de Andrade. It was necessary to transform the country of count Gobineau's nightmare, which foresaw only a tragic ending to so much mixture, into an utopia which would leave us on equal footing with the Europe of Descartes.<sup>13</sup> I mention "Gobineau's nightmare" because it is something of an icon to a generation of followers of racial Darwinism<sup>14</sup> who bet all their chips on the notion that a country of mixed "races" was an untenable

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13 One should also read Schwarzc (1999) on the relevance of *The Masters and the Slaves* to any interpretation of brazilian society. According to Schwarzc: "The 'melting pot' appeared as an optimistic version, more evident here than any place else: 'Every brazilian, even the lightest-skinned and most blonde-haired, carries in his soul - and, if not in his soul, then in his body - the shadow or at least the complexion, of the Indian and/or of the Negro,' declared Freire, making *mestiçagem* a simultaneously national and distinctive problem" (Schwarzc 1999: 276).

14 For an analysis of the concept of race in the nineteenth century, see Schwarzc (1993).

proposition. This was not only his nightmare but the great phantom that haunted a generation of nineteenth century thinkers, one which returns time and again to haunt the twentieth century. The nightmare appears to be haunting us yet again in this great century of change that is beginning. After all, the version of a country divided into whites and blacks is a contemporary version of the idea that mixture is bad and renders us untenable.

Thus, a generation of artists painted the Brazil of Di Cavalcanti's *Mulatta*<sup>15</sup>, of Tarsila do Amaral's *Abapurú* and *Negress*<sup>16</sup>. And several generations later they continued to idealize and invent a country which does not fear this mixture and makes of it the delight and the pain of being what we are. I shall not name them all, but one must not forget the Concretists and, above all, Augusto de Campos and his poem "Luxo". And what to say of the tropicalist movement and the youth of the 1960s who, to this day, write songs that speak to our paradox of being Haiti and not being Haiti<sup>17</sup>. Nor should we forget Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's classic 1969 film re-reading of *Macunaíma*, which transformed the book to reveal its contemporariness. And what to say of artist Luiz Alphonsus's works *O conceitual caboclo* [The Caboclo Concept]<sup>18</sup> and *Índia e mato* [Indian Woman and Forest] – both parody and metaphor of Tarsila's *Negress* – were it not for an interpretation of Brazil inaugurated by Mário de Andrade and the *modernistas* during the 1920s.

Others travel Mário's roads in his journey as a *Turista aprendiz* [Tourist apprentice]<sup>19</sup>. The very same Hermano Vianna (1995) had already told fantastic stories of the construction of samba in Rio de Janeiro. Based on Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Pedro Dantas, Heitor Villa Lobos and Luciano Garret's 1926 meeting with Patrício, Donga e Pixinguinha (the nicknames by which they were immortalized in the pantheon of brazilian popular music), Hermano Vianna leads us to solve, as it were, the mystery of samba. The aforementioned "meeting" took place well before the publication of *The Masters and*

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15 See Di Cavalcanti's *Mulatta* (1928) at [www.dicavalcanti.com.br](http://www.dicavalcanti.com.br).

16 See Tarsila's *Abapurú* (1928) and *Negress* (1923) at [www.tarsiladoamaral.com.br](http://www.tarsiladoamaral.com.br).

17 Cf. Caetano Veloso's songs "Haiti" and "Americanos".

18 To mention but one of them, visual artist Luiz Alphonsus, of the Conceptual generation, produced two works which allude to the modernist influence. *O conceitual caboclo* and *Índia e mato* belong to the Gilberto Chateaubriand collection.

19 See the book of photographs in which Hermano Vianna retraced one of Mário de Andrade's journeys (Vianna 2000).

*the Slaves* (1933) and *Raízes do Brasil* (1936), books which were fundamental in defining the identity of modern Brazil. Rediscovered by Hermano Vianna (1995) in *The Mystery of Samba*, (currently a fundamental reference) this meeting is invaluable to any understanding of the history of samba and of our identity.

Nor can we forget Roberto DaMatta in all his work, which proclaims his indebtedness to Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, specifically to his unique contributions in the 1966 “Multiculturalism and Racism” seminar held in Brasília and organized by the Ministry of Justice, participants of which included then President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.<sup>20</sup>

In that seminar, for the first time, we heard echoes of the debate between those two conceptions of nationhood. Those who propounded a nation whose myth and desire is an egalitarian society, one in which “race” is not held to be a characteristic of distinction and inequality. On this side were those who identified themselves and our brazilian-ness in Macunaíma. Fábio Wanderley Reis (1997), in the conference titled “Myth and value of racial democracy”, and Roberto DaMatta (1997), in the lecture “Notes on racism brazilian-style”, defended this position. On the other side were those who described this aspiration of our nationality as false consciousness, as lack, as that which we are missing because they compare our way of conceptualizing difference with other societies who think “race” based on opposition and non-mixture. The latter group broke with the Macunaíma myth, who regarded it as an illusion, and among them were the many north american and not a few brazilian scholars, alongside new and historical militants.

Among brazilian scholars who propose to treat the non-equals unequally I should like to highlight the participation of Antonio Sergio Guimarães, who has since written on the subject and who, in that seminar, exposed with Cartesian clarity, the assumptions underlying this sort of social engineering and their applicability in Brazil. But there were others like Thomas Skidmore (1997), Carlos Hasenbalg (1997), Angela Gilliam (1997), Anthony Marx (1997) and George Reid Andrews (1997). Activists from the black movement and Senator Abdias do Nascimento (who was not invited to the table) made countless interventions supported by the aforementioned scholars.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Most of this seminar’s communications (organized by the Ministry of Justice’s Department of Citizen’s Rights) have been collected in book form under the editorial supervision of Souza (1997).

21 Monica Grin’s Ph.D. dissertation (2000) includes a fine analysis of this and the various positions at stake.

No doubt the debate that began in the late 1990s did nothing whatever to silence the voices of those who still base themselves on the fable of three races version as a foundational myth for the Brazilian nation. I could continue to list and remember the many who drank from the fountain of *modernismo* or those who sought inspiration in the sensitive listening to the many *negros*, *morenos*, *mulattos*, *escuros*, *alvos*, *claros*, *marrons*<sup>22</sup> etc. who experience those class encounters in our society's many rituals.

Can all that effort and many memorable books in our memory have been in vain? Could their authors have been merely copying a message that wound up as ideology, transfiguring it into the refuge of a racist elite, as many say today? The doubt and the question are not unfounded. The Macunaíma myth is currently under severe criticism for inventing a nation divided between blacks and whites, and the destruction of that mixed and plastic hero by state policies that demand a bipolar classification, another concept of nationhood is presented in its stead. Who would dare to criticize Mário de Andrade? It would appear that those who would invent a Brazil divided into blacks and whites are, unwittingly, overthrowing the Macunaíma myth many times over, for it continues to found a nation based on mixture, on the plasticity of this mixture and on the possibility of being simultaneously Indian, white and black. In his address of March 21, 2001 (International Day for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice), President Fernando Henrique Cardoso contributing to this unseating of our very unique manner of combating racism, because in his call for instruments to lessen social exclusion, he threw the baby out with the bath water when he said that "It is not easy to dismantle mental and institutional structures strengthened during centuries of slavery, social exclusion and romantic visions of 'racial democracy'". There are still those who use stronger adjectives to criticize our universalist matrix, as did Ricardo Henriques in his April 21, 2002 interview to *O Globo*:

[...] is to break with the French republican matrix. We have all been culturally

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<sup>22</sup> *Negros*, *mulattos*, *escuros*, *alvos*, and *claros* are the many categories used in everyday Brazilian life to refer to people of all colors. Our system of racial classification is based on appearance and not origin, as anthropologist Oracy Nogueira so finely opposed our system of classification to the North American one in 1950 as part of research funded by UNESCO in Brazil, in the classic volume *Tanto preto quanto branco: estudos de relações raciais*, re-edited in 1985. Our system of classification uses a color gradient and our racial etiquette always avoids polarizing the gradient, always preferring to use words that emphasize what unites the polarities rather than what separates them.

educated and the great majority of our studies were influenced by that great universalist french matrix which believes that the imperative of equality is the best matrix for any intervention, treating everyone as equal. This is the most cynical strategy for dealing with the problem.

Everything would appear to indicate that the revisionists of that legion of founders of *brasilidade* [or brazilian identity] appear to be proposing radical changes to the conception of a mixed nation built from mixture, plastic and ambiguous in classification and in self-classification, in the name of the struggle against racism, of that which is called brazilian racial ideology and in favor of the end of iniquitous racial inequalities. Quotas for blacks are one of the pillars which uphold that reorientation of the national project which is apparently underway. There are, basically, two main ideas underlying the revisionist propositions of the modernist brazilian identity:

- To build a nation divided into – black and white – opposing “races”, and move from the idea of integration to an ideological repertory of separation under the flag of “diversity”.
- To give up the ideal of french liberal democracy for the liberalism of north american democracy, proposing to treat non-equals unequally and to take the “myth of racial democracy” as an ideology that masks reality.

There are certain risks in changing the course of a national project in such a way. The change is radical because it takes that which was unique to our way of treating difference as something spurious which should be extirpated by public policies such as, for instance, quotas for blacks in public service and in public institutions of higher learning. The version which gives origin to this politics of a struggle against inequality would appear to suspect more than Macunáima. It annihilates Macunáima because, as state policy, it forces people to define themselves not according to the mould of our founding hero, but as black or white, and as state policy it affects society as a whole. The new quota policy adopted at various levels of federal institutions, in the public universities of the State of Rio de Janeiro and in many other public universities around the country, forces people to define themselves beyond doubt between two polarities – black or non-black.<sup>23</sup>

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23 The introduction of a new method for identifying candidates who opted for the quota system in the UnB vestibular recently created controversy. For a discussion of the problem, see Maio and Santos, Maggie, Fry (2005).

In 2004, the Federal Government sent the National Congress the draft of a law which established quotas for blacks and public school students in the federal universities. The project continues to wind its way through official channels, formalities and procedures along with some twenty or so others which were already there – all of them dealing with the same subject. The minister of Education saw to it that the racial and social quota policies would be debated in the National Congress by the representatives of the people.

But the quotas had already been adopted as state policy by the Ministry of Education in governmental decree n 30 of August 12, 2004. The governmental decree creates the criterion “race/color” for conceding the Financiamento ao Estudante de Ensino Superior (known by its acronym Fies) [and meaning Financial Aid to Students of Higher Learning]. The Fies is a loan destined to finance monthly tuition fees for students in institutions of higher learning – this credit has existed for many years. Until today, the criterion for obtaining it was poverty or income. With the new governmental decree, student response to the “race/color” ---- on applications is mandatory. If the answer is “black”, s/he will have a 20% greater chance of obtaining the benefit. The candidate who is selected for the final interview must present “the father and/or mother’s birth certificate, at least one of which must contain information that the parent belongs to the black race or color”.

Recently, the Ministry of Education and Culture (through the National Council on Education) made public another extremely important and little debated document, the *National curricular [curriculum] directives for the education of ethnic-racial relations and for the teaching of afro-brazilian and african history and culture*. José Roberto Pinto de Góes (2004) was the first to alert us to them in a recent article in *O Globo*. The directives state that, in accordance with “[those who have been alerted?] warning from the black movement”, those who recognize their african ascendancy are black (*pretos* and *pardos*). In other words, schools must teach the system of racial classification adopted by the “black movement”.

The quota policy is a public policy with logical consequences which affect society as a whole both in the present and in the future. The former is the need to define those who will benefit from it. This is why the University of Brasília requires photographs on its registration forms and the Fies governmental decree required a birth certificate stating parental “race”. The latter is the need to educate the population for the creation of a racialized

education in which the “black movement” will play an active part. The third consequence is the idea of ethnic pride. After this one can imagine a school divided among [between] whites and blacks<sup>24</sup>. The closest scenario is that of a divided country.

The IBGE statistical model, which for at least one hundred years has been investigating the social locus of the Brazilian population, has opted for a path which respects the ambiguity of our system. The categories (“black”, “*pardos*”, “yellow”, and “native Indian”) adopted for official statistics are less radically opposed to Macunaíma because they allow for the inclusion of a solid group of *pardos*, mixtures of every sort, which could eventually migrate towards white or black. In the version that defeats [overthrows/overturns] Macunaíma, the only remaining choices would be “white” or “non-white”.<sup>25</sup>

How could such a profound turning point possibly have taken place in the ideological repertory which marked our history in the twentieth century? How could these propositions for change be accepted so rapidly, to the point of becoming an item on political agendas of the presidential candidates in the 2002 elections and have conquered a great many of the contemporary elite of the intelligentsia? Are the people who were seduced by these policies aware that they are in the trajectory of the destruction of the modernist ideological repertory?

It is hard to discover the reasons for the change and harder still to imagine what the modernist ideological repertory could be so quickly discarded. But was it really discarded? Could quota policy proponents perceive themselves as refuters of the modernist ideological repertory? Despite wanting to believe those who say that nothing will change because we are what we are and will thus devour it all our way, one cannot help but think that the proposed changes may affect the foundations of the modernist ideological repertory.

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24 For those who position themselves in favor of the racial quota policy, they constitute a shorter path to racial awareness which is absent and must be reinforced. Eduard Telles (2004) states that this shortcut is necessary to decrease racial inequality in education. In a review of Telles’s book, Fry (2005) asks whether this might not be a river of no return and whether destroying the notion of racial democracy as an ideal is not a form of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

25 In a recent article, José Murilo de Carvalho (2004) drew attention to the statistical genocide of *pardos* which has been taking place with the dissemination of data on racial inequality. The author describes how the problem has been treated since the nineteenth century in demographic censuses and argues that this current change signals an about face in our concept of nationhood.

## It now becomes necessary to outline this historically

In *A Ilusão do concreto* (1991), I described the concerns that afflicted researchers of the subject and many militants throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. With data collected during the centennial of the Abolition of Slavery, I stated that, at that time, the intelligentsia's central concern was with what used to be called black culture and not with racial inequality. I described the paradox of our system of racial classification which, though based on the color gradient, does not fail to mention the opposition, following the thread woven by Oracy Nogueira (1985) in 1950, Moema de Poli Teixeira (1986) in the 1980s and many other anthropologists who, in those 1980s described a Brazil of mixtures.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, a group of scholars was concerned in stimulating new researchers to plunge into the study on racial inequality and racism. That group, led by Carlos Hassenbalg (1979) and Nelson do Valle Silva (1978), reflected on the reasons for silence in the sociological literature of the day on the subjects of racism and racial inequalities. According to the group, such a silence had been produced by the vision inherited from Florestan Fernandes (1965) who considered racism a holdover from the slavocratic past and believed that, as society became more developed, racism would tend to disappear. Thus, the research on the subject erased itself from the scenery of the social sciences which emphasized the cultural aspects inherited from that past.

Equally impressed by the statistics of racial inequality, I began to examine the mechanisms which produce these inequalities and concluded that it was a fear of discussing whatever it is that opposes and separates, in other words, of discussing blacks and whites, which hampered the progress of research. Collected in a broad qualitative survey, my data reinforced the hypothesis that, in Brazil, we prefer bridges to margins, to use Roberto DaMatta's classic expression.<sup>27</sup> I considered the data collected in the year of the centennial as a sign that Brazil might have something better to teach the world, particularly in light of the tragic wars that were afflicting eastern Europe:

The explosion of racism in the heart of those first world societies which had hoped to overcome their "ethnic" divergences and sociological differences is leading increasingly larger numbers of scholars to devote their attention to the

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Peter Fry (1983), Roberto DaMatta (1987b), and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1985).

<sup>27</sup> See DaMatta (1987a).



problem. Perhaps their influence will succeed in touching [sensitizing?] Brazilian intellectuals (Maggie 1991: 105).

At the time, however, I doubted Mário de Andrade. I thought that refusing to talk about social and racial inequality and insisting on a discourse regarding a black culture meant that the ideas that had marked my youth and my early writing were serving to blind Brazilians to the racism in our everyday lives. Could the young anthropologists of the 1970s who, on other journeys of apprenticeship, had discovered a Brazil characterized by a culture of admixture, of encounter between non-equals, in the *terreiros* of Umbanda, were wrong (Maggie [1975] 2001), in “Feijoada e Soul Food” (Fry 1983), in samba, or in the buildings of Copacabana’s *Utopia Urbana* [Urban Utopia] (Velho 1971) have been wrong?

I sought ways out of a deadlock that has distressed a generation of anthropologists who followed the lines drawn by Mário de Andrade. My first step was to bring more partners to the debate in order to form a new generation of researchers interested in studying the “racial question” in the Institute for Philosophy and the Social Sciences’ Laboratory for Social Research at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. In 1988, our team of students and other anthropologists from Rio de Janeiro and from São Paulo had already begun a large qualitative survey about the centennial year of the Abolition.<sup>28</sup> Among the survey’s most interesting outcomes (in addition, naturally, to the articles and theses that grew out of it) was having stimulated many students to dedicate themselves to the subject, and watching them move on from their undergraduate studies to academic careers as masters and doctors. In 1994, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, I organized the IFCS Program on Race and Ethnicity, bringing together researchers from Brazil and many other corners of the world to discuss and rethink the subject. During those years I revisited my own early writings and, remaking the trail of anthropology that understands “race” as a social construct, in addition to the discussions with this group of anthropologists of various backgrounds and tendencies, I was able to reconcile myself with the modernist ideological repertory.

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28 Some of the works based on data collected during the centennial year of the Abolition of Slavery include Schwarcz (1990), Birman (1990, 1997), Damasceno (1997), Cavalcanti (1997), Farias (1997), Moutinho (1997) and Maggie (1989).

The result of that program was like a return to the Unesco Project, for Brazilians and foreigners came together to research subjects which had already been forgotten by our sociological literature. At that point, there was no talk of quotas and the researchers discovered many other dimensions of identity among its “natives”. In my introduction to the book *Raça como retórica* [Race as Rhetoric] (Maggie and Rezende 2002), which brings some of the results of that program, I signaled a need to consider, according to the modernist tradition, Brazil’s contribution towards the exaltation and improvement of the quality of civilization.<sup>29</sup>

From 1998 to 2000, we also organized the Color and Education Program at the IFCS and took a complete survey of what was being considered and established in terms of public policy to lessen racial inequality. Thus we discovered that Brazil still regarded itself as mixed. The majority of our interviewees still felt that the quota system was not the best solution for confronting racism. We did a case study of a social movement that, day by day, was gaining more and more followers, the *Pré-Vestibular para Negros e Carentes* (or PVNC). This study indicated that the strategy of naming blacks alongside the poor represented a way of recognizing the “racial” problem without neglecting to speak of social and class inequalities. The PVNC movement proposed another path for overcoming our social iniquities. I shall return to the subject of the PVNC further ahead, but it must be said that, when we presented the result of this research in 2000, the field was mined and everything was being treated with a moralistic, accusatory tone. Even at that point, it was hard enough to put *modernismo* back in its place. The statistics of inequality between “blacks” and “whites” had won the minds of the intelligentsia and the media, who now appeared to be in favor of a strategy that would include the reservation of places for blacks. To them, our society ceased to be a place of mixture and hybridism to be understood as clearly divided between blacks and whites.

If anthropological tradition led us to attempt to listen to what our natives were saying about the subject of “race”, on what sources were the proponents of this other, less “Macunaimic”, less “cannibalistic” version of our culture basing themselves?

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29 For a selection of essays produced by scholars who participated in the Program and who returned to the subject with new research in Brazil and abroad, see Maggie and Rezende (2002).

In an article called “Silêncio nunca mais” [“Silence nevermore”], journalist Miriam Leitão revealed the sources that convinced that it was necessary to change the paradigm and that the way to do so would be the quotas. She says:

The quotas really are controversial. I’m for them. I found Roberto Martins and Ricardo Henriques’s data more convincing, as have been the arguments of so many blacks I listened to, all of which prove that, over the course of the last hundred years, universalist policies did not succeed in confronting the distance between blacks and *pardos* on the one hand and whites on the other. I read texts by specialists such as Antonio Alfredo Guimarães and Hélio Santos, I looked at Nelson do Valle e Silva’s chart comparing the salaries of blacks and whites in the same social stratum. I spoke to Governor Benedita [da Silva] about the talents she had discovered while putting together her administration and who had been hidden away because they were black. I went to debates like those by Professor Hédio Silva, at the São Paulo PUC; by former minister Raul Jungman, at Fiesp; by the UNO; by Cândido Mendes. I interviewed blacks, brazilians and foreigners. I opened my mind and let in the strength of convictions of those who had either studied or experienced the problem. Quotas are not the only affirmative action, but they do have the power to fuel the debate. Affirmative action is a broad field in which public policy and private action can begin to build less ethnic inequality in Brazil (*O Globo*, 22/12/2002).

Miriam Leitão makes a clear case for the thoughts of those who were influenced by Roberto Martins and Ricardo Henriques’s numbers:

Brazilian racism is different from the American variety, but it has been very efficient in *separating the two halves of the brazilian population*. Because we did not have anything as coarse as the politics of segregation, we resigned ourselves to a situation of intolerable injustice. And we delude ourselves with discourse to the effect that Brazil has become miscegenated and, thus, diluted the problem. Our family albums are witnesses to miscegenation. *The trick of brazilian racism was not requiring a certificate of origin*. It was giving white-skinned individuals more opportunities, open more doors for them, giving them more ascension, more power (*O Globo*, 22/12/2002; my italics).

In this version, our nation is described as being made up by two imperious halves. Although Miriam Leitão recognizes that our family albums are filled with mixture, she believes that it is the fruit of a “trick”, an illusion

and, in saying this, she knocks down that which lay at the heart of the modernist utopia. Mário de Andrade's Brazil had figured out its own way to devour Bishop Sardinha. According to this version of our nation, it is now necessary to discard the strategy of encounter and mixture and adopt another one based on what Miriam Leitão is calling a certificate of origin. A drop of black blood?... Who would be left to apply the quotas?

A contradiction arises in Miriam Leitão's discourse and in many others. If, on one hand, they speak of a country divided between whites and blacks, on the other, they do not refute what they call miscegenation or mixture in our family albums. What Miriam Leitão proposes, then, is a radical change in our concept of nationhood, one in which individuals would seek out certificates of origin. But what, then, should we do with the mixture that is in our albums?

At a 1996 seminar organized by the Ministry of Justice's Secretaria of Citizens' Rights, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso himself exhorted scholars to discover a creative solution to our problem:

We, in Brazil, do truly live side by side with discrimination, we live side by side with prejudice, but "the birds that sing here do not sing like those over there", which means that the discrimination and prejudice we have here are not the same as those which exist in other cultural formations.

Therefore, in the solutions to these problems, we should not simply imitate. We must be creative, we must see how our ambiguity, how Brazil's non-Cartesian characteristics – which make things so difficult in so many ways – can also help in other aspects... It is therefore better that we should seek a more imaginative solution (Cardoso 1997: 14).

In another speech, marking the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2000, he changed the course of the conversation and proposed:

This year of 2001 is especially important in the struggle against racial discrimination. In August, the international community will hold in South Africa a world conference against racism, xenophobia and intolerance, which will make advances in diagnosing the contemporary manifestations of racism, discussing its causes, identifying its victims and analyzing strategies to combat

and overcome them. The government and the Brazilian people are engaged in this combat. There is much to be done before racism is fully overcome in Brazil. It is not easy to dismantle mental and institutional structures which have been strengthened over centuries of slavery, social exclusion and romantic visions of “racial democracy”. Nonetheless, much has already been done. Measures such as an improved surveillance of discrimination in the labor market are examples of my administration’s effort in this struggle. But it is important that these measures continue to multiply, that they have continuity, and that society and the media accurately and proudly reflect the fact that we are truly a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. *There can be no doubt that our mestiço identity is one of the central aspects of the historical accomplishments we celebrate in the 500 years of the Discovery.*<sup>30</sup>

A multi-ethnic, multicultural and mestiço nation is a contradiction in terms. We are either multi-ethnic or we are mixed. Thus, to return to journalist Miriam Leitão’s argument, how can we say that our family albums reveal our mixtures if we live in a society only of blacks and of whites?

Right or wrong, our myth of origin says that we, Brazilians, are a people born from three diverse “races” who came together here to plant a new civilization. Macunaíma is the hero without character because we are still, as Mário de Andrade said, in the ides of 1928, like twenty-year-old youths seeking our identities. Should we reinvent the myth of Macunaíma and do as in Richard Morse’s serious joke of 1990 and invent a hero with plenty of character?

### **Who is afraid of change?**

The alarming numbers of “racial” inequality evidently point to a renitent racism in Brazil. But how does one go about uprooting this evil? The proponents of quotas believe that we must abandon the modernist ideological repertory and treat it as a “trick”. But can they really lead us to overcome our iniquities? Therein lay my own doubts.

In order to find a more interesting solution, we must do as Mário de Andrade did and move away from the numbers that provide us with a black and white photograph, and not even that, because the statistics do not

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<sup>30</sup> The Brazilian President’s message to the nation on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (3/21/2001, [www.mj.gov.br](http://www.mj.gov.br), my italics).

reveal the many shades of grey which black and white photographs contain. Statistics are not like films which reveal the diachrony, colors and variations of form. Statistics are constructed models that need to be fleshed out with blood, bone and muscle. In order to try to understand what the numbers cannot reveal, what it is that lies beneath our everyday lives, we must learn how to listen to the many blacks, whites, *morenos* and the poor who will be affected by this proposed change, which beyond any shadow of a doubt will not cost much to the proponents themselves. Our country must seek the inclusion of nearly 80% of the population that is outside the many important gains of citizenship. It is necessary to probe deeper to seek solutions that will affect the subjects of this story, and it must not be forgotten that much still needs to be done to include the thousands of youths who still cannot even conclude elementary school.

This is what led group of poor youths from the periphery of Rio de Janeiro to come together in a movement called the Pré-Vestibular para Negros e Carentes (PVNC), which I mentioned earlier. I think there is a clue here which must not be ignored. The movement succeeded in attracting hundreds of youths who, benefited by universal policies of inclusion, had succeeded in finishing high school and wanted access to openings in the public universities of Rio de Janeiro. It must be said that there those who finish this phase of their scholastic trajectory are still a minority. Only 30% of youths belonging to that age group make it to the end of high school. This very active group of youths from the city's peripheries and poorer quarters did not want to be co-opted by the ideologies of national or international funding agencies. It accepted support from no source other than teachers who taught classes for free or from churches, homeowners associations or sometimes even public schools that lent them classrooms. They wanted to discuss and develop a strategy created by themselves. For several years, they succeeded in attracting not only militants who self-proclaimed themselves as black, but also many poor whites and others who were color blind, like one of the students who responded to a 1994 survey undertaken by my team by defining himself as *flicts*, in an allusion to Ziraldo's extremely beautiful story (1984).<sup>31</sup>

This movement was a huge media success, attracting many young students who sought out its uncomfortable classrooms both to learn and to

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<sup>31</sup> See Maggie (2001).

teach. By naming the blacks along with the poor, the movement succeeded in providing a racially non-neutral solution and, simultaneously, being sensitive to the many ways that these students have of self-defining themselves. The movement's efficiency is certainly owed to the determination of these youths who sought a way out of the path of the bullets of the police and the drug dealers and the isolation in which they found themselves because they were outside the possibilities of competing with colleagues better blessed by fortune and educational heritage. Throughout the 1990s, since its inauguration in a São João de Meriti parish under the leadership of Father David, the movement has grown spectacularly. Many *núcleos* (or centers), as the groups gathering in churches, *favela* dweller associations and schools are called, were created and group coordinators organized according to general guidelines, even as they were constantly committed to debating the PVNC's overall direction.

Until the year of the Durban conference in 2001, most of the coordinators were opposed to the idea of quotas. Leaders wanted the students to manage through merit and individual effort to rise to a place in the system of higher learning and with this perhaps to have more opportunities to leave the peripheries in which the presence of the State is practically non-existent and where youth is at the mercy of another "movement" – as the drug trade is popularly known.

After Durban, with the introduction of the quota policy for blacks in the state public universities of Rio de Janeiro, the PVNC underwent a very important transformation. The spirit of some of its leaders was crushed and many abandoned the movement, riddled with doubts about what paths to follow. According to a former coordinator, "The change generated doubt and disquiet. If, on one hand, we may well lessen inequality with this policy; on the other hand, we shall do away with merit". She concluded with the following question: "the greatest doubt is how to combat racism by using race?"<sup>32</sup> However, the greatest transformation did not come from those whose enthusiasm had cooled, but from propositions put forth by Father David. The dominican priest, one of the PVNC's founding heroes, created another organization (Educafro) which defines itself as a movement for *afro-descendants* and the poor and which, unlike the PVNC, has accepted donations from foreign

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32 A former PVNC Center coordinator who is currently earning a degree in social sciences

agencies, in a departure from the earlier proposition of financial autonomy. Now situating the poor alongside those of african – or afro – origin as a criterion for selecting its students, David organized the Educafro as a franchise, seeking to attract the many PVNC centers which had hoped to identify themselves with the movement’s winning proposition – to wit, that descent needed to be considered as a basis for self-classification. Thus, those who do not want to exclude whiter-shaded individuals from their family albums will certainly be excluded from the preparatory courses.

Let us not accuse Mário de Andrade of racism! It was his generation and his leadership that initiated the most radically anti-racist movement after centuries of so-called scientific racism. Deep down, however, perhaps those who are proposing the end of the modernist ideological repertory believe more in *Macunaima* and in the *Cannibalist Manifesto* than the author of these lines. Perhaps they believe we shall devour multiculturalism today just as Bishop Sardinha once did, unable to assess structural damage resulting from events such as the ones I have described above have occurred. As Marshall Sahlins said, structures are endangered when they are invaded by events which, even when interpreted in the light of tradition, are able to transform it in a radical way.

The structural changes produced by the laws and norms stipulated by the State, which I have described here, in other words, the creation of a social engineering based on racial bipolarity, will much more deeply affect the mixed and *flicts* population that lives in the vast suburbs and peripheries of the cities. But as Miriam Leitão said, we are all in this together. Who will be responsible for the consequences?

Many of the people who read early drafts of this article have asked me what, then, is to be done? I always answer that there is a great deal must be done to fight racism and inequality in our country and that it is high time we started doing it. As many have said since the beginning of this debate, the first step in any campaign against racism ought surely to be the destruction of the very idea that gave birth to it – the idea of “race”.

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