

MAKUNAIMÎ AND THE END OF (BRAZILIAN) MODERN IDENTITY

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Abstract: This essay reflects on Makuxi artist Jaider Esbell's intervention on (Brazilian) modernism. Moving beyond critique, Esbell refuses to engage modernity on its own terms. Instead, his work demands an end to identity-distinction itself, modernity's greatest invention. By emphasizing manifestation over differentiation and transformation as a fundamental state of being, Esbell calls for a disenchantment of the modern world. This critical move comes as an ethical rupture, a radical emptying of the mode of being we have inherited to move away from the violent logical referents of capitalism and colonialism.

Keywords: modernism, capitalism, colonialism, identity-distinction, Makunaimî

Resumo: Este ensaio analisa a intervenção do artista Makuxi Jaider Esbell no modernismo (brasileiro). Indo além da crítica, Esbell recusa-se a lidar com a modernidade seguindo os termos da própria. Em vez disso, seu trabalho exige o fim da identidade-distinção, a mais importante invenção moderna. Ao enfatizar a manifestação sobre a diferenciação e a transformação como estado fundamental do ser, Esbell convida o desencantamento do mundo moderno. Essa manobra crítica traz uma ruptura ética que busca um esvaziamento radical do modo de ser que herdamos com o intuito de afastar as referências lógicas violentas do capitalismo e do colonialismo.

Palavras-chave: modernismo, capitalismo, colonialismo, identidade-distinção, Makunaimî

In the rooms of the palace where we firmly stood – free from the chains of illusion we had made without – the sound that filled us was unlike the link of memory itself. It was the inseparable moment within ourselves of all fulfilment and understanding (...) This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I had never heard myself sing before. I felt the faces before me begin to fade and part company from me and from themselves as if our need of one another was

now fulfilled, and our distance from each other was the distance of a sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one undying soul. Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had eternally possessed — Wilson Harris, Palace of the Peacock (151-52)

In the 2023 works “Makunaima, my grandparent in me!” and “Image, Myth, Art and Contexts,” Makuxi artist Jaider Esbell shares 10 of his paintings in which he depicts Makunaimâ through various figures (some more concrete and others more abstract) to show the less known sides of Makunaimâ (or Makunaima).¹ That entity inspired Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaíma*, a 1928 novel that came to be one of the utmost representations of Brazilian Modernism’s attempts at offering a critique of the nation’s economic-social and cultural-philosophical structures whilst reimagining what the country could be. Esbell reintroduces Makunaimâ, a sacred ancestral entity of several indigenous peoples of South America, and refuses to only respond to or resist the multiple violences of ongoing capitalist colonization. At stake in the paintings and writings is the bringing of formlessness and form together, without attaching supremacy to either, to counter modernity’s claims to determinacy and its ensuing violations. Precisely because of the latter, Esbell breaks away from engaging with (Brazilian) modernism on its own terms. Rather, Esbell seeks a total break from modernism’s desires and actualizations.

What is it that Brazilian modernism wants in the first half of the 20th century? Entities instead of identities? Selves in self-disillusionment processes in flux without Other, with others and a reconstructed Other? Recovering, and hence reification, of colonial-racial essences to pretend to change the national subject? To pretend there is no racism or colonialism? To destroy the fantasy of law to establish a new (non-)regulative legislation? To steal while pretending to promote? Does it seek what it has lost but is already available?² The São Paulo modernists search for the daily, concrete popular expressions throughout the vastness of the country’s geography as the source for their movement is important and marks their difference from dominant, elite spaces that determine the ‘erudite’ as the essence of Brazilian identity. They seek to articulate a new vision of/for Brazil, and their work indeed produces a rupture. Mário de Andrade looks for

¹ Makunaima and Makunaimâ are different ways to spell the name of the same sacred ancestral entity amongst the indigenous nations of South America that have the entity as part of their (hi)stories. Jaider Esbell uses both spellings.

² “We already had Communism. We already had Surrealist language (...) Before the Portuguese discovered Brazil, Brazil discovered happiness” (Andrade 42).

Brazil within Brazil to (re)establish Brazil — and to some extent, he does so. He does not rely solely on superficial factoids. But this essay is not centered on them. Instead, I will try to tread closer to another question: what is it that the modern (mind) seeks, repeats, and ruptures? Therefore, this essay will not revisit Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* nor will it explore the prevailing version of Brazilian modernism encapsulated by the 1922 Week of Modern Art with its potentials and pitfalls.³ Rather, it will stay with Esbell's demand for the end of (Brazilian) subject-identity, that is, the utmost of modern inventions: identity-distinction itself.

The pre-concept method

To abandon *identity-distinction*⁴ as the core for creating the world, Esbell's critical move comes with a simple question: "Do I speak of prejudice, preconceptions?" (181)⁵ This question aims for the before of the concept, the *pre*, to excavate the core of modernity's violence: the (modern) mind's desire for determination. Mobilizing the pre-concept might seem self-defeating since it is already a concept and, hence, arguably remains open to the same core violence that Esbell is attacking with his critique of the pre-conceived. Legrás helps to understand the risk and necessity of the pre as method by reminding us that *language-communication* must be permanently in a state of (re)constitution instead of *determination-assumption*:

What is proper to human beings is to take responsibility for the ambiguous sense that confronts them; to feel the vertigo of the meaningless while diminishing it in the dimension of communication ... Analytic understanding works through symbolic deferral as essential to the construction of meaning. This is why Lacan can say that the symbolic "is beyond understanding" even if it is that place "in which all understanding is inserted." (14-15)

³ Refer to works from Zita Nunes, Rodrigo Octávio Cardoso, Val Souza, Denilson Baniwa, Lucia Sá, José Miguel Wisnik, Rafael Cardoso, Alexandre Nodari, Beatriz Azevedo, Fred Coelho, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Júnior, and Salloma Salomão.

⁴ Briefly, I mean to indicate how, in the world of modernity, distinction is the mechanism which coheres the process of identity through the apparent difference between, for example, the concepts of universality and particularity (key to the development of the modern mind). Differentiation becomes a state of determination that rejects transformation-change and instead reduces, distinguishes, and possesses to make the world cohere. Identity-distinction articulates violence before its myriad of manifestations (capital, racial, colonial, gendered, sexual, geographic, etc.)

⁵ "Pré-conceito" in the original.

That is, to live with *concepts-meanings* without turning them into prefixed pre-concepts and pre-meanings, the apparently impossible task that Esbell takes up. His work intervenes in (modern Brazilian) identity, philosophy, language, art, history, and being by pointing to our (colonizing) fundamental limitation, that is, the moment when humans start to believe their (own) concepts too obstinately.⁶ Thus, subject and object become definitions, determinations, logics. With this notion of *pre*, Esbell uses the limitation of language *to point to* the limitation of language as the path to build a collective-social life no longer marked by the default mode of the life of capital violence, since the latter's overarching, totality-seeking/inducing being erupts from the forgetting of the before of *fluid-fusion* (175, 177, 185). That is, it already takes *fluid-fusion* as concrete and attempts to contain it.⁷ With Esbell, appearance becomes mere opening to uncertainty: "I make known that I belong in all visuality, all traces already exposed of my being are merely a step towards more mysteries" (161). Visuality against determinacy: all images-words, all appearances, are invitations, as Esbell and Makunaimâ continuously reiterate. Instead of determination, they invite the perpetuity of the now: "the image is a part of the art of showing the *continuum* transitory moment of things" (179).⁸ The path is unambiguous: either one refuses every single modern structure that we have inherited, or one will, regardless of intentions, continue to reproduce violence as metonym for being. Nothing short of a battle over being itself

⁶ Colonization has specific historical meaning in the modern context: it is about land and attempt at elimination (of populations and bodies, of onto-epistemologies and cosmo-philosophies), that is, substitution of life (deemed not capable of proper life) for another type of life — see Patrick Wolfe's "Settler Colonialism", for example. And a colonizing force is also about mindsets, about the self with itself and how it confuses its lack, and need for wholeness, through violence — see Sylvia Wynter "1492".

⁷ Remembering the limitation of (self-)coherence, or of understanding, becomes a path for a reshaping of how things are practiced in the world. Horácio Legrás explores the danger of total referents: "Lacan ... has taught us to suspect the type of totalizing interpretations which are grounded on nothing but a desire for domination" (6), that is, "[u]nderstanding idolizes by taking the process of understanding to a standstill ... No one is saying that understanding is a myth and doesn't exist. What is mythical is the belief that understanding represents a terminal point in communication ... the illusion that the web of signs contains something substantial to be revealed, something ultimate that suffices to itself beyond any dialectic. This constitutes the illusion of the referent. Let us be clear regarding the illusion in question: it is not that there are no trees 'out there' in the world, it is just that the word *tree* owes them nothing for its constitution. But why should signification be phallic? The phallus is not the penis, Lacan warns his audience. The phallus is a signifier that leads toward a conformism in and through meaning" (18, 20). What is more phallic than modern life and its relentless reductions towards the coherence of the proper?

⁸ This insistence on now is the fundamental condition of reality. As Wole Soyinka explains: "The confrontation ... is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle ... and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition" (3).

is at stake. By staying close to their writing, this essay searches for the *pre*-concept with Esbell and Makunaimá to heed to what they ask of us: to construct a *limit-less* world.⁹

The rule of separateness: modern life, away!

One of the fiercest moves of Esbell's writing is to suspend knowing as given. He reminds the reader that they have not been presented to, and hence do not know, Makunaimá. And yet, they know *Macunaíma*. Within this context, Esbell also replies to Macunaíma's *modernismo*, that is, to how the popular(ized) figure is taken from the Makuxi and miswritten, mis-comprehended, apprehended: "So, does Makunaimá appear to me first as a colonized form? I haven't even presented my grandparent to you, and I am already asking you to go beyond gender, beyond time ... There is, wherever I take them, a full meaning beyond the factoids of Makunaimá's laziness and lack of character" (163).¹⁰ Whether *Macunaíma* represents a national identity, or a *nation-subject* without a character, or a yet to be developed, or impossibly marked by a "bad" character, *culture-people*, the former exemplifies the structures of colonialism broadly conceived (the *extraction-possession* cycle to articulate social *conditions-relations*). More importantly, however, is that it does so by relying on the *mind-being* structure of capital-modern life for it relies on the narratives already available to think the 'new' moment of the nation, the art, the century. It is irrelevant what Mário de Andrade knew or didn't know, what he researched or didn't research, where he spent his time and where he did not. What matters is that Mário de Andrade's novel takes for granted the structures available as real, or the rule of (modern) separateness as given.¹¹ On the other hand, Esbell aims for abstract and concrete, philosophical and historical, spiritual and political, thought and economic as co-constitutive realities: "I happen, artistically speaking, within a process that invites us to critically think decolonization, cultural appropriation, Christianity, monotheism, monoculture and all the dilemmas of the globalized existence. Or isn't that the case?" (160). By emphasizing the manifestations of the ongoing logic of domination instituted over the past five centuries ("all the dilemmas of the globalized existence") while also

⁹ Here, limit(-less) is not deployed as the type of "psychotic violence" Horácio Legrás (2024) discusses where a lack of (psychic) limit is what articulates femicides and gender violence more broadly (135). Without limit, there is no subjectivity-collectivity-reality possible, but the terms and conditions of the Limit are at stake.

¹⁰ The Taulipang and Arekuná, Caribs and Arawak are also relatives of Makunaimá (Fehskens 98). The Wapichana, Ingarikó, and Pemom as well (Cristino Wapichana).

¹¹ Perhaps the fundamental rule of modern life. See Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Difference without separability."

arguing that, to address said manifestations, one must not stop at them as *real-total* (e.g., “decolonization, cultural appropriation, Christianity, monotheism, monoculture”), Esbell struggles with what structures the structures themselves by refusing reduction and definition through the embrace of continuous *time-perceptions*, abstract *sense-meanings*, with him and Makunaimâ as artists of transformation:

First, I'll mention that I am not alone, I don't speak alone, I don't show up alone ... I belong in all visuality, all traces already exposed of my being are merely a step towards more mysteries. We are the well of all mysteries ourselves ... we are not defined ... we come from a continuous time, without stop. Before that, I make known that we seek the most abstract meanings, we handle other very firm deals in this passage. And even before that, I should say that both my grandparent Makunaima and me, and I am a direct part of them, we are artists of transformation. (161)

Bringing together mystery, traces, appearance by removing a fundamental *alone-lessness*,¹² Esbell simultaneously refers to himself and his grandparent specifically, the Makuxi and indigenous nations of Brazil generally,¹³ and finally also brings *us* into the struggle against the constructed (multiple) *us* of modern life: the national subject *us* and its exclusions and violences;¹⁴ the global *us* of the *commodity-citizen* life-cycle;¹⁵ the *us* who make (national) art;¹⁶ the modern *us* through

¹² Carl Mika writes about alone-lessness: “in this fully enmeshed realm sits the human self, but humanity is merely one aspect of the world's social nature ... there is a thorough construction of self and thing through their immediate association and unity with each other ... the self, an entity thoroughly related with all other things, is utterly dependent on the constitutive nature of power and place ... power and place are immediately part of the self; the self is de-individualised, despite appearing to be alone” (35-6).

¹³ When dealing with concepts and philosophy, one must always be wary of not reducing indigenous to yet another empty signifier while also holding together the overall common philosophical underpinnings of indigenous cosmovisions (as Esbell himself argues for in his text). Carl Mika's work offers profound reminders of that (12-13).

¹⁴ See, for example, the works of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, Aileen-Moreton Robinson, Glen Coulthard, David Lloyd, Audra Simpson, Avery Gordon, Dian Million, Jodi Byrd, Cedric Robinson, Lélia Gonzales, and Beatriz Nascimento.

¹⁵ Ailton Krenak's *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* and Davi Kopenawa's and Bruce Albert's *A Queda do Céu* and *O Espírito da Floresta* are key to the critique of capitalism beyond appearance.

¹⁶ Denilson Baniwa relates: “In 2017, in this place I am speaking from right now, the Goethe Institute in São Paulo, I and 10 other indigenous artists of Brazil have met some of the greatest collectors, gallerists, curators and Museum directors in Brazil to discuss what kind of indigenous presence was necessary in the Brazilian scene then. And what we, indigenous artists, heard from those people, from those great connoisseurs of Brazilian art, was that traditional peoples did not make art. They only made crafts. They made collective art, primitive art, or anything that fits that vocabulary, these synonyms, but never art that could be considered art by these academic means of production” (119-20).

dispossession;¹⁷ in sum, the *proper* us and the *us* of the proper. Perhaps the call could be put in these simple terms: forget the being (us) inherited, walk with us (being) now. The imposition of identity as a constitutive modern process is one of Esbell's most scathing critiques:

Makunaima's highest exposure severely reflects inwards into the forest the frivolous idea of a curious kind of monotheism. Then came the isms, with Christianity specially. Reflections from all tonalities of existence affect Makunaima which receives them with counter-reflections. Makunaima would be the great God, the greatest and the most perverse, for that was the imperative attempt to forcibly extract-impose that identity. That was the twisted proposition, which was so celebrated, that failure of feeling which is the face of Brazilian culture. It was a human failure, a shallow, mundane reading. (169-70)

It is not merely about pointing out the creation of the figure of the indigenous with all its violences and reductions (the failed face of Brazilian culture). More fundamentally, it is a critique of the structure of being which allows for *Macunaíma* to be written in the first place, underscored below as the “projection on the indigenous peoples of all existence”:

The deification of Makunaima allows them to live yet more vividly the necessary bitterness of the triumph to come. The hero without a character was ready to open their arms wide open to the world and to receive its rain of arrows, its continuous lunges and the projection on the indigenous peoples of all existence. They preserved us by delivering themselves, by making themselves prey to the hunter. My grandparent's appearance, enchantment, maximum suction and abandonment as a useless trickster apparently comes to an end. (169)

Projection operates a double move: the projection of the modern *identity-distinction* of the indigenous and Makunaima as the projection who “preserves us by delivering themselves, by making themselves prey to the hunter” — as in most of Esbell's essay, no word is *solved into* a properly finalized meaning, that is, they work as reminders, provocations, questionings,

¹⁷ See, for example, the works of Graça Graúna, Sueli Carneiro, Silvio Almeida and Júlio Vellozo, Yuko Miki, Lígia Osorio Silva, Jaime Alves, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Beatriz Perrone-Moisés, Abdias do Nascimento, Manoela Pedroza, Jorge Couto, Ronald Raminelli, John Manuel Monteiro, Thomas Skidmore, Ana Lúcia Vieira, Alcmena Bastos, Lília Moritz Schwarcz, and John Hemming.

openings, to make tremble the permanent state of determinateness which rules modern(ism's) life. Nevertheless, Esbell's essay is much more than critiques of Macunaíma's *modernismo*. What has been forgotten (Makunaimî as common source) is that which allows for their (Makunaimî's) substitution for another common source, that is, violence as metonym for being or capitalism's ever perfecting historical developments and repetitions. It is here that Esbell's writing appears as a reconstruction of the *mind*.¹⁸

Makunaima is my grandparent and gender, form and content have their places of action, as we always say, for they are fundamental, but we must go beyond that. Makunaima is beyond and proves it by continually changing. No, they are not a transsexual. Let us dissociate, little by little, Makunaima's acting-existing from the cognitive effects of gender in our minds. Yes, in the minds . . . we will have to visit another world . . . Makunaima truly is my grandparent; that is a fact. . . We have a history and a geography. . . It's a biological, genetic, material and substantially spiritual or energetic relation. . . I am inviting you to go beyond the debate around colonization or decolonization . . . [to] extrapolat[e] discourses.

(161-2)

Modern mind, in all its conceptions, precepts, constructs, and actualizations must go ("the cognitive effects of gender [genre] in our minds. Yes, [with]in-minds"). That is, mind needs to have its cognitive effects removed by moving beyond gender and time and striving towards actual relationality — not solely philosophical relationality. Here, one witnesses the collapse of *intra*-, *inter*-, and *outer*- *relationality* as *mind-concepts*: "Makunaima truly is my grandparent; that is a fact". There is no denial of intra-, inter-, and outer- relations, realities, concreteness, existence: "We have a history and a geography"; "biological, genetic, material and substantially spiritual or energetic relation". It is the opposite: a total inhabiting of all three to not abandon any into the hands of *mind-full meaning-signification* — the articulators of colonial violence as total(ized) system of *thought-life* actualized.¹⁹ The knowing that opens the essay is undone. Makunaimî has no *gender-genre*. Evidently this isn't a denial of (gendered) violence. After all, only the brazen can affirm

¹⁸ For a mapping of the (dominant) modern mind, see Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Locke's *Two Treatises* and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

¹⁹ I am contrasting *mindful*, a state that rejects the reality of the mind's concepts (including mindfulness itself), with *mind-full*, i.e., a mind full of its own constructs and their projection onto reality, the danger Esbell stresses.

that the multitude of present-historical violences of the world are not real.²⁰ Rather, the structural violences of the world are already a manifestation of the (attempted) killing of Makunaimâ. That is, Esbell demands we not confuse structural manifestation for reality itself but to see what conditions and establishes the manifestation of the structures. There is no more fundamental critique of modern life and violence than highlighting the *structures* which *structure* the *structural* violences of the past five centuries.²¹ One must return to manifestation as meaninglessness, that is, a lack of attaching of meaning as the fundamental return to *isness*.²² The state where all is incessantly possible instead of the deeming of possibility itself as the goal of a human lost to itself.²³ One must go (to the) beyond (of) the modern mind, that which has devised identity-distinction as the mechanism which creates the conditions under which the nonstop and ongoing modern genocides throughout the world continue unabated. There's nothing special about the human outside its capacity for reduction. In the passage above, transformation itself isn't possible for a being who is transformation itself. There is no *changing* because there is only change.

Excess, foundation, logical referents

When painting Makunaimâ as a hummingbird, Esbell directly connects us to transformation as fundamental state by introducing the “instant readiness of Makunaima in transforming things and transmuting themselves [is] the most fantastic side of their doings, and thus the least understood” (182-3). This critical move is especially important given how the

²⁰ As Dionne Brand wrote: “Only the brazen can say, ‘I was not here, I did not do this and feel that.’ ... It never occurs to them that they live on the cumulative hurt of others. They want to start the clock of social justice only when they arrived. But one is born into history, one isn’t born into a void” (81-2).

²¹ In the era of modernity’s version of imperialism, usually actualized in terms of capital, colonial, religious, racial, gendered, and class supremacy. There is no single/exclusive social group, people or nation who benefit from these but there are undeniable inheritances and overall patterns. For one example, refer to Ana Maria Gonçalves *Um Defeito de Cor*, which gives a vivid history of Brazilian colonialism, early independence, some of the broader political context in West Africa, and the creation of a nation through the stealing of land and enslavement in tandem with the establishment of the global capitalist order.

²² Carl Mika illustrates *isness* with his notion of worldedness: “one thing is never alone, and all things actively construct and compose it” (4). For him, the most important ontological, intellectual, and ethical stance is the idea that what exists is the “eternal convergence of the world within any one thing ... this fundamental collapse of the All within the one also has significance for the nature of thought itself ... the idea is a material entity that is constituted by all other things in the world; it is as equal to the situation as my own neurological decision to think is ... this oneness ... is much more *formational*” (1-2, emphasis original).

²³ Is there anything more meaningful than Makunaima’s decision to cut down the great Wazak’á tree and its endless rounds of transformation and generation(s) of beings? (168) To find the lost human is to stretch towards meaninglessness as fullness because the operation of reduction-distinction is no longer a ruling force.

external world and its obsessions are dominated by the life of the modern mind in which transformation is taken for granted as the turning of being into possession via *reduction-distinction-separation*. As Esbell will articulate below, the obsession with happiness begins from a contextual reply to the lack of contact with material freedom, that is, a need to possess that which appears to contradict the objective and proper social structures created by the modern mind. The “idea of happiness the outside world desires” becomes a state of determinateness for the external world to properly cohere and hence a total alienation from a sense of coherence which doesn’t need reduction-possession but actually clamors for opening. This version of happiness is then deployed to create the figure of the indigenous and all the violations that come with it (e.g., the old and debunked but still widespread and believed stereotypes of laziness, lack of work ethic, backwardness, etc.).²⁴ When emphasizing the colonial projection of a permanent festiveness in the indigenous world, Esbell helps to elucidate the deployment of the construction of the former [happiness] as the state of lack of indeterminateness that points to the giving into the mind’s power of hallucinated determination.²⁵

Is there always a party taking place in the indigenous universe? That is what Makunaima has shown, and therefore they were deemed naturally vulgar, disrespectful, and inconsequential? Maybe the joy of indigenous people, the idea of happiness that the outside world so desires, is one of the adverse causes for frivolous impositions. Joy is plenty, the abundant or subtle clothing that makes them unique, could be why they are threatened. (187)

What is the “outside world” and its “desires” if not capital violence in all its modalities? What is the external if not the obsessive seeking of happiness of the confused mind of modernity? A mind that has instituted the immediacy of human-thought as nature instead of *indefinability-manifestation*, and ergo becoming the source of “frivolous impositions” — otherwise, apparently the world cannot cohere.²⁶ Esbell emphasizes the fundamental hallucination-illusion that identity-reduction is and how it is taken to the extreme by the modern life-mind cycle. Violence as metonym for being — our (modern) inheritance. What happens, however, if we walk towards

²⁴ Refer to Deborah Miranda’s discussion of how colonial powers in California and Mexico said the indigenous nations loved their children “too much”, which proved their need of salvation.

²⁵ See Legrás’ discussion of Lacan’s “discourse of the capitalist” (133-56).

²⁶ For variations-in-conversation with indefinability-manifestation, see Isabelle Stengers, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Arturo Escobar, Anna Tsing, and Eduardo Kohn.

disenchantment *through* enchantment? In the canvas “Transformation/Makunaimî’s Resurgence,” Esbell refuses separation and determinacy to bring about the concurrence of formlessness and form through a depiction of Makunaimî that cannot be reduced nor apprehended, thus rupturing the rule of modern identity-distinction:

The image suggests an aggregation of scattered elements in the appearance of a figurative idea for the fluid myth. It is fluid because it comes from a state of energy and walks through a time when, in a certain space, men and other beings were also more fluid. Did they merge together? ... We speak of a time when everything could be anything. We speak of a time when things changed in shape under different circumstances. Makunaima comes from that time. He comes from a time before that time, actually ... At the same time the image suggests integration and harmony, the excess of foundational elements can also suggest a disaggregation, an expansion, a disintegration. (173)

If one starts with the elements illuminated, another picture rises: Makunaima comes from the time *before* the time of fluidity and fusion.²⁷ That is, formlessness, being itself, fundamental emptiness remembering that interbeing, fluidity, fusion, (dis)integration, (dis)harmonization are all *already manifestations* of being itself — they are not being. That is, if one isn’t careful (as the modern mind isn’t), they easily become just another site of the determinacy cycle for the coherence of reality. We are being guided towards the *pre*. The profundity here is that all elements are already seen as elements of the mind colonized by the need for meaning, or “logical referents” (165). *This* is the anti-modernism of Esbell’s writing and paintings. The critique of *modernism* as movement, art practice, etc., is not what matters the most.²⁸ Esbell’s critical move allows for the structures of modern life themselves to be highlighted and dismantled. If the goal is simply to occupy the space of modernity (structurally), nothing can fundamentally change since the life of the (modern) mind will continue to be the dictator of the possible:

go to a time before all this. I believe and feel that in a certain moment I can be in another time, in a time before our pre-colonial diversities. A total inner

²⁷ There is no other. There is only Other and how we construct it for our purposes of justice or violence.

²⁸ Material interventions and occupation of space certainly are crucial. For one example, see *Manifesto da Antropofagia Periférica*.

vacuum is required ... a nakedness inside to make space... a total emptying of being is required, so another being can fit. The being is full and brings its own knowledge... I repeat, I am not alone, I don't speak alone, I don't show up alone ... I emphasize that we are not predefined, we come from a continuous time, without stops ... Makunaima doesn't require a form, a gender, a genesis. They are an energetic state which creates and recreates itself ... It's the mundane demands of our human senses which require a logical reference ... And so everything is merely the instant and soon will pass into something else. This is our language, a continuous act in itself, transformation... An origin in itself, a resource characteristic of the great act, creativity. We appeared out of nothing, with everything... To disenchant is a transitory state, directly related to the act of destroying what was then associated with my grandparent in their great journey through the world; the lack of character and the disdain for everything. (164-6)

By calling us to return to the time of, and before, pre-colonial diversities, Esbell asks for an emptying of the inherited (modern) self to make room for a being not reliant on logical referents. Though the open “we” refers specifically to himself and Makunaimî, it encompasses humans, nonhumans, and the reader. *We* don't have definition: “*only human senses demand a logical referent.*” Makunaimî plays with manifestation over differentiation, engaging ethical-collective construction instead of reductive-possessable building. Transformation *is* the language. Disenchanting the modern world is the direction. Evidently this is not a call for a return to some type of fantasized pristine, identity-free homogenous world. It is a bouncing back towards a mode of being that is antithetical to structural violence as metonym for being (“[we] can be in another time, in a time before our pre-colonial diversities”). We must get rid of our inherited being, that is to say, we must make our inheritance more uncertain and less settled to be able to make room for the new plenitude-being because the being we have inherited has no plenitude — moreover, there is no ‘new’ as I have just written, it is merely a return to what already is.

Because Makunaima, at the end, reminds us of a fundamental truth that has been suppressed for the functioning of modern life: it is our human sense who requires some type of logical referent (“[Makunaimî] doesn't require [dismisses] a form, a gender, a genesis ... It's the mundane demands of our human senses which require a logical reference”). It is theoretically simple and practically complicated: the social life that has been built is based on my logic

becoming the dominant in the struggle with/over the other minds surrounding me, that is, the paving of the path for domination. This enchantment, almost a magic trick since it seems at times we have been deceived by ourselves, is precisely why Esbell calls for disenchantment to move towards what enchantment could actually be as practice since it already is as reality, that is, being enchanted by being and its isness.²⁹ That is, to disenchant what has been established as reality: the enchantment of the magician made ploy that is the hallucination of Macunaíma “as lack of character and disdain for everything”, i.e., modern identity itself. This is how the pre that is this essay’s obsession is presented: as a permanent movement between concept-being-word(s) that have all meanings and practices possible at the same time; they are particular and universal at once — hence, they are neither. It is a play of disenchanting the enchantment of modernity to bring a new type of enchantment which is no enchantment at all because it deals with reality as it is — indistinction instead of differences intersecting-differing; formless into oneness instead of identity-distinction; oneness into manifestation of uniqueness instead of multiplicity, multiculturalism, multi-concept; the enchantment-disenchantment nexus: Jaider Esbell’s great diversity forever.

Who is colonized?

A third of the way through his writing, Esbell advises: “[w]ithout entering the gates of indigenous peoples’ cosmovisions there’s no way to discuss decolonization” (162) — precisely because their cosmovisions are already non-, anti-, de-colonial.³⁰ People are already free. Evidently there is political, territorial, economic, and bodily sovereignty to be fought for. Esbell, however, brings another question: if one traps people into confinements due to one’s political desire for liberation, what is happening if not a repeating of modern identity in its fullest sense?³¹ How is it that Makunaimâ isn’t free? Who is seeing Makunaimâ as imprisoned? Colonized? As a

²⁹ Even my writing above of (modern) being having no plenitude then becomes a falsehood because plenitude requires plenitude. Staying with what seem to be paradoxes or conundrums or contradictions, where there are none, is one of the practices for a justice-oriented society.

³⁰ Refusing the terms and conditions of coloniality of being (Wynter), of power (Quijano), of property (Bhandar), of self (Andreotti), of body (Miranda), of hell and open veins (Galeano), of space (Nourbese Philip), of maps (Brand; Burnett), of science (Cajete), of sovereignty (Barker), of relation (Glissant), of philosophy (Arola), of history (Estes).

³¹ The opposite of what Viveiros de Castro (2007) suggests: “our political and theoretical objective was to definitely establish ... that indigenous is not an issue of feather headdresses, *urucum*, nor bow and arrow, something apparent and evident in this stereotypical sense, but rather a question of a ‘state of spirit’. A mode of being and not a mode of appearing... indigeneity taught us a certain mode of be-coming (*devir*), something essentially invisible but nonetheless effective: an incessant, infinitesimal movement of differentiation, not a massive condition of anteriorized and established ‘difference’, that is, an identity” (135-6).

victim? Esbell doesn't. He emphasizes Makunaimî's agency multiple times during the essay (e.g., 166-7, 169) as a fundamental way to review the ideas sustaining *Macunaíma* and its processes and aftermaths.³² But agency for whom? For us, the ones who don't know. Because Makunaimî is already free. And Esbell goes to the *cerm* of the question: the (modern) *mind-I* as the fundamental site from where all violence stems from.³³ In one sense, it is most obvious that the Makuxi (and other indigenous nations across the Americas) aren't free: their lands are repeatedly invaded, especially when rife with natural resources for capitalist imperialism; there has been very little attempt at constructing a nation-state in which indigenous nations are actually, indispensably, integrally, and constitutionally (as in *constituted* — not merely in the law) nations with their sovereignty respected and promoted; their languages are under attack (not only as speech-culture; their languages as social-structural organization which, generalizing for brevity's sake, are antithetical to accumulation-extraction-possession-distinction cycle, that is, the ethical life of capitalism); their material mode of being is never not under aggression.³⁴ And yet, as Esbell shows repeatedly, they already live decolonized.³⁵ It is the process of unsettling the supremacy of certainty-determination to make room for a different mode of certainty which strives for mystery (“we are the wells of all mysteries”) instead of determinateness that Esbell offers:

All visions are transient, and there is more than one in me. There will never be a conclusion, and my passage is as temporary as these apparent demands and their urgencies ... the fact that we live in a permanent state of colonization also poses a factor of obligation, motivating us to be beyond things ... And we also believe,

³² With agency, nothing less than (the meaning of) eternity is in question, as Makunaimî explains: “My son, I glued myself to that book cover. They say I was kidnapped, that I was harmed, stolen, wronged, betrayed, fooled. They say I was a fool. No! ... It was I who wanted to go to that book cover ... There I saw the chances for our eternity” (Esbell 166-7).

³³ I am mixing the word “cerne” (core) and *CERN* (European Council for Nuclear Research). Very briefly, the latter aims to explain the fundamental nature of reality (being) by looking at the structures of the particles that build the universe from the scientific-cosmology tradition (e.g., nonlocality and particles as events since they are always within the nexus of their potentiality and their collapse into reality), which have already been described by the ontoepistemologies-cosmologies of nations like the Makuxi. In this way, Oswald de Andrade's provocation (footnote 2) stands the test of time: western hegemony is looking for what had already been found.

³⁴ In *Apuyemiyekî?*, a documentary about the genocide of the Waimiri-Atroari during the Brazilian military dictatorship, they ask: “Por que kamña [civilizado] matou kiña [Waimiri-Atroari]? Apuyemiyekî? Porquê?” (Vaz). Why do the civilized kill the Waimiri-Atroari? Why?

³⁵ In theory, “decoloniality” and its variations don't seem to take us very far from the structures that instituted it. I try to follow Silvia Cusicanqui's framework in dialogue with Silvia Federici: “the postcolonial is a desire/wish, the decolonial is a fashion, the anticolonial is a daily and permanent struggle” (Cusicanqui n.p.).

because of our strongly spiritual nature, that our art may give us reach ... so that we can at least actively make up the great diversity forever. (170-1)

What is permanent colonization? Indigenous lands in the Americas, at the very least, in our current era. Even stating indigenous is somehow already giving into the modern-capital norm.³⁶ However, this will never not be a historical fact. Is there a time in which a historical fact no longer (ex)is(ts)? Perhaps. But one must ask again: what is it that the modern (mind) seeks, repeats, and ruptures? With this framing, what matters most is that what fundamentally is in permanent state of colonization is (modern) identity as identity (mind), and Makunaimâ represents an extreme (yet mundane)³⁷ example because they are transformed into *Macunaíma*, that is, identity-distinction. And Esbell has taught us to remove the cognitive effects of gender from our minds — to return to Makunaimâ. This return is a crucial artistic, academic, personal-collective, and political act because it seeks to return Makunaimâ (life) to the world to end the rule of modern identity. Or, in Esbell's terms, new compositions to old concepts: “I believe there is another moment beyond East and West coming together to encapsulate thought. New dimensions are opened when old terms are put in new contexts. The fact is that we live in a state of art and walking through other worlds is just a form of thinking and experiencing this much discussed decolonization” (164).³⁸ What is the point of visiting other worlds in what might seem abstract? As I have tried to argue, there is nothing abstract about Jaider Esbell and his relationship to/with/as Makunaimâ. It is precisely the “walking through other worlds”³⁹ as “form of thinking and experiencing decolonization” which allows the end of (Brazilian) modern identity. All identities are thought forms (“cognitive effects”).

Esbell's work is against thought practiced/defined by/as modern mind, the ultimate prison which classifies and calcifies the underlying structures of violence's possibilities in the

³⁶ On the importance of keeping critical terms that seem to play into the hand of capitalism's desire, see Robert Nichols' *Theft is Property!* The term indigenous also is important at least in the realms of legal-juridical and sovereignty claims against the violences of the state-capital. As Glen Coulthard argues, the institutional space of the state cannot be vacated, and one also strives to build beyond it (179).

³⁷ The Rio de Janeiro's police is an utmost example of this mundanity since the reduction of identity-distinction operates to turn violence into the norm of conduct. For another example, refer to Joanne Barker's “murderable and kinless Indian”, a terrorist figure developed by the state-capital to create the conditions under which genocide is just.

³⁸ Billy-Ray Belcourt writes: “i fall into the opening between subject and object/ and call it a condition of possibility./ (...) all that is left is the signified./ people die that way” (11). The opening in-between instantiations of determinateness as the chance of displacing the hegemony of the (identity-distinction) signified.

³⁹ See Édouard Glissant's *errantry*.

name of the proper coherence of reality. That is, to return to thought to overcome thought as means to erase confinement as dictator of reality. Eternity. Here we are. Back to the beginning. Everything can be everything, anything.⁴⁰ All things could be all things. A time without attachment of meaning to bodies. Just bodies. Being:

We are wells of all mysteries ourselves... [Makunaima] break all barriers, subvert all advice, kiss their grandparent, the tortoise, and go toward the father of us all, the universe ... Makunaima in human aspect. The myth appears to suggest a condition of plenitude. It is possible to see them as a male, imposing being... He looks absolute, as if he was the enchantment itself taking form to attend to visualities... We never cease to search for the opposite effect when we simplify the image of the essentially fluid myth to something limited to an image. The limiting sense of seeing oneself as human, mortal, material... This way, who knows, we have the basis or the clues to their devolution to a former state, the state one expects, the full state of art, the state of energy, when the eyes see what is abstract, for that is where all meaning resides. (165; 177)

The arrival (which is a misnomer for we have never left — it only appears that we have) at “where all meaning resides” is enchantment as the demand for the end of the ruling of the (modern) mind’s power.⁴¹ Esbell explains it simply: it “would be a risk if we were, in fact, pleading understanding (comprehension).” Because comprehension (*compreender*) means to seize, grasp, *take into the mind*. And Makunaimî is not the mind. They cannot be comprehended since, if they are, the (modern) identity reduction will just have repeated itself. Makunaimî and Esbell offer a way out of the deadlock of capital-modern life. He ends with a question: “Does this breakthrough break anything?”⁴² The question invites a double-handed response. On one hand,

⁴⁰ Ailton Krenak writes: “we all share transcendence and, when we arrive in the world, we already are – and being is the essence of everything. The other skills we can develop (like owning things, having a career, ruling the world) are layers that you add to the perspective of a being that already exists.... It’s deeply respectful to say: this being already exists, this being doesn’t need a mold; rather, it’s this being that gives us the mold of who it is that has come into this world. When we make moves to change the original design of a being, whether human or nonhuman, and mold it so that it has some use, we are committing violence against the path that it is already able to follow here on Earth” (*Ancestral Future* 57-8).

⁴¹ The power of comprehension (of judgment, of rationality-universality, of identity-property) is absolutely incredible. It creates what it imagines. It will take us to the ends of the universe and beyond. It will determine and be certain about its determinations. It also takes us to the continuing ending of worlds, now. It creates what it imagines.

⁴² “Rompe alguma coisa esse romper?” in the original.

yes, since it breaks/ruptures being for its own recovery. On the other, no, since the material conditions of life for indigenous nations in Brazil and throughout the Americas won't change now. As you explained, we are in permanent transformation and in permanent colonization. The hope of the now is that a non-capitalist future-present can be made achievable via interventions which attempt to drive us away from the dictates of the modern ethical life of violence.⁴³ With you and your grandparent, nevertheless, we arrive where we have always needed to be and eternally had been at.

⁴³ There is no lack of ways and methods to achieve this. See Jason Hickel, Stephanie Kelton, Sabrina Fernandes, Pavlina Tcherneva, Fred Hampton, Silvia Cusicanqui, Abdullah Öcalan, Leanne Simpson, Antônio Bispo dos Santos, Teia dos Povos.

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