

**“Who Is Eating Whom?”:
Wet Nursing and White Cannibalism in Brazil**

GRACE SPARAPANI
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

In 1928, Oswald da Andrade published the “Manifesto *Antropófago*” (Cannibalist Manifesto) in the first issue of the *Revista de Antropofagia*, putting forth a schema for how Brazilian modernism could differentiate itself from European modernist projects. Living in Paris at the time, the bourgeois Brazilian occupied a precarious, liminal racial position; far from home, he experienced the sensation of being seen as Other. Embracing this station, he adopted the Brazilian figure of the cannibal, a stereotype assigned to both Brazil’s Indigenous groups and the Africans brought to the country in the slave trade. Andrade’s cannibal’s hunger knew no bounds, turning his appetite both inward, to the arts and traditions of the Portuguese, Indigenous, and African races making up Brazil, and outward, to the cosmopolitan art histories of European modernisms. In this devouring, writes Leslie Bary, Andrade’s cannibal “adapt[s] [their] strengths and incorporat[es] them into the native self.”¹ In this paper, I consider the metaphoric cannibalism of Brazilian modernism to assert another white cannibalism, one that teeters between metaphor and literalism: the cannibalistic feeding of wet nursing, in which white infants suckled at the breast of enslaved Black women, depleting both their physical and affective resources, often at the expense of those women’s own children. In turn, I find a fascination with the figure of the Black wet nurse—the *mãe preta*—at the founding of and continuing through Brazilian modernism.

Illustrating the “Manifesto *Antropófago*” was an exaggerated figure by Andrade’s partner, Tarsila do Amaral (Figure 1). The figure features a miniaturized head, a bulbous, pendulous nose, and an inflated body with prominent hands and feet. To Amaral, the cannibal is a bodily figure—its corporeality, rather than its thought, its defining, ruling feature.

MANIFESTO ANTROPOFAGO

Só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente.

Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os collectivismos. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratadões de paz.

Tupy, or not tupy that is the question.

Contra toda as cathecheses. E contra a mãe dos Gracchos.

Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropofago.

Estamos fatigados de todos os maridos catholicos suspeitosos postos em drama. Freud acabou com o enigma mulher e com outros sustos da psychologia impressa.

O que atropelava a verdade/era a roupa, o impermeavel entre o mundo interior e o mundo exterior. A reacção contra o homem vestido. O cinema americano informará.

Filhos do sol, mãe dos viventes. Encontrados e amados ferozmente, com toda a hypocrisia da saudade, pelos imigrados, pelos traficados e pelos touzistes. No paiz da cobra grande.

Foi porque nunca tivemos grammaticas, nem collecções de velhos vegetaes. E nunca soubermos o que era urliano, suburbano, fronteirico e continental. Preguicosos no mappa mundi do Brasil.

Uma consciencia participante, uma rythmica religiosa.

Contra todos os importadores de consciencia enlatada. A existencia palpavel da vida. E a mentalidade prelogica para o Sr. Levy Bruhl estelar.

Queremos a revolução Carahiba. Maior que a revolução Francesa. A unificação de todas as revoltas eficazes na direcção do homem. Sem nós a Europa não teria sequer a sua

pobre declaração dos direitos do homem.

A idade de ouro annunciada pela America. A idade de ouro. E todas as girls.

Filiação. O contacto com o Brasil Carahiba. Oá Villeganhon print terre, Montaigne. O homem natural. Rousseau. Da Revolução Francesa ao Romantismo, á Revolução Bolchevista, á Revolução surrealista e ao barbaro technizado de Keyserling. Caminhamos.

Nunca fomos cathechizados. Vive-mos através de um direito sonambulo. Fizemos Christo nascer na Bahia. Ou em Belem do Pará.

Mas nunca admittimos o nascimento da logica entre nós.

Só podemos attender ao mundo orecular.

Tinhamos a justiça codificação da vingança. A sciencia codificação da Magia. Antropofagia. A transformação permanente do Tabú em totem.

Contra o mundo reversivel e as idéas objectivadas. Cadaverizadas. O stop do pensamento que é dynamic. O individuo victima do systema. Fonte das injustiças classicas. Das injustiças romanticas. E o esquecimento das conquistas interiores.

Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros.

O instinto Carahiba.

Morte e vida das hypotheses. Da equação eu parte do Kosmos ao axioma Kosmos parte do eu. Subsistencia. Conhecimento. Antropofagia.

Contra as elites vegetaes. Em comunicação com o sólo.

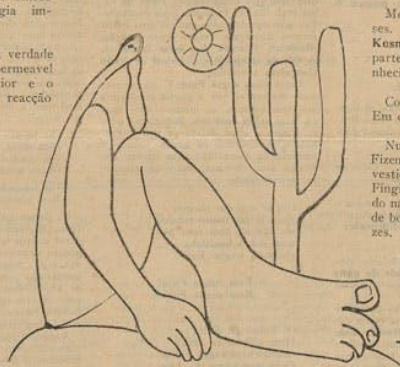
Nunca fomos cathechizados. Fizemos foi Carnaval. O indio vestido de senador do Imperio. Fingindo de Pitt. Ou figurando nas operas de Alencar cheio de bons sentimentos portuguezes.

Já tinhamos o comunismo. Já tinhamos a lingua surrealista. A idade de ouro. Catiú Catiú. Imara Notia. Notia Imara. Ipeju.

A magia e a vida. Tinhamos a relação e a distribuição dos bens phisicos, dos bens moraes, dos bens dignerios. E sabiamos transpor o mysterio e a morte com o auxilio de algumas formas grammaticaes.

Perguntei a um homem o que era o Direito. Elle me respondeu que era a garantia do exercicio da possibilidade. Esse homem chamava-se Galli Mathias. Comi-o.

Só não ha determinismo - onde ha mysterio. Mas que temos nós com isso?



Desenho de Tarsila 1928 - De um quadro que figurará na sua próxima exposição de Junho na galeria Perrier, em Paris.

Contra o Padre Vieira. Autor do nosso primeiro emprestimo, para ganhar commissão. O rei analphabeto dissera-lhe: ponha isso no papel mas sem muita labia. Fez-se o emprestimo. Gravou-se o assucar brasileiro. Vieira deixou o dinheiro em Portugal e nos trouxe a labia.

O espirito recusa-se a conceber o espirito sem corpo. O antropomorfismo. Necessidade da vaccina antropofagica. Para o equilibrio contra as religiões de meridiano. E as inquisições exteriores.

Continua na Pagina 7

Figure 1. Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropófago," *Revista de Antropofagia* 1, no. 1 (May 1928). Featuring an illustration by Tarsila do Amaral. Image courtesy of Biblioteca Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros da Universidade de São Paulo.

The same cannibalistic figure features in Amaral's 1929 painting *Antropofagia* (Cannibalism) (Figure 2). In this painting, Amaral's cannibal is joined by another figure with a similarly small head and exaggerated body, with a large breast hanging over the other figure's leg; in an act of painterly cannibalism, the breast "devours" the other figure in terms of pictorial space.



Figure 2. Tarsila do Amaral, *Antropofagia*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 126 × 142 cm, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Image courtesy of Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

The figure with the large breast in *Antropofagia* recalls Amaral's earlier painting—and one of the most recognizable works of Brazilian modernism—*A negra* (Black Woman, 1923) (Figure 3). The painting features a Black woman—described by Amaral as “very fat”—on a geometric background. Her features are exaggerated: her lips, in the words of Amaral, are “huge, pendulous,” and her breasts are heavy, one draped lengthily over her arm crossed in front of her, the other, in an act of fragmentation, hidden from view.² In the article “Suspended Munition: Mereology, Morphology, and the Mammary Biopolitics of Transmission in Simone Leigh’s *Trophallaxis*,” Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, quoting Jennifer L. Morgan, writes that, in enslavement,

the [Black] breast took on mythic proportions: “European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women’s breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism.” African females’ breasts were depicted as exaggeratingly *pendulous, even as bestial additional limbs*.³

Amaral, the child of wealthy Brazilian plantation owners, cited the enslaved women on her family’s plantation (to which she referred lovingly as “the farm”) as inspiration for her figures. She said in an interview in 1972, “I remember having met one of those old slaves that lived on our farm—when I was just a girl of five or six, you know?—and she had drooping lips and enormous breasts because, as I later learned, at the time slaves would tie stones to their breasts to elongate them and throw them back to feed a child tied to their backs.”⁴ It is questionable whether this practice actually occurred or if it was a legend meant to emphasize white belief in supernatural Black bodies.⁵ However, the veracity of this statement is not what matters to me. Rather, what makes this statement of import is that Amaral believed it, and in her belief found this story *charming* rather than horrifying, an oddity to be remembered with fondness and related to French painters like Fernand Léger rather than the embodied nightmare it would have been—to attach heavy stones to one’s breast to the end of making one’s duties under enslavement more efficient, so that one could breastfeed a child even when attending to other responsibilities. The horror only amplifies when one considers the prevalence of the enslaved *mãe preta*, or wet nurse, in Brazil—the Black woman forced to breastfeed her enslaver’s children even at risk of the malnourishment of her own children.



Figure 3. Tarsila do Amaral, *A negra*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 100 × 81.3 cm, Museo de Arte Contemporânea de Universidade de São Paulo. Image courtesy of Museo de Arte Contemporânea de Universidade de São Paulo.

In her delight in the fleshy sight of stretched breasts, of enslaved bodies manipulated like earthen clay, of the “very fat black wom[e]n” that inspired *A negra*—and who perhaps even nursed her—Amaral exposes herself to be cannibalistic in ways beyond even the titular cannibalism of “Manifesto *Antropófago*.” As nexuses of the aftermath of slavery in Brazil, the practice of forced

wet nursing, and the cannibalism of modernity, *A negra* and *Antropofagia* serve as a starting point to examine the *mãe preta* as she was ingested both by her enslavers and by history.

In his book *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture*, Vincent Woodard lays out the history of white cannibalism in the Atlantic. Long dismissed by scholars as superstition, imagination, exaggeration, or metaphor, reports of and anxieties about white cannibals by enslaved Africans are taken by Woodard as truth—or, at the very least, as revealing of truth. He writes, “Such beliefs represented the captured African’s first articulations of an intersection between themselves (their bodies, erotic life force, labor capacity, and exoticization) and the European’s hunger for new land, physical and psychic contact with foreign others, and a perfect state of global dominion.”⁶ Among the examples he gives of white cannibalism in US slave culture are: an enslaver who “after methodically butchering and cooking a male slave over a roiling open fire... reported to his wife ‘that he had never enjoyed himself so well at a ball as he had enjoyed himself that evening’”; an enslaver who would “rather whip a negro than sit down to the best dinner”; and the act of “seasoning” enslaved persons through torture and, at times, the application of actual spices and cooking materials to their flesh.⁷

Though Andrade reports the precedent for his cannibal as the stereotype of the Indigenous and/or African cannibal, this context cannot be ignored when considering the anthropophagous force of Andrade, Amaral, and their contemporaries. Indeed, returning to Nunes’s question, one must ask to what extent Andrade and Amaral *could* appropriate or reclaim the stereotype of Indigenous and African cannibalism, or if to even do so is yet more evidence of white ingestion of the histories that colonialism has erased. Perhaps important in answering this question is a reconfiguring of the cannibal modernists as mimicking the behavior not of the stereotype of the Black or Indigenous cannibal but of the historical white cannibal, thus appropriating not the *actions* of the premodern Black/Indigenous body but the *flesh* of that body itself.

In thinking of flesh, we can look to Hortense Spillers in her distinction established in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” between the “body” (capable of labor) and the “flesh” (capable of being consumed)—a distinction which is, as she writes,

the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh” ... Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies... we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.⁸

Thus, while, as a physical act, breastfeeding has often been talked about in terms of labor—both productive and reproductive—I feel that this framework falls flat when thinking about forced wet nursing in enslavement and instead posit thinking of it as a kind of being consumed.⁹ In thinking in terms of white cannibalism, Woodard also employs this framework, moving beyond discourses of exploitation for economic means and into considerations of the enslaved body as site and fodder for the expression of the perverse “demands, hungers, and insatiable needs” of white colonizers and enslavers. This leads him to his guiding question, which I also consider: “How does it feel to be an energy source and foodstuff, to be consumed on the levels of body,

sex, psyche, and soul?”¹⁰ The affective dimension of this question is crucial, and it importantly keeps us from making the mistake of harboring sentimentality or romanticism when thinking of the *mãe preta*.

The scholarship on wet nursing in Brazil, particularly on its visual legacy, is sparse; however, Kimberly Cleveland’s *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation: Artistic Renderings of Wet Nurses in Brazil* (2019) offers a rare example of a full-length book on the subject. Though an excellent work of scholarship, the title of this work itself exposes an inappropriate sentimentality: How can one speak of “nourishment” when speaking of cannibalism? Or when considering the “insatiable needs” of the enslaver? Cleveland’s sentimentality recalls thinkers like Gilberto Freyre, the twentieth-century Brazilian sociologist whose influential work *Casa-Grande y Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves)* introduced the concept of racial democracy, an imagined post-racial utopia achieved through the miscegenation of Indigenous, Black, and white peoples in Brazil. In this familial organizing of the country, Freyre proffered the *mãe preta* as the nation’s mother, having held both Black and white children at her breast. On the subject of the white Brazilian child nursed by a *mãe preta*, Freyre writes in *Casa Grande y Senzala* that “through the caresses bestowed upon him by the *mucama*, there was revealed to him a human kindness greater, perhaps, than that of which whites were capable.”¹¹ There is a lip service paid here to the *mãe preta*, a fantasized overemphasizing of her generous and caring nature, she who so graciously gave her milk to her enslaver’s young, that reveals an overcorrection on the behalf of the author. However, as Nunes writes in *Cannibal Democracy*,

It makes all the difference to the notion of mixture who is eating whom and that miscegenation has been seen historically as a (hierarchical) process of whitening. People of African descent are thus understood to disappear into the mixture, so that actually existing Blacks occupy the condition of remainders. Even into the present, Blacks are submitted to a kind of official disappearance in Brazilian democracy and are required on the level of representation, as exemplified by the census, to leave their blackness behind as a remainder.¹²

Further, at the same time that he romanticizes the generosity of the nation’s “Black mother,” Freyre cites those “who have hinted at the possibility that the inclination to colored women to be observed in the son of the family in slave-holding countries is a development out of the intimate relations of the white child with its Negro wet-nurse.”¹³ Freyre’s euphemistic language belies a reality of systemic and systematic rape: the *mãe preta* is ingested but is not incorporated into an image of Brazil—either of the modern (Andrade) or democratic (Freyre) fiction. Instead, she is forced to attend to a further hunger—the sexual appetite of the white child who becomes enslaver and thus exercises his power over the enslaved women in his terroristic reign. The family structure of racial democracy is thus complicated by the introduction of the incestual dynamic of the white enslaver who associates his predilection for raping and torturing enslaved women with his nursing at the breast of a *mãe preta*.¹⁴ How can we label such a seed as generosity, as nourishment? Marcus Wood describes this cycle more generally in *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America*, writing,

Black milk, slave mother’s milk, was stolen in vast, unknown, incalculable quantities as generation after generation of white infants ‘drank and drank’ from the nipples of the ‘Mammy’ and *Mãe Preta*. For four centuries this black milk

sustained the progeny of the slave power, *which is to say the blood of fertile black women, turned into milk, built up the bodies of the white infants who had been propagated by the slave power.* The little white bodies were born and bred in their turn to rule over the slave body with absolute power.¹⁵

To this complication in “nourishment” we may further add the dynamic of the *irmãos-de-leite* (brothers-by-milk) or *irmãos-de-peito* (brothers-by-breast)—or, in Freyre’s loving terms, “foster-brothers at the breast of their Negro nurse.”¹⁶ These terms invoke an image of two children, one Black and one white, feeding equally at the breast, one held tenderly in each arm of their shared mother. However, this image is again a fantasy; in actuality, the white charge was often prioritized over the enslaved woman’s Black biological baby. In the article “From *Mãe Preta* to *Mãe Desamparada*: Maternity and Public Health in Post-Abolition Bahia,” Okezi T. Otovo writes that “for wet-nurses, patrons held the power to decide whether or not they would have sufficient time to care for their own infants in addition to their charges—the symbolic fraternity between white and black children suckled at the same breast, the ‘*irmãos de peito*,’ notwithstanding.”¹⁷ The result of this power was a conflict displaced onto the Black mother—and thus in turn onto the Black child—of how to ensure proper nutrition for the *mãe preta*’s own baby.

In “Between Two Beneditos: Enslaved Wet-Nurses amid Slavery’s Decline in Southeast Brazil,” Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado tells the story of one wet nurse whose conflict between her own child and her white charge played out in court. In 1886, Ambrosina, an enslaved woman in Paraíba Valley in southeast Brazil, was accused of murdering her white charge, two-month-old Benedito (who shared a name with her own son) after his asphyxiation. Though the stakes of the case make clear that the *mãe preta*’s survival was entangled in her charge’s—meaning that a wet nurse would hardly dare harm a white child in her care—Ambrosina still had to appeal to a fantasy of generosity and care.¹⁸ In the court proceedings, she “said that she so esteemed the boy that her own son only breastfed from her the respondent at nighttime nursing from a bottle during the day, so that there would not lack breast milk for the child.” Machado thus rightly asks: “What was occurring with black Benedito, kept on a bottle? Was his milk being boiled? If not, we may assume that little black Benedito suffered from recurrent indigestion, diarrhea, and dehydration, problems that can be fatal for a babe in arms... Beyond the fact that he was nursing, nothing was recorded regarding his physical condition, if he was healthy or not, if he cried out of hunger and lack of care.”¹⁹

In this way, the Black child was also cannibalized in the act of wet nursing. As Woodard notes, starvation exists also on the spectrum of consumption, as the body begins to consume itself from the inside out: “Though not necessarily made to consume his or her own broiled flesh, the emaciated slave still embodied a condition of daily and incremental self-consumption.”²⁰ Despite the stereotype of the African cannibal that Andrade and Amaral drew upon, the greatest anthropophagy present in enslaved Brazilians was an auto-anthropophagy, as the body turned inward to feed upon its own reserves, fat, and muscle. These cells, however, were ultimately consumed by the enslaver; as Woodard continues, “In commercial terms, the slave’s emaciated body translated into the blood and flesh currencies of social stature, increased wealth, and spiritual dominion for the master. Quite literally, the master held within his hands the powers of life and death.”²¹

Despite the enslaver's alchemical ability to translate blood and flesh into currency, it was the Black body that was assigned preternatural power. Machado cites that the ignoring of the Black child went hand-in-hand with a belief that the child was not being harmed due to an assignment of superhuman qualities to the Black body, a hallmark of enslavement and its aftermaths in the Atlantic. Beginning with the mother, despite being "understood as having been marked by innumerable intrinsic more and physical defects," writes Machado, Black wet nurses "nevertheless were thought to produce abundant amounts of nutritious milk, because the very blackness that indicated the foregoing failings was also understood as evidence of their 'sanguinary' type and overall robustness." She further cites an 1890 children's book, *Mammy's Baby*, in which a white child, left alone for just a moment, cries in complete bewilderment. The very next stanza depicts a black child who, left completely alone amid tables and chairs, laughs amusedly and 'never needs caring for.'"²² Thus, the Black child also experienced what Woodard describes as "mother hunger—the sense of being orphaned from the nation, the desire for intimate belonging," which left the child "vulnerable (through the disruption of male/female conjugal unions and familial support systems) to processes of social consumption," even if they were safe from literal physical consumption by their white "brother."²³ Spillers describes this vulnerability as a kind of "kinlessness," writing,

The enslaved person as property identifies the most familiar element of a most startling proposition. But to overlap kinlessness on the requirements of property might enlarge our view of the conditions of enslavement... Certainly if "kinship" were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then "belong" to a mother and a father. In the system that Douglass articulates, genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties.²⁴

In turn, this "kinlessness" was used as evidence for separating Black mother and child, both during slavery and following abolition.²⁵ In the essay "Bad Mothers, Labouring Children: Emancipation, Tutelage and Motherhood in São Paulo in the Last Decades of the Nineteenth Century," Marília Bueno de Araujo Ariza details the practice of service provision contracts used by enslavers to claim legal authority over formerly enslaved children in immediately post-abolition Brazil. During this time, the Orphans' Court in São Paulo oversaw many cases brought forth by enslavers to obtain legal guardianship over the children of the women they formerly enslaved by citing the interest of the children. The children, if the court decided in the favor of the plaintiff (as if often did), became laborers under the guise of care, working only for room, board—in other words, as Ariza notes, the "basic provisions to keep workers working"—a promised salary to be received upon a certain age (that was often never paid), and education—though "in the vast majority of cases, [this] meant educating youngsters in domestic skills, or, for the few most fortunate, in crafts and commercial activities with a view to the formation of a disciplined labor reserve."²⁶ The cannibalism of wet nursing contributes here to the continued dehumanization and marginalization of the Black child even following abolition, as the very conditions that wet nursing—and enslavement at large—created were used as justification to continue the separation of mother and child as the latter was subsumed into a workforce, both remaining "an energy source and foodstuff... consumed on the levels of body, sex, psyche, and soul."²⁷

Indeed, to highlight the difference between the *mãe preta*'s wet nursing and breastfeeding by a white woman, even of a child not her own, a rare reported case of race-reversed wet nursing served as evidence for the plaintiff in the case between Tristão Siqueira and the formerly enslaved Theresa; according to Siqueira, his wife "deeply cherished the children, so much (and by that he meant so much more than Theresa) that *she had even breastfed them herself*."²⁸ Wet nursing in this instance offered Senhora Siqueira a legal claim to the child that would never be offered to the *mãe preta*; the milk of the latter, even if named as generosity, was taken forcefully through believed right, and she was not even granted familial relation to her biological children, either in enslavement or post-abolition. In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe writes that in "the ways that lines of filiation and kinship ran for the enslaved, for mammy, not for mother... *neither blood nor milk ensured familiarity*."²⁹ As Otovo writes, this played out in Black and brown mothers in post-abolition Bahia being "at times asked to provide breast milk for the local human milk dispensary in return for welfare support," but, in addition, even breastfeeding one's own children was seen as "providing a service to the nation." In this view, the "children belonged as much to the state as to their own mothers because of the future utility of their labor for industry, agriculture, and warfare... By providing breast milk for the dispensary or nursing their own little future laborers, black and brown women's bodies had a public utility that was not ascribed to white women due to both color and class."³⁰ Even after the abolition of enslavement in Brazil, the Black child was viewed not as a future citizen or future subject, but as a future worker—indeed, as always already a worker, ready to have their flesh transformed into economy for the nation. This adds the breast—and the milk it contains—to the linkage Christina Sharpe finds among

the Middle Passage, the cofle, and, I add to the argument, the birth canal[;] we can see how each has functioned separately and collectively over time to dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold and the prison, and turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition; their non/status, their non/being-ness.³¹

In this framework, the breast becomes a factory, as well, producing not only the product of breast milk but moreover the product of laborers, the cells in milk incorporated into Black bodies then transformed into "blood and flesh currencies" for the nation, with Black subjecthood still, even post-Emancipation, relegated to the margins.

One of the most famous images of Brazilian post-Emancipation *branqueamento*, the official national policy of collective whitening,³² is Modesto Brocos's 1895 painting, *A Redenção de Cam* (Ham's Redemption). In this painting, a dark-skinned Black grandmother sends her praise and thanks into the heavens for the birth of a white child. The difference in color between grandmother and baby is stark, with the child even whiter than his white father. The grandmother, shoeless, is marked as a slave; her grandson, born in the immediate wake of abolition, bears both the legal and phenotypical markings of "freedom." Though the presence of the daughter/mother implies a narrative of kinship, to remove her from the scene would leave the viewer with two figures almost impossible to visually integrate. The grandchild bears no kinship resemblance to his grandmother; together, they read more as a *mãe preta* and white charge than as biological family. With the turning of the enslaved nurse into the *mãe preta*, the universal

Black mother of a nation, she was, in actuality, robbed of her actual kinship ties—whether literally through the forced abandonment of her own child, symbolically through the kinlessness with which Spillers identifies the slave is infused, or visually through the racialized differentiation between the idealized Black foremother and the idealized white progeny. The foregrounding of the illusion of kinship as contained in the title of *mãe preta* serves to camouflage the multivalent breaking of kinship ties behind the scenes—that the Black “mother” becomes mother in name only, as her flesh is consumed by her white charge and her reality consumed by the annals of a history constructed in hindsight, as her progeny begins to bear no resemblance to her. Having been turned in life from body to flesh, she is turned in history into a symbol.

This symbol was taken up by the city of São Paulo in one of their most well-known pieces of public art, Júlio Guerra’s *Monumento Mãe Preta* (1955) in Largo do Paissandu (Figure 4). The monument came after a decades-long campaign to honor the *mãe preta*, beginning in 1926 after Cândido de Campos, a white editor of one of Rio’s newspapers, declared that Brazil should “glorify the black race” using the wet nurse as a symbol.³³ São Paulo’s newspapers joined this call only two years later, though this time by the Black press. The campaign lost steam, however, until the early 1950s, when the 220 Club in São Paulo strategized a push for a monument to the *mãe preta* coinciding with the upcoming IV Centenary of the city that would run from January 1954 to January 1955; the monument was officially unveiled on January 23, 1955, as part of the Centenary’s official closing events.³⁴ Guerra’s monument is notably modernist. His *mãe preta* is a colossus; her back is broad, her hands, feet, and breasts almost swollen in their mass. Her face is flattened, her hair helmet-like in its structure; her eyes are set far apart around a broad nose, and her lips are large. In contrast, her white charge is delicate, with a fully rounded head, even-set eyes, sculpted cheekbones, and well-modeled hair. Her features are a caricature; his, however, are reminiscent of a Renaissance baby Christ, his tiny body dwarfed in her hands as he claws at her breast. Cast in the same material, Guerra, a white sculptor, relied on exaggerated features to mark racial difference.



Figure 4. Júlio Guerra, *Monumento Mãe Preta*, 1955. Bronze and granite, 2.2 m × 2.6 m × 1.6 m, São Paulo. With details comparing the face of the *mãe preta* to that of her charge. Images courtesy of José Jorge Peralta and Fabio Panico.

Though the modeling of the *mãe preta* can be read as a modernist aesthetic, the classical features of the white baby challenge this interpretation. And it is this depiction, and the violences of modernism that it exposed, that Black critics took issue with. José Correia Leite, a Black militant who had been active in the campaign in the 1920s, said in 1992,

To make [the monument] they chose a modernist sculptor who made that which is there. Even today I am against it. If it were a white woman it wouldn't be permitted for an artist to create a deformed figure like that... Why do an enormous black woman, when everybody knows that a black woman like that wouldn't enter into the big house to nurse the owner's child with that big foot? ... They chose their housemaids carefully. They needed to be very pretty, very clean, very correct. Why do an enormous black woman like that?³⁵

Why, indeed? Considering the difference between the styles used to portray the wet nurse and her charge, as well as Correia Leite's observation that a "black woman like that wouldn't enter into the big house," Guerra's decision to model the *mãe preta* as he did seems to go beyond only a modernist motivation.³⁶ Instead, there is a visual dissonance here that hearkens back to *A Redenção de Cam*—the viewer is left with the impression that for this *mãe preta*, the title of "Black mother" is *only* a title, as this woman could *never* beget the child she holds. The distinction for Guerra seems to be clear: one is human, the other only fleshy clay.

I would like to proffer another lineage for this statue: with her "pendulous lips" and "heavy breasts," the resemblance to *A negra*—itself the most famous example of Brazilian modernism—is striking, and it brings the painting's own history with the breastfeeding *mãe pretas* of Amaral's childhood into the fore. In November 1928, just a few months after the publishing of the "Manifesto Antropófago," the *Revista de Antropofagia* opened its seventh issue with an opinion by Antonio de Alcantara Machado decrying the campaign for a monument to the *mãe preta*. To erect one, he wrote, would set a precedent for a proliferation of others, "one for each race. Then one for each nationality. The tribute would cause a competition of the races, of origins, even types of milk. *Ultimately, the makers of condensed milk would also demand a statue and rightly so.*"³⁷ It's a telling statement that goes beyond only cautioning against the elevation of one race over the other. Rather, it becomes clear that Machado—and by extension the *Revista de Antropofagia*—view the wet nurse in the same vein as condensed milk: readymade foodstuff ripe for the taking, disembodied flesh to be consumed.

GRACE SPARAPANI is a writer, researcher, and editor based in Austin and Berlin. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, where she specializes in contemporary art with a focus on trauma, video, and performance. She serves on the editorial board of the *Avery Review*, and her writing can be found in *Ed, Sofa Magazine*, and *frieze*, among others.

¹ Leslie Bary, “Oswald de Andrade’s ‘Cannibalist Manifesto,’” *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (July–December 1991): 36.

² Tarsila do Amaral, “Saudades, Caipirinha,” *Folha de São Paulo*, February 16, 1975, quoted in Maria Castro, “Both Paulista and Parisian: Racial Thinking in *A negra*,” *Tarsila Popular*, ed. Adriano Pedrosa (São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo, 2019), 59; and Tarsila do Amaral, “Pintura Pau-Brasil e Antropofagia,” *RASM—Revista anual do Salão de Maio* 1 (1939): n.p., quoted in Stephanie D’Alessandro, “*A negra*, *Abaporu*, and Tarsila’s Anthropophagy,” in *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2017), 38.

³ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Suspended Munition: Mereology, Morphology, and the Mammary Biopolitics of Transmission in Simone Leigh’s *Trophallaxis*,” *e-flux* no. 105 (December 2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/105/305272/suspended-munition-mereology-morphology-and-the-mammary-biopolitics-of-transmission-in-simone-leigh-s-trophallaxis>; quoting Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 54 (1997): 191. Emphasis added. Jackson further notes that “the comparative anatomization of the breast played a crucial role in determining and differentiating both the matter of species and the matter of sex—‘hemispherical’ and firm breasts were thought to be racial characteristics of European and Asian women. The idealization of the ‘hemispherical’ breast is effectively a version of mapping that implied that the earth and its inhabitants could be divided into two halves and that an essential hierarchical racial division could conveniently be read in the perception and comparison of breast shape. The African female’s purported characteristic pendulous breasts provided evidence that the indeterminate and contested (yet inferior) ontology of the blackfemale with respect to the discourses of species and sex/gender issued from nature itself.” Note that Jackson uses the neologism *blackfemale* to connote the specific “un/genderedness” of Black women with regard to the default-white category of “female” or “women.” She writes: “Assigning a new value to ‘the female’ and elevating women’s reproduction (understood as European and elite) was purchased at the price of transferring and deepening teratological associations of ‘the female’ with the ‘African female,’ which ultimately racially calcified into the singularity I term *blackfemale*.”

⁴ Tarsila Do Amaral, “Entrevista: Tarsila do Amaral,” *Veja*, February 23, 1972, 3, quoted in Castro, “Both Paulista and Parisian,” 62.

⁵ Maria Castro, in a catalogue essay for the exhibition *Tarsila Popular*, cites accounts and engravings by white settlers as evidence for this practice, but ultimately concludes that “while there are many references to enslaved women breastfeeding children tied to their back in both literature by European travelers and ethnographers, as well as in the visual arts, research on the nursing customs of enslaved women is ongoing, and scholars are still determining whether the practice indeed took place. To date, there is little evidence that women tied stones to their nipples to elongate their breasts, as Tarsila described.” See Castro, “Both Paulista and Parisian,” fn 49.

⁶ Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, ed. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, *Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 17.

⁷ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 34, 62.

⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.

⁹ For the framing of breastfeeding as labor, see, for example, Robyn Lee, “Breastfeeding Bodies: Intimacies at Work,” in “Bodies and Intimate Relations,” ed. Nanna Mik-Meyer, Anne Roelsgaard Obling, and Carol Wolkowitz, special issue, *Gender, Work and Organization* 25, no. 1 (January 2018): 77–90; Stephanie Jones-Rogers, “[S]he could ... spare one ample breast for the profit of her owner’: White Mothers and Enslaved Wet Nurses’ Invisible Labor in American Slave Markets,” in “Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies,” ed. Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, Diana Paton, and Emily West, special issue, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 38, no. 2 (2017): 337–355; and Virginia Thorley, “A Mother, Yet Not ‘Mother’: The Occupation of Wet-Nursing,” *Journal of Family Studies* 21, no. 3 (2015): 305–323. For more on how labor, generally, may fail as an analytic for considering enslavement and its aftermaths, see Shona N. Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Tiffany Lethabo King, “Labor’s Aphasia: Toward Antiblackness as Constitutive to Settler Colonialism,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (blog), June 10, 2014, <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/labors-aphasia-toward-antiblackness-as-constitutive-to-settler-colonialism>; and King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 14.

¹¹ Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (1933), translated by Samuel Putnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 372.

¹² Nunes, *Cannibal Democracy*, 23.

¹³ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 279.

¹⁴ As Kara Walker puts it, “The big black mammy is the object of Oedipal longing within the plantation family romance... Sucked and fucked she is the ultimate ‘earth-mother’ wholly submissive yet defiant.” See Kara Walker, “The Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South Is the Embodiment of History,” newsletter accompanying the exhibition *Kara Walker* at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, January 12–February 23, 1997

¹⁵ Marcus Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 399.

¹⁷ Otovo, Okezi T. “From *Mãe Preta* to *Mãe Desamparada*: Maternity and Public Health in Post-Abolition Bahia.” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 48, no. 2 (2011): 170.

¹⁸ In this regard, I am reminded of Dana’s dilemma in protecting Rufus, her ancestor by way of his raping the enslaved Alice, in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. Despite her hatred for his actions, her survival is inextricable from his, and as a result, her flesh and kinship ties get continually cannibalized by his demands, as manifesting both in his direct treatment of her and in the time travel that facilitates their meeting: “Something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving. Something ... paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped. I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red, impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed.” See Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 260–261.

¹⁹ Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, “Between Two Bénédictos: Enslaved Wet-Nurses amid Slavery’s Decline in Southeast Brazil,” in “Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies,” ed. Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, Diana Paton, and Emily West, special issue, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 38, no. 2 (2017): 330. Machado, “Between Two Bénédictos,” 330.

²⁰ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 47.

²¹ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 47.

²² See Machado, “Between Two Bénédictos,” 321. Emily West and R.J. Knight also note that “beliefs in black women’s easy breast-feeding and childbirth laid the foundations for subsequent ideas about black African women’s superior ability to perform hard manual labor.” See Emily West and R.J. Knight, “Mothers’ Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (February 2017): 40.

²³ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 120, 130.

²⁴ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 74–75.

²⁵ “Separating mothers from their own infants to wet-nurse white babies made it easier subsequently for white slaveholders to rationalize why they parted mothers and infants, because babies were no longer reliant on their own mothers’ milk.” See West and Knight, “Mothers’ Milk,” 53.

²⁶ Marília Bueno de Araujo Ariza, “Bad Mothers, Labouring Children: Emancipation, Tutelage and Motherhood in São Paulo in the Last Decades of the Nineteenth Century,” in “Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies,” ed. Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, Diana Paton, and Emily West, special issue, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 38, no. 2 (2017): 410.

²⁷ Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*, 14.

²⁸ Ariza, “Bad Mothers, Labouring Children,” 414. Emphasis added.

²⁹ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2009), 165.

³⁰ Otovo, “From *Mãe Preta* to *Mãe Desamparada*,” 185.

³¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 74.

³² Following the abolition of slavery, Brazil adopted a policy of *branqueamento*, or racial whitening, in the 19th and 20th centuries. Under this policy, it was believed that interracial marriage would eventually eliminate Black bloodlines, as each successive generation was whitened. The government used the Directoria Geral de Estatística to officially measure the “success” of whitening in Brazil during this time.

³³ Kimberly Cleveland, *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation: Artistic Renderings of Wet Nurses in Brazil, Slavery: Past and Present* (New York: Cambria, 2019), 126.

³⁴ For a more detailed history of the campaign for a monument to the *mãe preta* and the discourse and politics surrounding its erection, see Cleveland, *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation*, 126–133 and 167–187.

³⁵ José Correia Leite and Cuti, *E disse o velho militante Jose Correia Leite* (São Paulo: Secretaria Municipal de Cultura, 1992), 99. Quoted in Cleveland, *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation*, 174. Similarly, in 1979, the Black militant Hamilton Cardoso called the monument's *mãe preta* a “fat old woman with enormous breasts, resembling a dairy cow.” See Cleveland, *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation*, 175.

³⁶ Of course, the primitivist influences on European modernisms are especially prescient here.

³⁷ Antonio de Alcantara Machado, “Concurso de lactentes,” *Revista de Antropofagia* 1, no. 7 (November 1928): 1. Quoted in Cleveland, *Black Women Slaves Who Nourished a Nation*, 131. Emphasis added.