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Triangulating the “Ethnic Trinity”
or what’s Primitivism got to do with it?

In 1978 Edward Said published *Orientalism*. Nearly twenty years later he wrote “‘Orientalism’, an Afterword” to address some of the hostility, criticism, and controversy of the original work, as well as to express the hope (and need) for future research. It is thus in a similar spirit that I propose to re-think and possibly re-situate the paintings of Brazilian artist Anita Malfatti – considered to be “the first Brazilian woman artist of the twentieth century” -- against a backdrop of early twentieth-century modernism and the discourse of the primitive, into which, in Malfatti’s case, the socio-cultural politics of Brazil need to be incorporated.  

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That Malfatti is considered “the first Brazilian woman artist” is attested to in a biographic entry for the 1995 Milwaukee Art Museum exhibition catalogue, *Latin American Women Artists = Artistes Latinoamericanas: 1915-1995*. It should be noted, however, that while Malfatti is included in this exhibition catalogue as well as in several others, a comprehensive biography has yet to be written. She is also included in a number of articles but, again, she more often than not is not the focus of the article but rather is part of a laundry list of names. For example, in an article for *Domus* in March 2001, Laura Bossi reviewed “Quando o Brasil era Moderno, 1905-1955,” an exhibition that explored the development of modernism in Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century. In her review, Bossi uses the fact that Malfatti, while presenting herself as a “modern painter,” was ignored by critics and yet ushered in a new era. The provocative information is distributed in two introductory sentences, which ultimately serves as the jumping off point for the rest of the article. Another, perhaps more telling, example is Aracy Amaral’s 1976 article for *Art and Artists*, entitled “The Modernist Period.” In a few short pages, Amaral does a good job of situating “the Brazilian Modernist movement of the Twenties” and “the visual aspects of the fine arts” (p. 32), including the significance of “the visual information brought by the painter Anita Malfatti from Germany and New York,” but the thrust of her article is centered on three others – Oswald de Andrade, Vicente Rego Monteiro, and Tarsila do Amaral – who frequented artistic circles in Paris with Leger, Brancusi, Eric Satie, and Jean Cocteau. It is the early Brazilian modernist, Tarsila do Amaral, who is perhaps the most known and has had her artistic career better documented. She was also not a participant of the *Semana de Arte*
When first I encountered Malfatti, it was in the context of writing a graduate thesis in art history on the development of modernism in Brazil. That was over ten years ago, and at the time, little did I know I was just barely scratching the surface in terms of addressing keys issues of race, place, and nation; of representation and the “other”; of primitivism and the primitive. Malfatti was and remains for me what Brazilian critic Katia Canton termed “a quixotic figure” whose “voracious assimilation of international artistic idioms” earned her the moniker of “initiator” of Brazil’s modernist movement.² Malfatti has also been referred to as the “fuse for the explosion into Modernism.”³ Yet, was it because she was so scathingly attacked in a review of her one-woman exhibition in 1917 that she “later abandoned the avant-garde” and “developed a more restrained esthetic”?⁴ Was she really a “Modernist martyr”?⁵

Anita Malfatti was one of a group of young artists actively seeking to transform Brazilian art. As such, these early modernists came from a prosperous and growing urban middle-class coming into its own after World War I. They deliberately sought to move away from the conservative art academies steeped in European tradition and began to search for cultural self-definition in terms of their Indian and African roots. Included in this search was the desire to incorporate the uniqueness of their native land and their country’s reaction to the cultural influences from the United States and Europe. The

⁴ Canton, 189.
modernists hoped the resulting synthesis would be the creation of a national contemporary Brazilian art that was truly expressive of their country and their time.

This desire eventually led to the Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern Art Week) – a visual arts exhibition and series of dance spectacles, poetry readings, lectures, and concerts by avant-garde writers, visual artists, and composers from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro that was held in São Paulo between February 13-17 of 1922. This public demonstration, and the artistic manifestos to come out of it, was to signify a “cut with the past, a violent break with tradition unparalleled in Brazilian history.” Indeed, it was the “coming out” event that launched Brazilian modernismo – a movement that incorporated two modernist imperatives from European avant-garde movements of the time: one, a Futurist commitment to formal innovation and experimentation, engagement with technology, and the representation of the urban scene; and two, an evocation of the primitive, of the infusion of the African into the day-to-day experience and cultural practices of Brazilian people. The ensuing dialectical tension between modernity and primitivity was identified and elucidated by Brazilian literary critic, Alfredo Bosi, for whom

International vanguardism, urbanity, and industrialization were foregrounded in the futurist tendency … [while a] renewed interest in the colonial experience, myths of national foundation, linguistic vernaculars, and the cultural practices of the povo (people or masses), especially Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples, oriented primitivist concerns. The modernists appropriated cultural materials of Brazil’s nonwhite population in order to advance the project of cultural nationalism.7

6 Nist, 3.
7 Christopher Dunn, Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture (Chapel Hill and London, 2001), 14.
But can one talk about modernity and primitivity without at least addressing the idea of the “primitive” and “primitivism”? Both have been constructed as something at once exotic and reassuringly familiar and both are culturally loaded (because they are culturally-constructed) terms whose shifted (and shifting) meanings are keys to understanding the representations of indigenous “others.” And, at least for the burgeoning avant-garde of the early twentieth century, the “primitive” art of non-Western cultures was thought to offer “more authentic kinds of experience than those available through the conventions of Western representation admired by Europe’s art-loving bourgeoisie.”

For the Brazilian modernists, the exposure to modernism, and their subsequent involvement therein, required that they break with the traditions of their past and their training. The cubism of Picasso and Braque may have been viewed as radical yet, at the same time, it was in line with the modern “tradition” of innovation, of invention and application of new techniques, begun by the Impressionists in France in the 1860s. There was no parallel for an avant-garde tradition in the art of Latin America, and the artistic developments taking place in Europe – Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dada, Constructivism – came to Brazil through the adaptation by many of the returning artists who had gone to study abroad, such as Malfatti, who traveled to Germany in 1910 and onto the United States in 1914. It became the overriding goal of the Brazilian modernists to realize a modern Brazilian artistic intelligence. To accomplish this, artists had two

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9 Brazilian art historian, Aracy Amaral, reminds us “it was only after 1923 that the influence of Cubism was to be found in Brazilian art”. See A. Amaral, “The Modernist Period,” *Art & Artists* 11 (April 1976), 33.
principal means: style and iconography. To employ the traditional and rigidly imposed ideas of the art academies was to affirm the past rather than the present, and was, therefore, decidedly unmodern. Moreover, the choice of subject matter must somehow indicate something Brazilian or at least Latin American. Consequently, much of the art produced by these artists in their efforts to define Brazilian modernism and declare themselves independent of Europe did, in fact, reveal a stylistic dependency on European modernism.

These artists did, by no means, live in an artistic or cultural void. Many had traveled to Europe and some even studied there. The stylistic definition of what was modern began in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and came to include, by about 1906, a decisive and intense involvement with the arts of non-European, non-literate cultures. These cultures, at the time of their impact on European modernists, had come under the colonial domination of Europe: for example, the French were in North Africa and they, as well as the Germans, were also in the South Pacific. Brazil, by contrast, was neither a non-literate culture nor still a colony of Portugal, and had, in fact, been independent for a century by the time the Semana took place. Furthermore, the definition of what was visually “Brazilian” had already been established by visiting European artists as early as the seventeenth century, to which the Brazilian modern artists added little conceptually.  

This visual specificity established earlier by Europeans was a part of the Brazilian modernists’ cultural past as well as their present reality.

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10 Dutch artists, Frans Post and Albert Eckhout, were in the northeastern part of Brazil around the same time and for the same reason: to visually chronicle the Dutch presence in Brazil from 1630 until the Portuguese reconquest in 1654. Also, in 1816, the Portuguese king John VI, living in Brazil since the Napoleonic invasions of Spain and Portugal in 1807-08, invited to Brazil a group of French artists, including Joaquim
The chronological range of styles appears to go from neo-Impressionism to cubism – many of which can be seen in Malfatti’s work, although even as late as 1929, Brazilian artists seemed to have made a deliberate decision to forego representational painting. For example, the arbitrary use of color characteristic of Paul Gauguin and later the French Fauves can be seen in her paintings. Indeed, Malfatti would have seen several works by Gauguin at the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne. These paintings could be considered models for her bold and subjective use of color and the choice of subjects depicted – including bowls of fruit and dark-skinned native women. Paint is freely applied, and a loose and spontaneous brushstroke is visible. As Malfatti developed her technique, she combined the angular distortion she had seen in Expressionist works in Berlin with the vivid colors formerly unique to the Fauves.

In the painting *Tropical* (1916) [fig. 1] we can see her stylistic experimentation and exploration of Brazilian identity. For Malfatti, the presumed exoticism inherent in a dark-skinned woman with fruit foreign to Europeans was the reality of Malfatti’s native environment, unlike Gauguin’s *Women of Tahiti* (1890s) [fig. 2]. Malfatti continued her exploration of Brazilian identity in *Indian* (1917) [fig. 3]. Here again is a non-white, non-European woman in a confrontational yet classical pose: weight seems evenly distributed, although there is a heaviness uncharacteristic of a “classical” nude. The position is neither active nor innovative. It is, in fact, particular to the very traditional Lebreton (previously the former head of the École des Beaux-Arts); architect Auguste-Henri-Victor Grandjean de Montigny; and painters Nicolas-Antoine Taunay and Jean-Baptiste Debret. The mission ultimately resulted in the foundation of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts – the second art academy to be founded in the New World. Artists like Post, Eckhout, and Debret very specifically rendered the native landscape and the people who populated it.
rendering of the nude, a tradition that has its roots in antiquity – for example, Praxiteles’ *Aphrodite of Knidos*, 350-340 BCE [fig. 4].

The paradox, then, is whether or not she is nude because one, it is part of the classical tradition or two, because the indigenous people of Brazil actually live (or lived) that way; and/or three, because nakedness is associated with the eroticism seen in primitivism – which, in turn, is another aspect of modernism. Furthermore, as if to hit home the point that this is not a European painting – whatever exactly that means – there is a giant water lily in the right middle ground, which is identified as a *Victoria Regia* (named after Queen Victoria of England) – a plant native to both Guiana and Brazil.

Interestingly, the idea for a *Semana de Arte Moderna* had been considered for at least two years previously, but to actually coordinate something for the year 1922 would coincide with the centennial of Brazilian Independence, thus equating Brazil’s *cultural* declaration of independence with the hundredth anniversary of its *political* independence.\(^\text{11}\) In retrospect, the *Semana* also had been foreshadowed by three separate events: the first was the exhibition of paintings by Lasar Segall, a young Lithuanian, held in 1913 in both São Paulo and Campinas, Brazil; and the second was an exhibition by Malfatti in São Paulo in 1917. The third event was the “discovery” in 1920 of a young Brazilian sculptor, Victor Brecheret, “a living fountain of creation, impressive in the coherence with which he joins to the eloquent use of symbols the healthy innocence of the primitive … a Brazilian Rodin … ‘the fruit of the mixture of races’.”\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{11}\) On September 7, 1822 Pedro I, son of the Portuguese king, John VI, established himself as emperor and Brazil became a constitutional monarchy. Monarchial rule ended on November 15, 1889.

\(^\text{12}\) Nist, 33-34. Nist recounts how in June of 1920, the poet Oswald de Andrade “wrote an article for the bimonthly journal *Papel e Tinta* (Paper and Ink), edited by himself [and the
Ethnically, Brazil is a mix of many – of indigenous Indians, Africans, and Europeans – and the diverse cultural mix that is Brazil needs to be considered if one is to have some sense of what it is to be Brazilian. In 1988 Ntongela Masilela remarked, “nearly half of [Brazil’s] population consists of black Brazilians,” while Jeffrey Lesser, writing in 1999, described a visit to a neighborhood in São Paulo that has been considered “ethnic” since at least the nineteenth century:

At the end of an escalator that only goes up, I have a vision of Brazil’s ethnic world. The escalator is in a nondescript building in São Paulo’s traditional immigrant neighborhood of Bom Retiro…. As I step off, there is a crowd negotiating their identities as Brazilians. In front of me is the little lanchonette serving “typical” Brazilian bar food like esfiha or kibe that might be recognized in the Middle East, or the suggestively named “Beirute” sandwich that would not. To the right is Malcha’s, a falafel shop, owned by a woman who left Yemen to

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13 According to a census count in 1914 (pre-World War I), there were 845,816 Italians, 293,916 Spaniards, 260,533 Portuguese, and 240,277 other nationalities then residing in the city of São Paulo. In fact, due to the high concentration of Italian immigrants in São Paulo alone, the city was often “referred to in the contemporary press as the ‘Milan of South America.’ ” See Stella Major Rego de Sá, “Tarsila/Pau-Brasil: Her Sources in the French Avant-Garde and the Significance of her work in the context of Brazilian Modernism” (Master’s thesis, University of Texas, 1984), 7.

14 Ntongela Masilela, “The Cultural Space of African Brazilians: A Tribute on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in Brazil” (paper presented at a Solidarity Meeting organized by Ulmoja Center, an African Students’ Cultural Organization of West Berlin, of which the author was a member, on May 13, 1988, at the Technical University of West Berlin, Germany). Additionally, in 1992 David Hellwig reported that “Brazil’s population today is so thoroughly mixed that it is difficult to determine racial derivation, a problem compounded by the desire of many people of African descent to define themselves as white. According to a 1987 household survey, 43 percent of Brazilians are black or of mixed race … Many scholars – and the small but growing community of Afro-Brazilian activists – view these figures as understated. Some assert that as many as 80 percent of Brazil’s 150 million citizens have some African ancestry.” See D. Hellwig, ed., African-American Reflections on Brazil’s Racial Paradise (Philadelphia, 1992), 9.
settle first in Israel and then in Brazil. Her menu reveals her clientele: it is written in Portuguese, Hebrew, and Korean.\textsuperscript{15}

Brazil is also home to a number of immigrants from Asia, particularly from Japan and, as noted by Lesser, Korea as well. Thus, for the early modernists, the melding of different ethnic groups was to become an exalted cornerstone in their call for “a Brazil for Brazilians … a blending of all heterogeneous races to create an original nation, unified and strong.”\textsuperscript{16} Still, given Brazil’s cultural heterogeneity, the visual arts at the beginning of the twentieth century were dominated by European aesthetics and subject matter. As Marguerite Harrison pointed out, “during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Brazilian art lacked context beyond the academic tradition that had been imported from France in the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{17} There were no art museums or cultural institutions to introduce Brazil to the avant-garde. There was not even a Fine Arts school in São Paulo.

Brazil did, however, continue the tradition of focusing intellectual activities within a literary or artistic salon – one of several nineteenth-century European practices incorporated into Brazilian elite culture. These salon gatherings often took place in a large room in one of the urban mansions of the country’s art collecting aristocracy. In São Paulo there were four main salons. An early favorite of the modernists was that of Paulo and Marinette Prado. Paulo Prado, a wealthy landowner and businessman, was also a writer, a bibliophile with an interest in Brazilian history, and a collector of modern art. He was also the principal underwriter of the \textit{Semana}. Additionally, there was the

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\item[16] Nist, 41.
\item[17] Harrison, 1.
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aristocratic salon led by Olivia Guedes Penteado, whom the modernists often called “Our Lady of Brazil” in recognition and appreciation of her unflagging support; and the “explicitly Modernist salon” of Mário de Andrade.\(^\text{18}\) Salon participants would have access to personal libraries and art collections. This is particularly significant because there were no modern art museums or galleries in Brazil until after World War II. Thus, by the early twentieth century, the salon tradition was well established in Brazil and it contributed greatly to the development of modernism.

Mário de Andrade was a poet, novelist, and critic of Indian, African, and Portuguese descent, and is best known for his novel, *Macunaíma: Um herói sem nenhum caráter* (*Macunaíma: A Hero without Character*), published in 1928, which introduced a Brazilian Indian, born in the Amazon forest, who speaks in the Brazilian idiom rather than in classical European Portuguese. The novel is a compilation of myths, songs, rituals, and texts taken from indigenous, African, Portuguese, and Brazilian sources. It is also a story where the title character spends most of the novel in search of a sacred amulet representing his cultural connection to his traditions that has fallen into the evil hands of a Peruvian rock collector in São Paulo. As such, it is an allegory for “Brazil’s own frustrated search for cultural autonomy at the time” and Macunaíma, as a symbol for Brazilian culture, “is not a coherent totality. He is an allegorical personage with no fixed racial or cultural identity. Macunaíma was born black to an Indian mother, but after bathing in a magic puddle he becomes white. Many elite intellectuals regarded racial and

cultural *branqueamento* (“whitening”) as a desirable and necessary process for modernizing Brazil.”

It is out of a different kind of “puddle” that the work of Malfatti emerges. She was not just a woman, a Brazilian woman, but she was also an artist, a modern artist, and one whose work should be situated within the broader range of international modernism rather than simply or solely Brazilian modernism. Born in 1889 in São Paulo, and therefore a first-generation Brazilian, Malfatti’s father was an Italian immigrant to Brazil, having fled Italy due to his republican sentiments, and her mother, born in the United States, was German, her family having left Germany in 1852 because of political views. Initially studying painting with her mother, in August 1910 Malfatti traveled to Berlin and enrolled in the School of Fine Arts where she studied with Bishoff Culm and Lovis Corinth, “whose urgent and emotive work excited her” – so much so that she “[worked] with him for the whole year of 1913.”

In 1912 Malfatti traveled to Cologne and visited the Sonderbund exhibition. Seeing the wide array of works from Impressionists to Cubists to Expressionists “legitimized [her] own modernist tendencies … [and] ‘gave her the conviction to follow her already modern course.’”

By 1914, and with the outbreak of war imminent, she decided to return to Brazil, stopping briefly in Paris. Once home, she painted a number of portraits, including one of her brother, and organized an exhibition of her own work in a department store in São Paulo. Although the public and

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19 Dunn, 21.
20 Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, *Anita Malfatti e seu Tempo* (São Paulo, 1996), 29. Malfatti later remarked that her 1914 exhibition was entirely composed of expressionist studies done in the atelier of Lovis Corinth, who, at one time, was the leader and later president of the Impressionist Berlin Secession. See Aracy Amaral, *Artes Plásticas na Semana de 22* (São Paulo, 1970), 75.
21 Harrison, 3.
critics commented about the works’ “masculine force” and its technical “crudeness,”
which was attributed to her “inexperience,” overall she received an encouraging review
in the local paper, O Estado, and decided to continue her studies – this time, traveling to
New York at the end of 1914 to take classes from Homer Boss at the Independence
School of Art.\(^{22}\)

Malfatti lived in New York for almost two years before returning to Brazil in
1917. Many of her friends, after seeing her new work, urged her to organize another
exhibition, and Malfatti subsequently made arrangements to exhibit at 111 Libero Badaro
Street. The show opened on December 12, 1917 and included fifty-three canvases
consisting of portraits, landscapes, caricatures, watercolors, and sketches. This time,
however, the critical reception was not so kind:

Opening day was auspicious: members of São Paulo society, journalists, writers,
and artists attended. Three works sold immediately. First reactions called the
collection original, bizarre, far from classical. Then a week later in the evening
edition of O Estado, December 20, 1917, Monteiro Lobato … attacked with a
vengeance. Excusing his criticism with the observation that flattery kills but
sincerity saves, Lobato professed to see noting in Anita’s painting but a branch of
caricature of color and form. So far as he was concerned it was all either paranoia
or mystification.\(^{23}\)

Lobato continued by making comparisons between modern art and the scribblings on the
walls of insane asylums – the latter, in Lobato’s opinion, more sincere. Her canvases
similarly appalled her family. Yet, ironically, because her work challenged traditional
photographic realism, Malfatti became the inspiration for the burgeoning modernist
movement.

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\(^{22}\) Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 14.
\(^{23}\) Nist, 24.
Ultimately, what had been a key point of the modernist discourse – defining what it meant to be “Brazilian” – may have contributed to a disconnect between what was philosophically espoused and what was materially produced. Thus, in summation, it is actually Jeffrey Lesser who aptly characterizes the early modernists, many of whom were creole or first-generation Brazilians, as reformulating ethnic distinctions so as to appropriate Brazilian identity. Some insisted that they were ‘white’ and thus fit neatly into a traditional society that ran along a bipolar black/white continuum. Others, however, refused to categorize themselves in those terms. These immigrants (and their descendants) insisted that the new hyphenated categories be created under the rubric “Brazilian.” This was not an easy or smooth process, and attempts to legislate or enforce brasilidade (Brazilianess) were never successful. As the millennium approaches, Brazil remains a country where hyphenated ethnicity is predominant yet unacknowledged.24

24 Lesser, 3.