

Race, Class Difference, and Representation in the *Pau-Brasil* Work of Tarsila do Amaral

Tarsila do Amaral is considered to be one of the most influential and important early Brazilian modernists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Though her work was integral to ushering in a new understanding of the avant-garde in Brazil, I argue that her works reflect her position of outsider. From a cultural standpoint, Amaral was very separated from the people she painted as a reflection of Brazil. By focusing on the works of her *Pau-Brasil* period, I will consider two distinct ways she exhibits her status. I will consider how she depicts class in her paintings and evaluate the differences when comparing depictions of herself and her peers to those of different race or social class as well as how they compare to works by other artists.

Rafael Cardoso provides an understanding of social class difference in Brazil, particularly in regard to race, which can inform the understanding of Brazil as a whole in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A law was introduced in 1888 to free all slaves, and the decades following saw social confusion as emancipated people destabilized the existing class structure.<sup>3</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, long-held ideas of racial inferiority were replaced by critiques of social structure.<sup>4</sup> Cardoso discusses the work of Alberto Torres, who advocated for organizing Brazilian society and focusing on national identity.<sup>5</sup> Gillian Sneed discusses the intellectual elite as a locus for promoting national identity after the formation of the Republic in 1889 and links this to the avant-garde who worked to define it.<sup>6</sup> This is the environment in which Amaral grew up and created art—struggling to come to terms with a colonial past and looking toward a modern future, with the goal of defining the identity of Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Sneed, "Anita Malfatti and Tarsila do Amaral: Gender, 'Brasilidade' and the Modernist Landscape," *Woman's Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 31, 37. Sneed says, "Amaral...is regularly positioned as the most significant Brazilian modernist painter of the period." Rita Shannon Koeser, "Brazil: Body and Soul," *Américas* 62, no. 2 (March/April 2010): 54. Koeser calls Amaral "one of the most influential painters in the early modern art movement of Brazil."

<sup>2</sup> Rafael Cardoso, "The Problem of Race in Brazilian Painting," *Art History* 38, no. 3 (June 2015): 488-511. This essay provides a background of how race affected art made during this time and briefly mentions Amaral's work in the same context. It is helpful in providing an overall understanding of social class in Brazil during Amaral's art production.

<sup>3</sup> Cardoso, "Problem of Race," 496.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Cardoso, "The Brazilianness of Brazilian Art," *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (January 2012): 21.

<sup>6</sup> Sneed, "Malfatti and Amaral," 30.

Amaral grew up in a wealthy family on a coffee plantation in São Paulo.<sup>7</sup> She was part of the elite, privileged upper class and as such was able to pursue an art education.<sup>8</sup> Still, her education as a woman was uncommon and she broke with traditional roles by leaving a loveless marriage and a child in order to further pursue her art.<sup>9</sup> She studied in Brazil and Paris in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and returned to Brazil just after the *Semana de Arte Moderna* to become part of Brazil's avant-garde community.<sup>10</sup> Her next trip to Paris exposed her to a variety of modern movements, including Cubism and Futurism.<sup>11</sup> She studied with Fernand Léger and found inspiration in the juxtaposition of classicism and modernism in the work of André Lhote. In Paris, Amaral painted *A Negra* [Figure 1], and in the few years following, she continued reflecting her ideas of national identity through her *Pau-Brasil* paintings.<sup>12</sup>

The term *Pau-Brasil* as it refers to Amaral's art of the period between 1924 and 1928 derives from Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry* of 1924.<sup>13</sup> The manifesto pushes for a Brazilian art to export, built from opposites and promoting the creation of a national style, linking both modern and traditional.<sup>14</sup> So too does Amaral's art work toward a specifically Brazilian identity. In 1923, she wrote, "I feel increasingly Brazilian... I want to be the painter of my country."<sup>15</sup> Despite her identification with Brazil, her paintings reflect a position of colonialism and outsider-ness. It is important to consider how Amaral experienced Brazil and

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Damian, "Tarsila do Amaral: Art and Environmental Concerns of a Brazilian Modernist," *Woman's Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1999): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cardoso, "Problem of Race," 507.

<sup>9</sup> Damian, "Tarsila," 3.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie D'Alessandro and Luiz Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017), 125; and Sneed, "Malfatti and Amaral," 32.

<sup>11</sup> Damian, "Tarsila," 3.

<sup>12</sup> D'Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. Amaral's connection to Oswald began with the Grupo dos Cinco. While typically their connection is defined by considering the Manifesto of Anthropophagy and its succeeding movement, the *Pau-Brasil* Manifesto and its connected artwork predates this by a few years and is an interesting starting point for looking at Amaral's work and its connection with national identity.

<sup>14</sup> Aracy Amaral and Kim Mrazek Hastings. "Stages in the Formation of Brazil's Cultural Profile," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 21 (1995):19 and Jackson, K. David. "Three Glad Races: Primitivism and Ethnicity in Brazilian Modernist Literature,"

*Modernism/modernity* 1, no. 2 (April 1994): 99. The *Manifesto of Pau-Brasil poetry* and the similarly titled era of Amaral's work refers to brazilwood and its high export value, commenting on the commonality between the prized wood and the work produced by artists and intellectuals of the time, both deriving from pure Brazilian nature.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

interacted with the scenes she painted. In 1924, she and a group of friends traveled to Minas. Though both Brazilians and foreigners, they “went as a group to discover Brazil.”<sup>16</sup> Considering Amaral as a tourist in Brazil emphasizes the outsider dynamic of her art. She paints her own country yet appropriates imagery which is not native to her. Amaral’s inspiration for her *Pau-Brasil* work comes from the “folk decoration” and “return to tradition, to simplicity.”<sup>17</sup> Even her use of the verb *return* connotes a backward move away from the modernity and innovation of her own urban environment.

“I am profoundly Brazilian and will study the taste and the art of our *caipiras*. In the hinterlands, I hope to learn from those who have not been corrupted by academies.”<sup>18</sup> Amaral’s quotation shows her co-opting of rural tradition and incorporating it into her art in a manner like that of Gauguin in his travels to Tahiti, accentuating the ‘otherness’ of their subjects. She utilizes European modernist techniques and primitivism to depict the landscape as different and exotic. She approached it from an outsider’s perspective, ‘discovering’ her own country in a colonialist manner. From her elite upbringing, she alternately identifies as “a proper *caipira*,” and, as in the earlier quotation, an outsider studying the rural culture.<sup>19</sup> The fluid shift produces a voyeuristic portrayal in her paintings while proclaiming the *Pau-Brasil* identity formation.

Amaral’s 1924 work *Morro da Favela* [Figure 2] shows a *favela*, or slum. Traditional houses are shown in bright colors and the poverty indicated by corrugated steel structures is erased by the whimsy of the composition. The slightly curved, sloping rooflines give a playful and upbeat feeling to the composition. Local flora is abundant, and many plants are painted into the foreground. The figures depicted are sandwiched between the greenery and the group of

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<sup>16</sup> D’Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 167.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. *Caipira* here is translated as country bumpkin by the author.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. The full quotation is as follows: “As a proper *caipira*, I declare that I find certain bright color combinations to be beautiful, although I was taught to consider them in bad taste.”

houses, and though they inhabit the center of the picture, they are swallowed up in the composition. The figures are treated like parts of a still-life, static and painted without faces or features.

When considering her depiction of people, such as in *Morro da Favela* [Figure 2] or *O Mamoiero* [Figure 3], with that of an artist like Candido Portinari, the dynamic of identity becomes visible. Like Amaral, Portinari grew up on a coffee plantation in Brazil, but he came from a poor immigrant family and faced the hardships of poverty and hard labor.<sup>20</sup> In his work *Coffee* of 1935 [Figure 4], it is possible to see a departure from Amaral's treatment of the human figure. He depicts the figures as central, relegating the landscape to the background. Though he does not individually treat the figures, they are clearly the focus of the composition. As opposed to Amaral's still figures, Portinari's are active and engaging in labor. They are also literally central to the work, occupying the foreground, with background elements pushing the eye back toward the figures.

While much of the current literature on Amaral's works concentrate on her contributions to modern art in Brazil, considering her work through its social or political implications can push us to question assumptions in the creation of her legacy. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) retrospective, *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, is the most current North American engagement with Amaral, and it concentrates mainly on her formal language and modernist influences, drawing comparisons between *A Negra* [Figure 1] and various paintings of bathers, from Cezanne to Picasso.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the exhibition's catalog removes consideration of social class or race and concentrates on artistic lineage and ingenuity instead. Stephanie D'Alessandro situates *A Negra* as advancing from Gauguin's "powerful scenes of exotic, pre-

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<sup>20</sup> "Introduction," Projecto Portinari, accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www.portinari.org.br/#/pagina/candido-portinari/apresentacao?idioma=en>

<sup>21</sup> D'Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 38-55.

industrial idyll” and Brancusi’s *White Negress*.<sup>22</sup> She mentions Amaral’s poet friend, Blaise Cendrars’ *Anthropologie Nègre* and Oswald’s discussion of black and indigenous traditions as “sources...right in the middle of modernity.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than delve into racial and social difference, Amaral’s choices in representation are explained away, describing others using race and class similarly in the same period. In his article, “Tarsila, Melancholic Cannibal,” Luis Pérez-Oramas inserts *A Negra* into Amaral’s later anthropophagic period.<sup>24</sup> He puts the picture in dialogue with *Abaporu* and *Antropofagia*, essentially suggesting that by considering *A Negra* in anthropophagic or digestive terms, the understanding of a black body as a matriarch and the black body as slave each act as neutralizer for the other, stripping either reading of any depth of social or cultural meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Though comparisons to Amaral’s European contemporaries and later modern artists of Brazil abound in the MoMA catalog, I find a comparison between *A Negra* and another of Amaral’s work to be more edifying. *A Negra* was completed in 1923, and Amaral completed her *Self-Portrait* [Figure 5] in 1925. Though fully immersed in experimentation with the formal language of Cubism and primitivism, her self-portrait is distinctly realist and delicately nuanced. Comparing these two works, a power dynamic emerges. The outsider, colonialist status of Amaral in depicting the rural Brazilian population, which I have argued for in this essay, is accentuated by juxtaposing it with an image of the artist herself. The figure in *A Negra* is the “form of a woman of African descent, her broad features slightly off-center on her face, which is framed by an irregular hairline.”<sup>26</sup> D’Alessandro suggests a link between it and images from the “European anthropological texts of the period.”<sup>27</sup> Cardoso calls it “a disturbing amalgam of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>23</sup> D’Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 84-99. For the complete Manifesto of Anthropophagy, see page 176.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 44.

vaguely post-Cubist pictorial conventions and a hieratic archetype of race.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast, little has been written about her self-portrait, perhaps because it does not cohere with the rest of her *Pau-Brasil* works and it inherently asks the viewer to consider Amaral’s unequal treatments of race and social class.

Amaral has depicted *A Negra* as stereotypically black, emphasizing large lips, dark skin, pendulous breasts, and wide hips. She is cast as a type and when Amaral recalled her inspiration, she spoke of “memories of having seen one of these old female slaves...who lived on our *fazenda* and she had droopy lips and enormous breasts because (I was later told) in those days black women used to tie rocks to their breasts in order to lengthen them, and then they would sling them back over their shoulders to breastfeed the children they were carrying on their backs.”<sup>29</sup> Perez-Oramas links the image to a photograph found in a scrapbook of the artist of a black woman sitting outdoors.<sup>30</sup> Amaral’s conception of the figure recalls slavery, not too far in the past when she painted this image, and calls into question the artist’s denial of agency to the subject and her aim when painting this piece.

A major difference between the two depictions is in the literal stripping of *A Negra*. Amaral has removed clothing from the subject, denying individuality through dress and perhaps pushing for a more primitive or savage interpretation of the figure. She has also removed any identification from the title, simply calling it ‘a black woman.’<sup>31</sup> This emphasizes race over any other quality and firmly casts this as an archetypal representation of a person of color.

In contrast, Amaral’s self-portrait of 1925 shows a carefully made-up face with appealing symmetry, a delicately modelled nose, and carefully shaped lips. D’Alessandro and Pérez-

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<sup>28</sup> Cardoso, “Problem of Race,” 507.

<sup>29</sup> D’Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 165. This recollection is from a 1972 interview with Amaral.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. The notes on the use of the term *negra* further discuss inherent differences in meaning from Portuguese to English and cultural context.

Oramas posit the self-portrait as a creation of her public image, a “self-promotion” with “her detached head hovering...with pulled back hair, dramatically outlined eyes, and long, dangling earrings.”<sup>32</sup> The head is disembodied, focusing on the creative center and denying the gaze upon her body, in direct opposition to the voyeuristic laying bare of the nude black woman. Amaral paints herself with elaborate earrings, obviously expensive and indicating her status.

Another self-portrait of 1923 [Figure 6] shows Amaral in a vivid red coat, again with exquisite red lips. According to the official website of Amaral’s estate, the painting stemmed from a dramatic entrance she made at a dinner party, accentuating her femininity and desirability.<sup>33</sup> Here she depicted herself in a similar manner to the 1925 self-portrait, but with the addition of a well-manicured hand and flashy coat, each accessory pointing to wealth and prestige. Through these disparities in representation, it is clear that Amaral approached the painting of Brazil and its representative figures in a completely dissimilar way from the way she represented herself.

Cardoso suggests that “as a white woman of the most privileged class in São Paulo, her claim to Afro-Brazilian heritage is scanty, at best.”<sup>34</sup> I argue that she makes no claim herself to Afro-Brazilian heritage, but co-opts the black body to craft an idea of Brazilian identity to export to the rest of the world, especially the art elite of Europe. She conflates the black body with the fecundity of the land of Brazil and its untapped natural resources, as evidenced by the brazilwood from which the *Pau-Brasil* movement derived its name. Thus, by equating Brazil and a woman of African heritage, she at the same time distances herself and emphasizes her European qualities and elite status. In a poem, Oswald calls Amaral a “caipirinha dressed by

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<sup>32</sup> D’Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> “First Years,” Works, Tarsila do Amaral Official Site, accessed November 18, 2018, <http://tarsiladoamaral.com.br/>

<sup>34</sup> Cardoso, “Problem of Race,” 507.

Poiret,” referencing her use of traditional rural colors and her flair for Parisian fashion.<sup>35</sup> As a child, Amaral had not only learned to speak French, but also ate foods imported from France, and wore French clothing, too.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that when choosing to create artwork that represented her idea of Brazil through its people, she did not identify with those people and therefore did not depict herself or others of her class. This reiterates her distance from the Brazil she wished to present to the world. She chose to co-opt images of and styles of the rural population, using the colonial gaze to depict them in a manner consistent with her own idea of Brazil’s national identity.

We can complicate this idea by comparing Amaral’s depiction of a black body to Arthur Timótheo da Costa’s *Self-Portrait* of 1908 [Figure 7]. Though slightly earlier, da Costa’s self-portrait reflects the self-image of a person of color at the time. Here da Costa is representing the black body in a much different manner than Amaral’s *A Negra*. He reflects his own cultural identity from within; he is of a particular social class and race and he depicts himself in a manner more like Amaral’s self-portraits than her nude black woman. He is confident and challenges the viewer to hold his gaze; he is an individual. With this painting, Amaral’s construction of race and Brazilian identity as contained within *A Negra* falls to pieces, shattering the stereotyped black figure and reclaiming agency and subjecthood. The carefully constructed narrative of Brazil contained in Amaral’s *Pau-Brasil* paintings is falsified as a monolithic simplification through the eyes of an outsider.

Throughout this essay, I chose uncommon comparisons to resituate Amaral’s work in a new light. Though many refer to her lovingly as Tarsila, I believe, in the same way as with Frida Kahlo, this personalization and pseudo-friendship on the part of the viewing audience or art

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<sup>35</sup> D’Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, 52, 141. As mentioned earlier, Amaral oscillates between identifying with caipira, or country folk, and co-opting their techniques and colors. Poiret was a French fashion designer who designed clothing for Amaral.

<sup>36</sup> Koeser, “Brazil: Body and Soul,” 54.



historian clouds the perception of Amaral's work.<sup>37</sup> By complicating the legacy of Tarsila do Amaral and asking questions that reposition her work within the larger racial and class stratification in Brazil, her work can become a lens through which to study the social fluctuations at the time and the effects of both position identity on depiction in modern art and of modern art on the identity of a nation.

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<sup>37</sup> Both D'Alessandro and Pérez-Oramas, *Tarsila*, and Sneed, "Malfatti and Amaral" mention this phenomenon, on pages 17 and 37, respectively.



Figure 1: Tarsila do Amaral, *A Negra*, 1923



Figure 2: Tarsila do Amaral, *Morro da Favela*, 1924



Figure 3: Tarsila do Amaral, *O Mamoiero*, 1924



Figure 4: Candido Portinari, *Coffee*, 1935





Figure 5: Tarsila do Amaral, *Self-Portrait*, 1925



Figure 6: Tarsila do Amaral, *Self-Portrait*, 1923



Figure 7: Arthur Timótheo da Costa, *Self-Portrait*, 1908

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