

# State-sponsored Avant-garde and Brazil's Cultural Policy in the 1940s: Candido Portinari and Gilberto Freyre in the USA

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One of the most remarkable characteristics of Brazil's cultural history in the twentieth century is the selective appropriation of the avant-garde ideas by the *Estado Novo* in the early 1940s, and the consequent rise of the repertoire of "Modernist" Brazilianness to the pantheon of national identity. Remarkable because this trend was also seen in other authoritarian States of the 1930s and 1940s, but which in very few cases were as successful in terms of mass expansion and longevity as was the Brazilian case. Italian Futurism (GENTILE 2009; BERGHAUS 1996) and Russian Constructivism, for instance, were similar cases of aesthetic appropriation of typical avant-garde

movements to build an ideal of cultural formation and national identity of authoritarian States. Nonetheless, the substantial difference that brings the Russian case closer to the Brazilian case (and therefore, further apart from the Italian case) is the issue of establishing such ideals in the upcoming decades.

In the Italian case, the aesthetic ideals of Futurism were repelled with the end of World War II and the fall of Fascism. In turn, in Brazil, much like in Russia, the aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde movements became further rooted, having offered specific contours for national identity at a key moment such as the years post World War II (GOUGH 2005; TUPITSYN 1992). This is key, for it marks the expansion of industrial development and mass culture, creating channels to promote such ideals at an unprecedented scale.

The specificity of the Brazilian case did not go unnoticed by the experts in political and cultural history of the *Estado Novo*. In her work *História e Historiadores*, Angela de Castro Gomes assesses the formation of a “historical culture” in the 1940s stemming from the centralization of cultural policy, thanks to the implementation of a new technical-administrative model, with the foundation of institutions such as the Department of Press and Propaganda, in December 1939. Still according to Gomes, the contours of the State’s cultural strategy are further defined in the early 1940s, when “nationalist ideas connected to the production of a common past gained mass-oriented support in Brazil, or, if analyzed from a different perspective, became the focus of more consistent public policies” (GOMES 1996, p. 19).

The purpose hereof is to attempt to indicate the importance of the international promotion of “Brazilianness” in defining the cultural identity of the *Estado Novo*, therefore further developing the investigation on the process of appropriation of the national past and the political and social uses thereof during a given period. This study initially focuses on the issue of the authoritarian State’s co-optation of key thinkers, cultural agents whose protagonism was built since the Modernist militancy of the 1920s. The paper then focuses on the role played, in turn, by American institutions and agents, such as the Hispanic Foundation and the Library of Congress, in the cultural exchanges brought forth by the approximation between Brazil and the US during World War II. More specifically, the paper addresses the

editorial perspective by analyzing the work developed by American publisher Alfred Knopf as a key cultural mediator, responsible for the first-hand publication of authors such as Jorge Amado and Guimarães Rosa in America, among others. Finally, this paper examines the cases of Candido Portinari and Gilberto Freyre, especially regarding the works conceived to introduce Brazil to the foreign audience. Both operate a type of cultural translation of their horizons, mobilizing creative keys to explain Brazilian past, establishing common grounds with North American and Latin American culture, and also updating their discourses to temporal horizons opened within the context of World War II.

### State Modernism

Furthering the aforementioned issues requires addressing one of the most contradictory matters of Brazilian intellectual history: the relationship between intellectuals and the State during the *Estado Novo*. Many of the intellectuals who played a key role in defining Brazilian identity do not fall under the categories Sergio Miceli determined in his work *“Intelectuais e Classe Dirigente no Brasil”* and call for the reevaluation of the meanings and implications of “cooptation.” In fact, this is a quite interesting aspect of the universe of the intellectuals involved in Brazil’s cultural promotion in the early 1940s: none of them had any privileged institutional space, and their relationship with the State was oftentimes either rarified or troubled. Their projects and connections are understood rather insufficiently and inaccurately according to sociology of knowledge, which takes into consideration factors such as background, family heritage, class situation or political stand.

It is clear that such observation neither compromises nor invalidates Miceli’s conclusions, for his cut is far broader in terms of time, dating back to the First Republic, and focuses on the proximity or organicity that intellectuals have with the state. It is nevertheless worth mentioning that in the preface of the work, Antonio Candido already spoke of “hermeneutical contamination” when referring to inaccuracies in the treatment of intellectuals that did not fall to the purposes of the *Estado Novo* (CANDIDO 2002, p.74). The cases of intellectuals

who, though occupying state positions, do not “alienate their mental independence,” to resort to the terms used by Candido himself when referring to Drummond, in Miceli’s understanding, must be seen as exceptions confirming the rule. Nonetheless, the analytical proposal of *Intelectuais e Classe Dirigente no Brasil* is to pursue standards, almost as ideal types that organize the new dynamics established in Brazil with the implementation of the modern bourgeoisie order of the First Republic. As taught by Weber’s and Simmel’s German sociology, such ideal types as “men without profession,” “writers-public servants and public servants-writers,” and “poor cousins,” among others, hardly find any accurate correspondence in reality, and in the best hypothesis, are formal reductions developed based on historical reality. Understanding the intellectuals part of the cultural promotion mission of the 1940s resists systematic classification according to the categories Miceli proposed when their pathways are investigated in further detail.

An excellent example is the case of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, one of the cultural promotion agents of the 1940s. Born in São Paulo, in 1902, Sérgio Buarque moved to Rio de Janeiro to study at the National Law School in January 1921. Since his arrival, he acted as the connection between the modernist intelligentsia of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, having facilitated the approximation of São Paulo natives such as Mario de Andrade with intellectuals domiciled in Rio de Janeiro, such as Graça Aranha, Ribeiro Couto, Ronald de Carvalho, and Manuel Bandeira, among others (GOMES 1993, p. 67; MORAES 2007, p. 86). Shortly thereafter, in 1924, Buarque founded journal *Estética*, co-published with his Law School colleague Prudente de Moraes Neto. Thanks to the journal, both friends managed to considerably broaden the scope of their sociability channels, having contacted young authors of Minas Gerais, such as Pedro Nava and Carlos Drummond de Andrade; of Recife, as is the case of Gilberto Freyre, who had just arrived from America; and of Alagoas, as is the case of Câmara Cascudo. In 1936, Sérgio published *Raízes do Brasil*, as the first issue of the Collection on Brazilian Documents (*Coleção Documentos Brasileiros*), organized by Gilberto Freyre. In the same year, Buarque was hired as a professor at the recently founded University of the Federal District. The rise to the university took place once again thanks to Prudente de Moraes Neto, then Dean of the School of Philosophy and Languages; a few months later, Prudente would also

be Buarque's best man at his wedding. Buarque's university colleagues included names such as Afonso Arinos de Melo Franco, friend and former classmate at the Law School, Manuel Bandeira, Gilberto Freyre, Mario de Andrade, Portinari, and Villa Lobos, among others. After the university was closed down in 1939, Sérgio Buarque and Mario de Andrade were transferred to the National Book Institute, when he established a closer relationship with Rubens Borba de Moraes. At the time, Borba was the director of the São Paulo City Library and was organizing the *Handbook of Brazilian Studies* with American professor William Berrien. As a result, Buarque had closer contact with Lewis Hanke, director of the Hispanic Foundation, connected to the Library of Congress. Thanks to such connection, Buarque travelled to America in 1941 to attend lectures in Wyoming, having also participated of a debate at the University of Chicago. Buarque also profited from the opportunity to conduct research at the Library of Congress and to travel to New York. One could in fact claim that the interest triggered by the cooperation with the US contributed to awaken his interest in the research that culminated in works *Monções* (1945) and then in *Caminhos e Fronteiras* (1957)<sup>1</sup>.

Assessing Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's intellectual pathway leads one to the following question: do the characteristics common to the many intellectuals who travelled under the cultural promotion mission to the US, in the 1940s, such as Rubens Borba, Freyre, Portinari, Villa Lobos and José Honório Rodrigues—in addition to Sérgio Buarque himself—suffice to claim that this is a group, or at least that the intellectuals have some sort of similar profile, building a certain “social place” during their careers, with respect to the State? As advocates of the modernist cause of the 1920s, they wove a set of social relations throughout the decade, always hovering around their intellectual projects and key actors, as is the case of Mario de Andrade. They also paved their way towards the Brazilian capital, where they rose to government positions especially thanks to exceptional circumstances related to the foundation of the ephemeral University of the Federal District (FERREIRA 2006, p.140-142). Upon the dissolution thereof, many of them started working for the Ministry of Education and Health.

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<sup>1</sup> *Monções* was planned at least since 1942 and was submitted to a competition promoted by an American institution. WEGNER 2000, p. 92.

In what concerns intellectual production, they joined the circles of the José Olympio publishing house and penned papers in journals such as *Revista do Brasil*, during its third phase. Much like some of their texts, their letters reveal more than the political standpoint many of them took in relation to the discontent and waning of the Vargas administration (DE LUCA 2011; NICODEMO 2004). Some of such intellectuals, including Baurque and Mario de Andrade, got involved in the creation of institutions fighting regimes such as the Democratic Left, early manifestation of the Socialist Party, and the Brazilian Association of Writers.

Antonio Candido has drawn attention to this phenomenon in his highly acknowledged paper on the 1930 Revolution and culture. The cultural policy of the *Estado Novo* is based on the “normalization” or “generalization” of the modernist ideals that were still circulating in a limited fashion, having been “exceptional, restricted and specific to the avant-gardists” (CANDIDO 1987, p. 185). The expression “modernism of State” is used rather provocatively to call attention to the need to further study such intellectual trajectories and the contradictory and troublesome relationship thereof with the *Estado Novo*, thereby increasing the complexity of that which was previously simplified, in the fragile and ever-so-common use of the notion of “cooptation.”

### **Topsy-Turvy Brazilianness: American Agents and Institutions**

A substantial portion of the bibliography on Brazil-US relations on this period generally addresses the issue of the *Good Neighbor Policy*, especially during World War II, in terms of cultural imperialism and practically as a one-way street, at all times. As such, one emphasizes the spread of North American values as an interface of the US political and economic interests in Latin America, against the interests of the Axis. The organization of the “*Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*” in August 1940 operates as a mark for it brings together economic, strategic and cultural policy interests under a single agency, emblematically led by magnate Nelson Rockefeller. Such emphasis is further justified thanks to the strong impact the images and products sponsored by the agency had in the imaginary of the period, largely because of the permeability of mass culture, especially

film. Sadlier and Tota have already revealed the players behind the production and reception of Walt Disney's propaganda films, such as "Saludo Amigos," and the consolidation of figures such as Carmem Miranda (SADLIER 2012, p. 14-33)

One of the possible mistakes implied in the stand that Brazil was merely subjected to the imperialistic designations of the US is assuming that the exported Brazilian culture somewhat **reflected** the country's cultural identity, which is stable and ready (WILLIAMS 2001, p. 227). This paper is intended precisely to reflect otherwise, arguing that the new horizon seen by the approximation with the US, which horizon implies new lifestyles, new production modalities, and, of course, the establishment of mass culture, in fact opens up unprecedented possibilities to reconfigure Brazilian national identity. What is actually at stake is the historicity of Brazil's cultural identity forged during the *Estado Novo*, which actually lasted during the entire twentieth century. One must therefore speak of a cultural policy that was reinforced thanks to the exceptional circumstances under which Brazil was promoted abroad, of an aggressive initiative to promote the country worldwide as a global power in the new configuration of the world order resulting from World War II.

The Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939-1940 is among the milestones of this process. Brazil's exhibition strategy followed the general lines of the event; to wit, "The World of Tomorrow." This discourse confirmed the presentation of the global power about to explode in the near future, which, in turn, quite harmoniously conciliated the strength of its past into its natural resources (including as an agro-exporting power) and the language of modernity (COTTER, 2009). As such, the strength of Brazil's exhibition came from the bold lines of the pavilion's architecture, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa. The two-tier pavilion in "L" format had all the characteristics of the international school, specifically summarized in Le Corbusier's *Cinco Pontos Para uma Nova Arquitetura*, or the *brise soleil, pan de verre* (curtain wall), ground floor with pillars and free plan, missing only the rooftop garden (HORMAIN 2012, p. 60). The connection between national and modern was translated into the simplicity of the pavilion's lines, as if architecture allowed nature to speak. Wavy balcony, cutting-edge material, curves on the outside wall

with glass windows allowing natural light to flow in, still preserving a view of the lake with water lilies and a ramp leading to the main entrance (WILLIAMS 2001, p. 208).



**Image 1** - Lewis Hanke, William Berrien, Antonio Edgar Carneiro, Gilda Rocha (futura Gilda de Mello e Souza), Luis Saia, Rubem Braga and Rubens Borba himself. Mario de Andrade's Collection, IEB-USP. MA-F-2093 Candido et. al. São Paulo, 1940.

As Williams has mentioned in a study on the cultural policy of the *Estado Novo*, the identity of the Brazilian modern architecture school was far from being defined at the time of the New York fair. Brazil's leading example of avant-garde architecture, "Palace Capanema," designed to be the headquarters of the Ministry of Health and Education in 1936, was still under construction.

Practically at the same time when Brazil showcased itself at the New York Fair, the director of the Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress visited Brazil. Aside from inviting Brazil's intelligentsia to the events to be held in America in the upcoming year, both American professors intended to establish partnerships, and, above all, 'recruit' Brazilians for the project to launch a Handbook of Brazilian Studies. Rubens Borba de Moraes, of the São Paulo group of modernists, Mario de Andrade's main assistant in the management of the information and bibliography division of the Department of Culture of São Paulo (1935-1938), was appointed co-editor of the work, together with Berrien.



Even if to a lesser extent, the idea was to repeat the success of the Handbook of Latin American Studies collection, published by Lewis Hanke since 1936, and available at the Library of Congress since 1939. After several impediments, the book was only published in Brazil in 1949 by publishing house Martins, entitled Bibliographical Manual on Brazilian Studies (*Manual Bibliográfico de Estudos Brasileiros*).

### US Version of Brazil’s “José Olympio”: Alfred Knopf

The collection of documents of former publishing house Alfred Knopf is currently at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas in Austin. Knopf played a very active role in the translation of Brazilian works in America, as from the beginning of the 1940s, thanks to the cooperation between the publisher, Lewis Hanke, and Freyre. During his stay in America, from 1943 to 1944, lecturing at Harvard and at the University of Indiana, Freyre negotiated the rights and monitored the discussions on the publication of his work *Casa Grande e Senzala* in English, with Knopf. Parallel to the lectures he gave at the universities, Freyre published a book entitled *Brazil: an Interpretation*.

The translation of *Casa Grande e Senzala* into English played a central role in the context of bringing closer Brazilian and North American intellectuals, for it marks the moment when Lewis Hanke and the Library of Congress acted as vectors of the US Department of State. In this context, Hanke articulates the cultural capital accumulated in the first years of the Handbook of Latin-American Studies and the first travel to Brazil, consolidating a network of activities on “Brazilian studies” in America. For instance, there is the case of Samuel Putnam, head collaborator of Brazilian literature at the Handbook of Latin-American Studies. Since the early 1940s, Putnam had been working in the translation of Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*, published as *Rebellion in the Backlands*, in 1944. Thanks to his background, he was convinced to translate Freyre’s work. Two years after the publication of *The Masters and Slaves*, in 1948, Putnam published his work on the literary review of Brazilian literature, entitled *Marvelous Journey: A Survey of Four Centuries of Brazilian Writing*, including a long assessment of Machado de Assis, as a writer of universal quality (PUTNAN 1948). Another interesting example is translator Harriet

de Onís, who specialized in Latin American literature and who Knopf convinced to translate *Memória Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Though she never completed her translation, De Onís established a closer relationship with Brazilian culture, which resulted in several important translations, most of which were published by Knopf himself in the 1960s, as is the case of *Grande Sertão Veredas*, (ROSA 1963; VERLANGUIERI, 1993), *Sobrados e Mocambos*, and *Dona Flor e seus dois Maridos* (DIMAS 2012).



**Image 2**—New York World’s Fair Poster, 1939-1940.

### **Modern and National: Race and Miscegenation in Portinari's Murals at the Library of Congress**

From 1939 to 1940, Portinari decorated the famous Brazilian pavilion at the New York World's Fair; practically at the same time, he had showcased part of his work at MoMA's Art in Our Time exhibit, in New York. The Brazilian pavilion was one of the fair's highlights thanks to its bold modern design arising out of the partnership between Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, which will be further addressed below. Portinari was working on the building's internal walls, with panels representing the cultural and social diversity of Brazil's regions—the "*Jangadas do Nordeste*" (Rafts of the Northeast), a "*Cenas Gaúchas*" (Scenes of Brazil's South), the festivities of "*Noite de São João*" (Night of Saint John). The successful repercussion of painting *Morro* (1933), guaranteed him an individual exhibit at the same museum in the next year, followed by several other smaller exhibits in the US and the publication of a catalog on his works by the University of Chicago Press. Such acknowledgement reflected in private commissions from influential names of the likes of Nelson Rockefeller and Arthur Rubenstein, having culminated with the invite made by Archibald MacLeish, director of the Library of Congress, to decorate the entrance of the recently founded Hispanic Foundation. Portinari presented his first sketches in August 1941, and the murals were painted from October to November, also in 1941. Portinari's fee was paid both by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and the Brazilian government.

Thanks to his success, Portinari had self-confidence on one hand, and on the other, some sort of notion on the expectations of the North American audience. The invite was nevertheless a challenge, for he would have to navigate amidst two quite unknown seas: historical painting and non-exclusively Brazilian representations<sup>2</sup>. In short, Portinari would have to paint the historical meaning of a "Hispanic" culture, looking for symbols of identity common to both Portuguese and Spanish America.

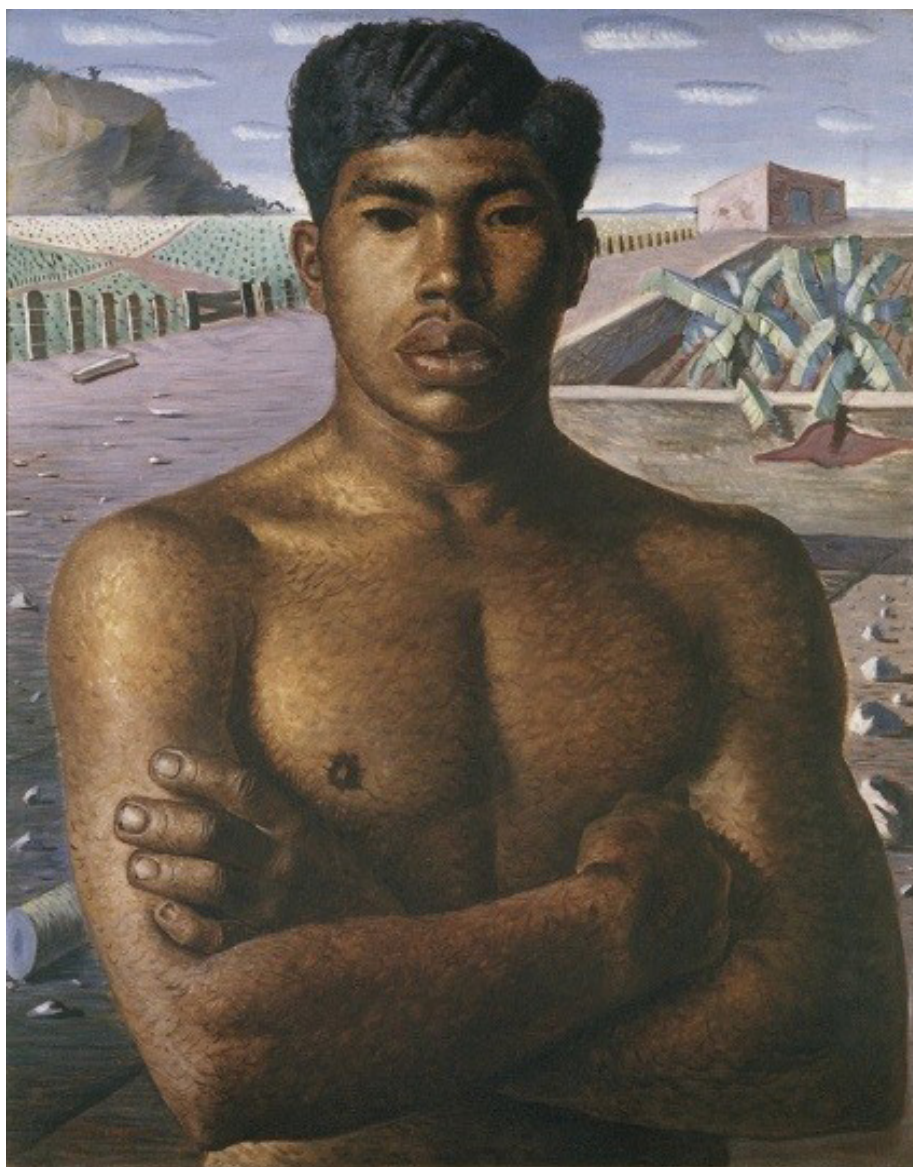
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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to his growing prestige, Portinari's paintings became closer to historical painting, as is the case of *Tiradentes* (1948), *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* (1948), *Navio Negreiro* (1950), *Bandeirantes* (1951), *Chegada de D. João à Bahia* (1952), *Descobrimento do Brasil* (1954) and *Anchieta* (1956), among others.



**Image 3**—“Morro,” 1933. Coll. MOMA.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

Portinari’s initial resistance to historical painting seems to be related to his repertoire of favorite themes, which are generally aimed at the observation of reality in the present. More than any other Brazilian artist of his generation, Portinari seems to be closer to the late modernism of the 1930s seen in poets such as Manoel Bandeira, than to the intellectual influence of Mario de Andrade. The general idea of this period in modernism is the pursuit of conciliation between the aesthetics of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and a new realism, capable of addressing Brazil’s multiple social realities including its peripheral insertion in the world and its relationship with Latin America (ANTELO 1986, p. 154). Much like Bandeira, Portinari sought to introduce new agents and elements of daily experience in artistic discourse, thus revealing artistically sublime aspects of what he perceived as concrete Brazilian reality. In short, for Portinari, art was a “research tool and knowledge” that could not be dissociated from the ethical commitment to knowledge about a multiple and complex country (ARRIGUCCI Jr 1990, p. 154).



**Image 4**—“Mestiço,” 1934. Coll. Pinacoteca de São Paulo.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

When he was working on paintings such as “*Morro*,” “*Mestiço*” and “*Café*,” from 1933 to 1935, Portinari achieved maturity in his style<sup>3</sup>. His repertoire of more specific themes and technical resources coincided with the figuration of issues that were part of his world, of humble origins in Brazil’s countryside, in the city of Brodowski. The artist himself admitted several times that he had to leave Brazil to reconnect to his own origins. This pathway was similar for many of

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<sup>3</sup> Daily and rural life are part of works ranging from “*Roda Infantil*,” of 1932, to the “*Circo*” series, of 1932-1933, which lead to the painting of “*Morro*” (1933), and the series on the work at the coffee plantations, beginning with “*Café*” (1934), “*Lavrador de Café*” (1934), “*Mestiço*” (1934) and, finally, the widely known “*Café*” (1935).

his modernist colleagues of the 1930s: Portinari became less *'paulista'* (native of the State of São Paulo) and more Brazilian. This change was catalyzed by the murals of the Ministry of Health and Education, of 1938, which are not coincidentally seen as a milestone of “routinization of modernism,” but which only received the nowadays known contours thanks to the cultural exchanges with the US.

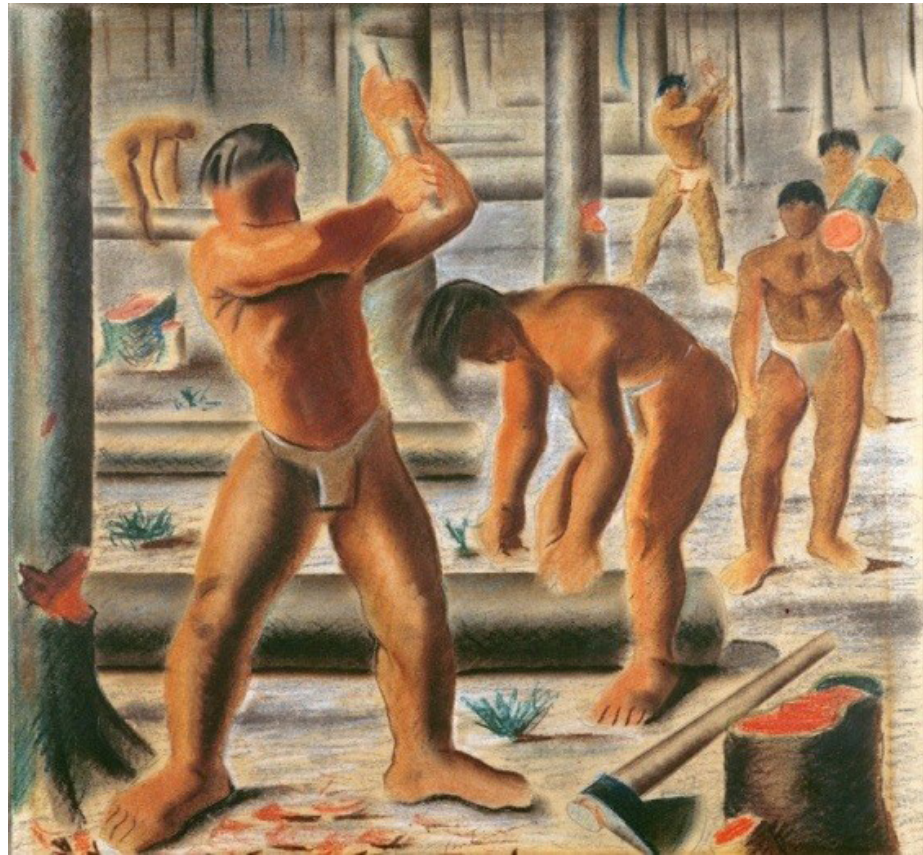
The topic of the *bandeiras* has an empathetic potential with the North American audience. The *bandeirantes* are the Brazilian pioneers. They represent the expansion of the frontiers towards the west in both cultures, and also represent the triumphant fight of man over indomitable—and, to a certain extent, unknown—nature. Such territory of the unknown has a special designation—wilderness, in the American case, and *sertão*, in Brazil. However, such a great empathetic potential never seem to have been achieved. The association of Brazil with the exotic, closer to the imaginary of a tropical country, went against direct comparisons between the cultures.



**Image 5**—“Desbravamento da Mata” or “As bandeiras,” fresco on tempera, 1941.  
Library of Congress.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

The vertical and spread-out arrangement of the forest is a direct reference to the set of studies that preceded the work on the murals for the MES, especially “*Erva Mate*,” “*Pau Brasil*” and “*Borracha*”

(PEDROSA 1942, p. 127). Such a solution, to wit, the representation of trees as vertical columns, was not used in the final version of the frescos, of 1938. For instance, “*Pau-Brasil*” works more freely with a game of lines and horizontal and vertical shadows, abstracting the presence of nature represented as such, unlike “*Erva Mate*,” which includes the literal presence of the trees themselves.



**Image 6**—“*Pau-Brasil*,” sketch for the Capanema Palace, 1938.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

There is a mimetic coincidence between form and content in the tension between the verticality and horizontality of the images. While the content brings in the story of man’s domination of nature, form—both color and the lines—dramatizes the fight for the domination of volume and matter. Much like in the Renaissance, when the experience of geometric perspective dramatized man’s attempt to understand the world around him. In both cases, such a fight is more of a process of exchange and adaptation than a story of domination. The verticality of the trees complements the looks to all directions, in full guard position against the threats and pursuit of other pathways. In turn, the

transversally laid man mimics the animals' gesture of drinking water from the river, searching for his own survival.

Different and quite enigmatic is the quasi-singular case of the settler, who appears in the fresco of exploration in the Library of Congress. Portuguese, white, bearded and holding a rooster, he looks at the observer, and he seems to be the only one concerned with his own image and with the future. Additionally, this is the only figure that may be deemed conventional in relation to the most direct historical representation—it is the image of a typical white conquistador. Based on his position, he seems to be the so-called captain of the woods—he does not seem to be working.

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**Image 7**—“Entrada na floresta,” card and tempera, 1941. Library of Congress.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

This may be the only dominating white male present in all of Portinari’s works during his mature phase; all other men are either multiracial or black. The executed figure is quite different from the one



Portinari sketched in the study for the work (image on the side). The role of the captain seems to be the same, for the gesture and the clothes suggests the man has a multiracial background. Such artificialness in the presence of the settler, purportedly depicted as either Iberian or Portuguese, inevitably leads to the following question: was the representation of the three races (natives, blacks and whites) artificially introduced in Portinari's horizon with the deliberate intent to be shown to a foreign audience? Such a suspicion is further aggrieved if one takes into account that with a white man, the artist would have represented all three races in the formation of America—blacks, natives and white alike.

North American critics seemed to have immediately noticed the racial issue and the role of multiraciality in Portinari's murals. During a lecture organized for the inauguration of the murals, Robert C. Smith claimed that "in the figures of his murals Portinari represented the three races of the Americas, the Indian, the Negro and the white man" (SMITH 1943, p. 11). Florence Horn suggests the following, in a contemporary review: "Portinari seems to be indicating that there is no race issue among the people themselves, or perhaps that the Brazilian is developing out a mixture of races" (SMITH 1943, p. 21). Though it may seem bold to make such a claim, Portinari perhaps was adapting his style to the expectations of the consumer audience. As Williams has mentioned, one of the harshest criticisms Portinari had received in America was directed towards the fact that his characters did not seem "Brazilian," or "Afro-Brazilian"; in short, they did not follow the conventions of the exotic<sup>4</sup>.

Historically, the activity of gold digging has been developed at the margins of the law, and is therefore one of the forms of vagrancy of colonial Brazil. Small-scale gold digging, using sieves, is a movable practice for it establishes itself hidden amidst third-party property, outsmarting any possible inspections and tax collection.

Though based on highly solidary rules and a hierarchical structure of subordination to a leader, the work was individual in nature and the leader referred to as captain. From the social standpoint, the gold digger was a very poor, though free man, and as is clarified

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<sup>4</sup> Review written by Elisabeth MacCausland during Portinari's exhibit at the MoMA, in 1940.

by a nineteenth century manuscript, quoted by Mello e Souza, “very well streaked of different colors, including whites, mulattos, mestizos, blacks, all poor people with such manners as is required by their unfortunate and terrible living” (SOUZA 2004, p. 281-282). Much like the case of the pioneer travels, or *entradas*, it is not about representing the poverty and merit of the common men of the colonization process, but also of including specific individuals and social practices, arising out of the contact between settlers and natives. Hence, including the representation of free men outside the dialectic of settlers and natives, fighting for their survival, seems to be strategic.



**Image 8**—“Garimpo,” fresco, 1938. Gustavo Capanema Palace.  
Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)



**Image 9**—“O garimpo,” fresco on tempera, 1941. Library of Congress.  
 Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

As has been observed by the art critics, the mining fresco may be deemed the “freer” and most anti-conventional painting of the murals (PEDROSA 1942, p. 132). Themes such as the discovery of Brazil, the Jesuits and the *bandeirantes* are classical historical topics of national repertoire, developed during the nineteenth century. Because of the anti-conventionalism, the relationship with Portinari’s previous work on the walls of the Ministry becomes even clearer. The difference seems to be the increased focus on the characters’ stylization and the chromatic game. Characters seem more conservative at the Ministry, or perhaps closer to the conventions of realism, and the color palette seems colder. Another substantial difference is the absence of any gesture beyond everyday work activities in the drawings of the Ministry. Such a fact once again brings Portinari closer to realist convention, for the story is told without any bias, from a distance.

This is not the case of the mining depiction of the Library of Congress, permeated by romantic and epic marks. The storytelling focuses on the gesture of raising arms in sign of triumph, and the ultra-

romantic convention filtered by neoclassicism. Such a gesture, which, in relation to the aforementioned image, dramatizes the discovery of gold, contrasts with the faces that show no sign of celebration. The epic arsenal that individualizes the story, focused on an individual trajectory that heroically represents the formation of a community, radically contrasts with the faceless workers and their very low social conditions. Such faces also do not seem to express any reaction to the discovery of gold, as if the gold found was not for one's own but for someone else's benefit. Taking the interpretation to another level, one could argue that the glories of this chapter of colonial history were set on the Portuguese settlers, and not on the poorer workers. One could therefore claim this fresco operates with the typical language of Brazilian modernism, extracting poetry from ordinary life.

Representing individuals whose activities were developed at the margins of society and restoring their role in the epic saga of the history of the Americas—one should also observe how atypically the discovery of gold is represented, for there is no sign of opulence or paradise, as would be the general case for the theme represented in the painting. The reference to paradise that was never found is quite clear in this case; in other words, it is the story of triumphal failure, for this gold was not for them.



**Image 10** - “A catequese,” fresco on tempera, 1941. Library of Congress.

Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

One could in fact imagine the triangle formed by the integration of the figures on the center, surrounded by emotional gestures between Indians and Jesuits. Such an idea directly goes back to the Renaissance pictorial convention, whose imaginary triangle is comprised of Mary carrying baby Jesus (*maestà*) or Jesus taken down from the cross (*pietà*). However, the painting actually shows the ordinary interaction of men who perhaps are as simple as the poor workers (who are also likely to be multi-racial) on red earth, much like the ground walked upon during the *bandeiras*. Such interaction suggests some sort of communion in daily life, in work and in affection, which becomes even clearer when the frescos are compared to the sketches. The sketches include the image of preaching, which remits to the notion of hierarchy and control. Said environment of universal, multicultural (or multiracial) community, strongly marked by secularized religious themes, according to the modernist conventions, are precisely the leading features of *War and Peace*, monumental work painted at the headquarters of the United Nations, in New York, executed from 1952 to 1956.



**Image 11**—“A descoberta,” fresco on tempera, 1941. Library of Congress.

Source: [www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

### Racial Paradise: Freyre in the US—1944

Alfred Knopf published *Brazil: an Interpretation* based on a set of lectures given by Gilberto Freyre at the University of Indiana in 1944, when Freyre was a visiting scholar. The book was almost immediately published, in 1945, thanks to the efforts of both Knopf and his wife, Blanche. Profiting from Freyre’s presence in the US, Knopf also negotiated the translation of *Casa Grande e Senzala* into English. The letters Freyre sent to the publisher, currently available at the University of Texas, in Austin, reveal that such negotiations were supported by Columbia University, (Frank Tannenbaum), the Hispanic Foundation and the Department of State.

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While his books written in the 1930s, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) and *Sobrados e Mucambos* (1936), are deeper assessments based on extensive documentation, *Brazil: an Interpretation* is closer to a pamphlet, in nature. Freyre does not limit himself to analyzing the historical role of multiraciality in Brazilian cultural formation, but goes so far as suggesting that such values, summarized in the introduction to the work with the term “fusionism,” understood as an alternative to guide humanity, considering the disasters of the war. Such an argument is summarized in the preface of the American edition of *Casa Grande e Senzala*, published one year later, “*accepting this interpretation of Brazilian history as a march towards social democracy, a march that has on various occasions been interrupted and frequently has been disturbed and rendered difficult, we are unable to conceive of a society with tendencies more opposed to those of the Germanic Weltanschauung*” (FREYRE 1946, p. XIV). Criticizing the racial theories that were on the origin of Nazism, Freyre claimed that even considering the “imperfections, the Brazilian experience could teach lessons to the world” (FREYRE 1945, p. 99).

Freyre was criticized for having addressed only one region in his work—Brazil’s northeast—since the publication of his book, as if it represented the country as a whole. As an answer to his critics, in *Interpretation*, Freyre attempted to pay closer attention to Brazil’s regional diversity. The author identifies two contradictory and complementary trends in national formation, one of which is designated, “Horizontal Founders,” comprised of the poor immigrants coming from Portugal to Brazil’s north, south and west; and the other,

referred to as “Vertical Founders,” comprised of the people who settled the coastline from São Vicente to Maranhão, who had sufficient capital to organize large-scale agriculture.

At the same time as he addressed his critics, Freyre created a parallel with North American historical formation, also divided into two regions with almost opposite trends. Much like in America’s South, the “vertical founders” had used large-scale production and slave labor. At least specifically in the Brazilian case, such colonization pattern left behind deep structural marks—a hierarchized society, full of signs of differentiation impregnated in the different areas of life, from architecture to habits. In turn, the “horizontal founders” were defined by the constant pursuit for land expansion, and they were the Brazilian version of the “frontiers-man.” Their main characteristic was the ability to adapt to a hostile and different environment. Much of such a learning took place thanks to the experiences shared with Indians, and, in fact, our “frontiers-men were not Portuguese but Indian-Portuguese hybrids” (FREYRE 1945, p. 41).

Such an ability to adapt was a trait common to the Portuguese even prior to Brazil’s discovery and colonization. In spite of the moments of undeniable intolerance, the Portuguese population had gotten used to living with and to the mix of different cultures, Arabs and Jews included. Much like Portinari’s representations, Freyre was trying to explain, to a foreign audience, that the main vector of Brazilian colonization had been the common, poor and multiracial man, from start, and not the historically crystalized figure of the settler/colonizer (FREYRE 1945, p.29).

One of the greatest differences between the trajectories of the US and Brazil lay in the social dynamics of slavery. While the North American system had a stricter hierarchical structure, the Brazilian case was marked by greater flexibility in social relations (FREYRE 1945, p.53). In his words: “Brazilian plantations seem to have been less despotic than slavery in other American areas; and less cruel—if one admits degrees in cruelty...” (FREYRE 1945, p.49). Freyre was well aware that Brazil’s image as a racial paradise had long been part of the repertoire of stereotypes on the country, in America (HELLIG, 1990, p. 55-57). Such an image was first built with the circulation of English-speaking travel journals in the nineteenth century, though it

nevertheless gained projection in the early decades of the twentieth century thanks to groups connected to the fight for Afro-American rights. Such an image is generally associated to the idea that there was greater social mobility in Brazil. As Freyre himself highlights, multiraciality does not prevent one from achieving important social positions, whether in politics, in business or intellectually.

Freyre does not dedicate much time to speak of the historical reactions between masters and slaves; his attention is rather focused on the evaluation of the issue in the present. Freyre suggests that the multiracial pattern is forming a prevailing social type in society—“negros are now rapidly disappearing in Brazil, merging into the white stock; in some areas the tendency seems to be towards the stabilization of mixed-bloods in a new ethnic type” (FREYRE 1945, p.96). Such an homogenization would not leave room for racial prejudice. If one is to speak of social discrepancies, they relate to class consciousness: “There has been, and still is, social distance between different groups of the population. But social distance is—more truly today than in the colonial age or during the Empire (when slavery was central in the social structure)—the result of class consciousness, rather than of race or color prejudice” (FREYRE 1945, p. 97).

In addition to social mobility, according to Freyre, multiraciality favored Brazil in several areas, including the creativity of its people and the propensity to peace and democracy. Creativity was allegedly evidenced by the number of artists, writers and architects of increasing international fame, as is the case of Portinari and Niemeyer. The long process of miscegenation would also have contributed to Brazil’s historical peace and stability. The inclusion of the multiracial population ensured the stability that marked Brazil’s transition processes, whether in the independence, abolishment of slavery, or the transition from Monarchy to Republic (FREYRE 1945, p. 101). Unconsciously using the unfortunate wordplay “white revolution,” Freyre clarifies that Brazilian peace contrasts with the violence of historical processes of several of its less-multiracial neighbors.

In turn, Freyre denies that the patriarchal rule present at farms forged appropriate conditions for the instauration of authoritarian governments, “strange as it seems, most of the despots, caudillos, and anti-democratic leaders that Brazil has had did not derive from



its plantations but came from other sections” (FREYRE 1945, p. 65). An “eagerness for social and cultural ascension” of the mestizo mass, quite to the contrary, could only represent a movement of horizontal inclusion, contrary to “despotic paternalism.” On the other hand, Getulio Vargas was the product of “separatist,” inorganic and anti-democratic provincialism, a true caudillo. His caudillism was an authoritarian political phenomenon, much like anti-Semitism and the Ku Klux Klan—the negative representations of intolerance and resistance to democratic values (FREYRE 1945, p. 148).

The meanings of the use of the term democracy in the text deserve special attention. It is clear that there are no grounds to speak of democracy itself in this case, for Freyre considered the Monarchy’s trend to promote balance between regional elites and the central government democratic. His idea of democracy cannot be dissociated from a type of anthropological theory of exchanges and cultural assimilations. His theory is based on the alleged horizontality of the relations between dominators and dominees, in which both learn and mutually assimilate each other, taking over “mutual benefits” from both cultures (FREYRE 1945, p. 121). This would be possible in any circumstance, even in the assimilation of Indian and African groups that remain connected to their original cultures, and in groups of recent immigrants, as was the case of the Japanese. According to Freyre, “there should be no subordination, however, of non-Portuguese sub-groups or sub-cultures to a rigidly uniform Luso-Brazilian or Portuguese-Brazilian culture or “race.” Hence, the Brazilian experience could be capable of “revolutionizing immigration policies without violence for both parties, for immigrated immigrants” (FREYRE, 1945, p. 121), therefore imposing some sort of ideal world for immigrant workers and artists (FREYRE 1945, p. 119-120).

One of the greatest obstacles to the export of such Brazilian anthropological democracy was imperialism, from the imperialism that marked the relations between England and Brazil in the nineteenth century to the current good neighbor policy. Freyre says to the American public that what is good for the US is not necessarily good for the Americas, and may in fact adversely affect its cultural diversity. Freyre severely criticizes the “almost divine” right to colonization associated with military and technological power, and reinforces the

contrary reaction of peoples such as the Mexicans, Arabs, Indians and Brazilians, based on the fact that their semi-colonial status “is causing damages to their creative capacity and human potential” (FREYRE, 1945, p. 73).

Freyre’s idea were largely accepted and circulated worldwide after the end of World War II, especially when UNESCO was first founded (MAIO, 1999, p. 114). In such a context, it seemed important for European and North American intelligentsia and political class to open up for debate and self-reflection, thus taking the due measures in order to avoid a new world war. This perhaps may have been the first purpose of organizing the UN, but it was also consensual that such an understanding would only be possible by mobilizing culture. Freyre’s ideas on Brazil were entirely in line with the pursuit of a more horizontal and tolerant understanding between the nations, such a pursuit would only be complete with the greater opening to peripheral nations, and by taking a deeper look into ethnocentrism. Freyre’s participation at UNESCO’s forum on Tensions that Cause Wars emblematically represented his new status as an international reference, having debated ideas with the likes of Max Horkheimer, George Gurvitch, and Gordon Allport, among others. In fact, Freyre was invited to chair the institution’s Department of Social Sciences (MAIO 1999, p. 114). It is precisely in this context of international projection that the most systematic criticisms to Freyre’s works were made. UNESCO itself funded research on racial relations in Brazil, which produced names such as Donald Pierson and Frankin Frazier.

### **Final Considerations**

The purpose hereof was to demonstrate the role of intellectual exchange, especially between Brazil and the US, in the rewriting of Brazilian past during the *Estado Novo*. Such a period is crucial for the national project of the Vargas government, which engendered the symbolic reconfiguration of national past, based on the confluence between past and present, between Brazil’s traditional frameworks and its potential for modernity. Intellectuals were purportedly chosen as agents in such process, mostly connected to the Brazilian avant-garde experience, to what is generically known as “modernism.” Said agents

had the duty to rewrite the national past given the new needs of the modern nation, whether in their novels, such as Mario de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, or in Villa Lobos' musical experiences, in Gilberto Freyre's and Sergio Buarque's essays or in Portinari's paintings.

The aforementioned exchanges catalyzed the re-articulation of national ideology, the selective appropriation of such ideas of a modern Brazil by the authoritarian State; having mixed already traditional forms, such as the paradise and natural motifs from Romantic tradition, with the new forms of identity, such as racial democracy. It seems clear that that said new ideological articulation was the symbolic interface of the attempt to include Brazil in the new economic world order. One may therefore claim that the converging point of such discourses is the development of Brazil's image as a global power of the future. Such discourse was furthered based on the opportunism and quite acute perception of the agitated historical situation brought forth by the end of World War II.

Thanks to the role of the State, such a messianic time structure and the images surrounding it were strongly promoted in mass culture. One could in fact speak of the rewriting of a great foundation myth. After all, such a story was not exactly marked by the epic triumphalism contained in the representations promoted thereby, and was more of a myth of profoundly authoritarian features. Much like many other stories, it was nothing other than "the distortion of reality," as Freyre himself said to the North American audience, when referring to the Brazilian artists, produced "when they feel the need to make reality seem more real, or more Brazilian than it in fact is" (FREYRE 1945, p. 158).

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