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Walking and the Life of a Contemporary Artist in Brazil. Being Nazareth. An Interview with Paulo Nazareth

Caminhar e Ser um Artista Contemporâneo no Brasil. Ser
Nazareth. Entrevista com Paulo Nazareth

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Introduction

The interview with Paulo Nazareth was conducted as part of the research project *As Práticas Artísticas Contemporâneas e o Pensamento Pós-Colonial e Decolonial* (Contemporary Artistic Practices in the Ibero-American Context and Postcolonial and Decolonial Thought; Sales & Cabrera, 2020). As is evident throughout the interview, we were keen to explore ethnic-racial and identity issues in the work of the artist from Minas Gerais, as well as his integration into the field of contemporary Brazilian art, delving into his background and interests. We acknowledge that the current context of contemporary art in Brazil has addressed significant dimensions concerning Brazilian identity, which is long present in Brazilian visual culture. In the 21st century, these dimensions have evolved, challenging our colonial legacy and the conservative tradition in the visual arts, spanning from modernism to the present day, particularly concerning racial issues.

By exploring colonialism's impact on fiction, imagery, and culture, the interview with Nazareth delves into how racism perpetuated and reinforced ample imaginaries that subalternised, racialised, and relegated native peoples, enslaved Blacks, and Afro-descendants to the periphery. Nazareth also addresses the issue of racial mixing, a ghost that has always haunted Brazilian culture and is still surrounded by a narrative emanated from a supposed "racial democracy".

As part of the research project above, we were interested in exploring the presence of this artist and his work. We recognise that Nazareth, like many others, has emerged as a voice previously obscured by the project of modernity. In the 21st century, such voices "come back" as "new social actors", engaging in identity and cultural struggles. Decolonisation in the field of art has manifested in various forms in Brazil, evolving into a transdisciplinary and collective pursuit given its urgency in a world increasingly overshadowed not only by the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the authoritarian and neo-colonial political climate of 2020 in Brazil. Although at the time of publishing and reading this interview, Brazil has returned to a democratic context, which we hope is not temporary, the shadows of conservatism and their agendas of racism and subalternisation continue to haunt us.

Born in 1977 in Governador Valadares, Paulo Nazareth is acknowledged as a prominent contemporary Brazilian artist, particularly since his performance piece *Notícias da América* (News from America), conducted between 2011 and 2012. During this work, the Minas Gerais-born artist crossed Latin America to the United States on foot. Upon arrival, he washed his feet in the Hudson River. He participated in the "Art Basel Miami" fair with an installation of the same name that brought him fame — a green Kombi loaded with bananas and featuring the artist on the side. Also known as a wandering artist, these "wanderings", as the artist himself prefers to describe them, are evident in his work through numerous formats and languages, including photography, video, installations, objects, and publications.

Michelle Sales (MS): Paulo, thank you for facilitating this conversation. Could you begin by introducing yourself and sharing some early memories from your childhood and adolescence that you believe were pivotal in shaping you as an artist?

Paulo Nazareth (PN): So, I have been Paulo Nazareth for a while. I was born on Morro do Carapina, a hill opposite Pico Ibituruna in the Rio Doce valley. Actually, I was born at the foot of that hill because my mother descended it to the Santa Terezinha Hospital. That was in the 1970s. Carapina Hill is a very ancient landmark there. I often refer to it as "Rio Doce Valley" or "Atu", as it is known in the Borum language. "Atu" is the name of the river. This town developed around a military outpost, Porto das Figueiras, and it was around this outpost, also known as a "Porto das Canoas", that the village and later the towns expanded. So it was also Figueiras, known as Porto das Figueiras, and my family originates from there, predating even the establishment of the military post. In the 1930s, more precisely in '38, during the Vargas era, Benedito Valadares, as

the governor at the time, elevated the village to the status of a "town". At the end of the same year, the town was renamed Governador Valadares, and those born there adopted the surname Valadares. My work also explores names and namings. I am increasingly reclaiming the original name, the name of origin: Figueiras, Porto das Figueiras, Santo Antônio das Figueiras, Porto das Canoas, and Atu, in the Borum language. My mother's mother descends from the Borum people and has this mixture with some communities that, at the time, did not call themselves quilombola. Both the Borum people and the quilombola communities grew and broke up into smaller groups precisely due to the challenges of survival in this region. My mother's mother was born in 1913, her father was born in 1911, and the fathers' fathers and mothers' mothers are from the late 1800s, more or less 1890 or 1880. The area where the family originated was turned into a farm, and some people left while others stayed and became known as "bugres". So those who were Indigenous Borum remained in the territory and were transformed into "bugres"; they were referred to as "bugres". My mother's mother was very resistant. When my mother was born, her mother left the farm and moved to the city. It is said that on the day they forcibly took her and sent her to a colony, specifically to the Barbacena Psychiatric Hospital, she was walking towards the river with the intention of drowning herself and the child. That *neném* [on the grandmother's lap] was my mother. The more they tried to take the child away, the more she resisted, and the more she resisted, the more they said she was crazy. In fact, she [the grandmother] had a fit of rage about the situation and the theft of her child. In this situation, the boss, who was a delegate at the time and also a notary judge, signed a document to send her to Barbacena, where she [the grandmother] was put on the train for the "crazy" and left. That is part of the history that I inherited; it is part of my history, and my mother still grieves over it to this day; she mourns her mother who has gone. My job is to be Nazareth, too, to carry Nazareth. I carry Nazareth, and Nazareth carries me. I feel it is a bit like they say: when a Pope is elected, he chooses a name to be called by. It could be from a previous Pope, or it could be a new name. Just as in art, in different ways, artists can and do choose a name, or they carry their own registered name or adopt a new name.

MS: It is a name with a profound religious significance. I did not intend to delve into this topic now, but you touched on a spiritual aspect that I believe is important in your work due to this "resource", so to speak, your autobiographical narrative. From what I understand, this family narrative tells of a family legacy, of family history, of people who have journeyed as projects of crossing over, not just from one place to another, but in envisioning other worlds, other existences, to build their lives. I will leave that as a question for you to address. The theme of religiosity and the mystical in your work, particularly regarding these journeys. I did not want to let Nazareth pass because this mystical ancestral aspect seems to be central. Meanwhile, before you address this, I would like you to comment on Mestre Orlando and his influence on your journey to becoming Paulo Nazareth. Who was Mestre Orlando to you? This relationship with a master carver, woodcarver, and woodworker, the very strong affinity with popular

culture in the interior of Minas Gerais, the memory of the Baroque, which runs through these popular cultures, these popular aesthetics of the interior of Minas Gerais.

PN: Orlando is that intersection of paths. I met Mestre Orlando in 1997, the year I took my university admission exam. I had taken the exam to enrol in the School of Fine Arts, among many other pursuits. It was a year of defining directions. That year, 1997, I tried to join the police, all the police categories there were, and, at the same time, art. I took the exam for the University Theatre and did not qualify, and I also failed the qualification at the School of Fine Arts. According to the qualification exams, I lacked the skills for the School of Performing Arts, the School of Fine Arts or the Military School. Despite passing the physical tests, the military schools did not approve me either. I had no psychic ability. I was deemed psychologically unfit for military service, Officer's School, or anything. That was the year I met Mestre Orlando. He also arrived in Belo Horizonte in the 1970s, and in the year I was born, he received an award from the Pampulha Art Museum. Orlando worked in Belo Horizonte for a long time, in the 70s, 80s and 90s. He engaged with young people and children in various locations, teaching the art of carving stone and wood, particularly talc or soapstone, which is common in our region. Even Aleijadinho himself carved in soapstone, and many of Aleijadinho's prophets, and much of his production is in soapstone and wood. Mestre Orlando held recognition but was also marginalised — many viewed him "not [as] an artist, [but as] a craftsman". There were even tensions with one of the local schools, not with the school itself, but with some teachers. They would say, "no, he is a craftsman". So Mestre Orlando would talk to me and others about this role of the artisan, of craftsmanship and this nature which is born with us, innate art, this place of being "born with". He pointed to this place, to what I did as a child, as already being the place of art, so the artist is there. What he highlighted was this: "it does not start here, but you as an artist start from there. Back there, when your mother would sweep the streets, go down the hill and go to the city centre, clean the streets of the centre, clean the streets of the city and find these toys (these 'little men', as we used to call them, these figurines. They say 'figurine' now, don't they?). So, when your mother found them and brought them to you, and you carved the sticks or moulded the missing parts out of chewing gum, you rebuilt them. Then you are already an artist; you have it in you, and it is born with you". All these earlier productions, Mestre Orlando, helped me recognise a production in art as the place of my development. That very walk, that encounter, and that is what I learnt from my mother, finding objects on the street and making that encounter, is the training school and the art production. It is a place of learning by doing, and in that place, the exercise itself becomes an art object. Nothing is merely an exercise, yet everything is. All production is an exercise, and all exercise is also production. So, all this production is an exercise; it is always an exercise for what lies ahead. Nothing exists without learning, and no learning is mere learning.

MS: Still on the subject of Mestre Orlando, Paulo, from what I have read in

some of your interviews and even in texts that I have also researched, there is something I would like you to comment on because Mestre Orlando seems to be an important master for you, an important teacher for you, from a political point of view as well, because he was involved in the process of Africanising Carnival in Bahia, one of the founders of Ilê Aye. Well, his work had an important political dimension that involved affirming Blackness and bringing it into popular culture. I would like to understand what that encounter was like for you from a political standpoint.

PN: Yes, Mestre Orlando had something good, which I see in Capoeira Angola, the *mandinga*. He brought a bit of that, which is the *mandingueiro*. It is a game where you feint; you pretend you are going one way, but you are not; there is a swagger, a certain grimace, and a playfulness. That grimace is part of this fight; it is there to distract and deceive. That is not just in Capoeira Angola but also in street capoeira, regional capoeira, and even with Mestre Pimba; there is a lot of ancestry and preservation. Mestre Orlando had a lot of that, and that grimace, of the jest; that jest is something that draws you in without you realising it: "oh, it is just a jest". And that is where the trick is, the main movement, the one that will be the decisive blow, which will lead to escape and freedom. Mestre Orlando had a lot of that because, besides sculpting and carving wood, he played a lot; there was a lot of play. And he played with music, and the music spoke of this place, so it was a musicality of improvisation, something beautiful. He conveyed this and introduced it to me, too, because I wanted to be many things. My rhythm always moves backwards or forward; it is always broken, and Mestre Orlando saw that, too, and singing is always singing, no matter the rhythm. He used to say: "you have to use this way of speaking while singing; you speak a truth while singing". He taught this place of play, which is also the truth, this grimace, very much connected to capoeira and the old capoeira, the capoeira of the streets of Salvador, which predates this, it was the game played on the street. While playing capoeira, capoeira is not just about the body; it is something that invades the mind, and when we talk about the body, it is not just from the head down. In this place, the whole body plays, from the tip of the toenail to the strand of hair, the face, the face, and, at that moment, you find this place of the *carranca* (frown), which is the person's own expression, the face that becomes a mask. So, you learn to create your own *carranca*. Mestre Orlando used to teach this thing where we talk about the body, but the body extends beyond that. This emanation of energy from the body, which we can call "heat" or whatever, is also the body, and it can spread throughout the world. And then this game, this *carranca*, can exist here inside your own head, and we can imprint it in other places, this capoeira game. So this place of affirmation is also a bit of his history when he discovers what he can do with his hands and passes this on to other worlds/many in Salvador, then here in Minas, in Belo Horizonte, in many occupations. Despite not having been to school, Mestre Orlando had a wealth of knowledge, and he also sought it out. He often spoke about how many artists drank from this fountain, how artists from Europe drank from the African fountain, and that this African art, regardless of where it was, was only

seen as a place for craftsmanship, as a lesser art. And it was only valued when a European artist appropriated it. We can think of the European artist not as an artist born in Europe but as an artist who inherited European culture. Mestre Orlando used to say that it is important to always fight against this because sometimes the place, the source of inspiration, is treated as a lesser place, and the copy, what is appropriated, has a greater degree of recognition.

MS: Paulo, I am studying your work in my dissertation, and one thing I am also interested in, not only for the dissertation but also for our research group, is one of the tensions in your work, which is subverting this concept of racial mixing, and thinking of the mestizo as a fictional character in Brazil who was placed in the racial theories of the 19th century as a degenerate figure and then romanticised as a representative of this national symbol. Both places start from a concept of "race" as a construct of biology, from biology. In your work, this figure, the mestizo, is used to punctuate not only the erasures but also to extrapolate a notion of essentialised and fixed "racial identity". You create connections through similarities, as in the project *Cara de Indio* (Indigena Face; Figure 1), for example. When you talk about Mexico, you question borders, something I saw in your book, which makes me think of a strong relationship between your work and the writings of Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa, this relationship of ambivalence in inhabiting these *in-between* places, and this is what I wanted to understand: how does this mestizo consciousness feed your crossings? And considering the territory as a fundamental aspect of your work, to what extent do you believe it is possible to negotiate these encounters?



P. NAZARETH EDIÇÕES / LTDA -- Morro Sama --- TA / PERU , abril 2011

Figure 1: Project *Cara de Índio*
 Credits. Paulo Nazareth, 2011 (@paulonazareth)

PN: Well, this place of the mestizo, I think it has always been, ever since I was little, left unspoken. It is a place of oblivion and the search for another place. The issue of place, that place of origin, is marked. Even the language varies from the countryside, from the interior of the state to the centre, and the outsider is always treated as the wrong one. It is important to say that to understand this place a little, I go back to the late 1980s. At that time, everything was very difficult, and this issue of race was very much denied, and we were always dreaming of an impossibility. One thing I like to remember is television because what reached us came from it, and this will feed a lot into my own work now, in a question: *what is the colour of my skin?*, for example, which I bring up in this *Cadernos de África* (Diaries From Africa) project/process. For a long time, we did not have television, and then, at a certain point in the 1980s, an old black and white (b&w) television set arrived. So, all the images we saw were b&w television images. There was this series called *The A-Team*, which was always aired on a b&w television and on a channel that had a very bad signal at the time and which kept juddering, especially for those who lived far from the (city) "centre". From that series onwards, people would ask me who I wanted to be, and

I would say that I wanted to be the Blackest guy there, and my friends would say: "no, you cannot. You cannot be that guy". I wanted to be Mr. T, but I could not be that character. My friends said I had to choose someone else, but I also could not choose a character who was considered the jester, nor could I choose one who was considered old, and, obviously, I could not choose a character who was a woman either. So the choice was restricted to one; in fact, that is the choice: "you have to choose that one!". The choice had to be that [character] who was considered beautiful, the standard. Making this choice was difficult, a choice that was not predetermined, and this was also very similar to voting. A predetermined vote, a controlled vote. You are free to make your choice, but you have to choose this one: you cannot be this one; you cannot be that one. But then, towards the end of the 1980s, things started to change, and something else began to happen: we were able to choose. This possibility of being able to choose the President also seems to reflect the likelihood of having other choices. And then, at the beginning of the 1990s, there were many possibilities and many things happening during those years. A very popular magazine that appeared in the 1980s, although it still adhered to a standard, which was *Revista Raça*; there was another standard because the models in *Revista Raça* also represented a model Black person that was not "just any Black person": it was not the weak Black person, it was a chosen model, it was not one considered ugly. I think this changed throughout the 1990s with the opportunity of going to other places, meeting other artists who were not in the magazine, who were not on television, flesh and blood artists: Mestre Orlando himself and this encounter with the issue of *carrancas*. This issue is not a turning point; it is something that's being built, and it is not completely built yet; it is always a question, a doubt. We had an experience in the 1980s where jokes about Black, Indigenous and other non-standard bodies were super strong. Racist jokes about Black and Indigenous people, sexist and homophobic jokes, all of this was allowed — in the 1980s, it was commonplace; it was laughed at. Laughter was debauchery and ridicule; you laughed at the other and not with the other, and when that other got close to your own self, you did not want to see it. These are challenging moments until we reach moments when this kind of joke, of debauchery, is not allowed. In the 1980s and 1990s, we had increasing opportunities for dialogue and exchange. The whole issue of hair, which was a very strong thing for me and which was also linked, because I had afro hair, Black hair, which I had to carry around, and I could not cut, I could only go to the salon once a year, because it was a financial choice: "either cut your hair or eat", "either cut your hair or buy I do not know what". The choice was always for the other thing, and carrying that hair also provoked. The figure of the hair itself brought with it this image of the "dirty sleeper", I had this nickname: "the dirty sleeper". I am currently working on a collection of my nicknames, "the dirty sleeper", and many others. The most subtle nickname I had was "bonbon"; they called me "bonbon", but bonbon was not meant as an affectionate term. Nicknames, especially at school and in other environments, are always connected to bullying. The nickname is always something to belittle in some places. I had a classmate at the time who was quite unpopular, yet she was one of the brightest girls in the group, the most

inquisitive and outspoken. She was a Black girl, dark-skinned, who was always considered "the crazy one". This friend was very important; she introduced me to this place of the racial issue, of the Black issue, and she brought me *Raízes* (Roots); she brought me this book *Raízes*, she lent it to me to read, and one of the characters, Kunta Kinte, raised many racial issues for me. This movement in the 1990s and 2000s was important for understanding the place of the mestizo, the son of the mixture who, even with light skin, will always be Black. There are variations, but he is in this place of the Black man, and, as a Black man, he is a marginalised body used for many things. These years have been essential for me to be able to build, and this construct comes from this place to this day.

MS: First, I would like to thank you, Paulo, for being so kind as to share your history. I am very moved. Especially when you give a historical account of your journey, it moves me because, although I am not a Black body, I am a peripheral body; I am a body from the Indigenous forest, from the Indigenous mountain range where technology does not reach, the word has not even reached there, and I have also faced denial, my body has been denied a lot, even though I am not a Black body, it has been denied as a gay body, as a poor body, as a body from a family with no money, no education, no intellectual background, and I have a background in research into ritual and art. I was commenting on how much it touches me when you bring ancestry into your discourse because I get an impression of a very close ancestry as art, as retrieval, as restoration, which I think is an important place even for other bodies that are unfamiliar to that practice, originally belonging to Indigenous and Black communities. The impression I get is that you are describing an ancestry that is deeply intertwined with your personal history and is reflected beautifully in your work as an artist and in various aspects of who you are. A body that is alive, of an ancestry that is alive and pulsating. When you talk about your grandmother and your mother, you are not talking about the past. Talking about your body is talking about the other women who have shaped you, and this is very beautiful and meaningful to me. I feel it like an arrow in my body, a very positive impulse, which makes me look at my research, my art, and my own history, and I am very grateful to you for sharing that.

PN: That is good to hear. I am grateful for the feedback. It is good to know that the work reaches this place. I was even going to talk a bit about Nazareth, my mother's mother. It is a place of doubt. We do not know much because she went to Barbacena, and the name thing comes back. She becomes a number; she loses her name. Her name is taken away from her. Nazareth Cassiano de Jesus becomes a number, and this number exists for around 20 years and then vanishes; there is no death certificate, and there is nothing. There is only Nazareth's admission to the hospital, and we do not know anything else. This hospital, more than a hospital, was a concentration camp; for a long time, it sold bodies; this place became a body factory and sold the bodies to universities in various locations. The university where I studied, here in Minas Gerais, is said to have bought 500 bodies. Nazareth could be anywhere in the territory as an objectified body, a dead body. So that is it. This ancestry is really there,

the mother herself, my mother who is here, and it is always a conversation or a non-conversation. We have similarities and questions. In my journey of making it this far, I have always been supported by women. My mother and my older sister, who used to look after me while my mother went out to work, are both named Ana, and I would call them both "mum", and they both had the same name. So this also shapes this history, and the work is to think about how much this history talks to other histories and how much this is a common history. How many bodies have disappeared in Barbacena and not just there? So there is this proximity, how close I get to my mother, who gets closer to her mother, how much these bodies talk to each other and how much this ancestry communicates with different ancestries. Those who are Borum, who identify themselves as Borum, as heirs to this Borum ancestry, also share this ancestry that was called "botocudo", the Aimorés, and also share an ancestry that stretches back to that time, which is that of the people from Lagoa Santa, the people from Luzia, which is often denied. The Borum people always refer to the cave paintings, and they talk about paintings from various locations, paintings that belong to their relatives. Sometimes, even the indigenists deny it and say: "they say yes, but nothing can be proved and if nothing can be proved, right?". However, these cave paintings, which, and that is not me talking, it is not the other person talking, are an inheritance of this place; they belong to the people. It is a transmission that comes from an orality that predates Cabral and Columbus. It is about something that has been passed down for a long time.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

Biographical Note

Michelle Sales is a researcher, teacher and independent curator. She is an associate professor at the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (2010), and she collaborates in the Postgraduate Programme in Multimedia at the State University of Campinas. Michelle coordinates the Postcolonial and Peripheral Cinemas research network, spanning Brazil and Portugal, and is at the forefront of the project *As Práticas Artísticas Contemporâneas e o Pensamento Pós-Colonial e Decolonial* (Contemporary Artistic Practices and Postcolonial and Decolonial Thought). She holds a PhD in Contemporary Studies from the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro and the University of Coimbra (2018–2020). Between 2014 and 2020, she was a member of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Coimbra, where she coordinated the project *À Margem do Cinema Português* (At the Fringes of Portuguese Cinema; 2020), funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. She received a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation under the Foreign Researchers Programme (2013–2014). Her work spans the following areas: postcolonial studies, intersectional feminism, and film studies.

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