

# The right to ancestry in Paulo Nazareth's works

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Nazareth Cassiano de Jesus was a descendent from the Krenak<sup>1</sup> indigenous people from Vale do Rio Doce, a region of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. In the early 1940s, with a four-month-old daughter in her arms, she ran away from her alcoholic and violent husband. She was found walking near the Saçuí River, in the municipality of Governador Valadares. When they tried to take her child, Nazareth reacted to protect her. She was then sent to the city of Barbacena on the “crazy train”, one of the many existing in Brazil at that time, which transported individuals with “deviations” that were not socially accepted. On board these trains, they arrived in that city known for housing seven psychiatric institutions in their territory, among them the Hospital Colônia de Barbacena, founded in 1903 and famous for scandals of selling bodies to medical schools around the country. Nazareth remained in the institution, without any contact with the outside world, at least until the year of 1963. Records cease with the military coup of 1964.

Daniela Arbex enumerates, in her book *Holocausto Brasileiro* (Brazilian Holocaust, in free translation), the women who ended up populating the mental institution:

Many were daughters of farmers who had lost their virginity or adopted behavior considered inappropriate for Brazil, at the time, dominated by colonels and landowners. Wives exchanged for lovers ended up silenced by the internment in the Colônia hospital. There were also prostitutes, most of them from São João del-Rei, who were sent to the Arthur Bernardes women's pavilion after cutting the men with whom they had slept, but who refused to pay for their services.<sup>2</sup> (Arbex, 2013, p. 22)

In 1977, in the same Governador Valadares where Nazareth was separated from her daughter, her grandson was born. Paulo Sérgio da Silva is Paulo Nazareth.

In 1999, Paulo entered the School of Fine Arts at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and, years later, completed his studies in drawing and engraving.

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1. The indigenous people known in Brazil as Krenak also name themselves as Borun or Borum. Therefore, all those words can be used through this article to refer to the same people, from who the indigenous side of Paulo Nazareth's family was originated.

2. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

But these would not be his best known facets to the public. His artistic process includes investigations into his own family memory, travel reports and an obsession with documentation.

Between May 2012 and April 2013, Paulo Nazareth produces *Cadernos de África* ("African Notebooks"), a record of his journey through the "slave route", in which he travels through locations where the main African slave trade centers for America took place. At the end of the tour, he exhibits, at the Lyon Biennial, a room with several traces of his trip, as in the work *Collection de Aguas de Africa* ("Collection of African Waters", 2013), in which he gathers labels of mineral water that he consumes during the trip.

A kind of personal collection permeates all of Nazareth's work, starting from the narrative he builds about the meaning of his own name. In an interview with researcher Giovana Ellwanger, in 2016, the artist from Minas Gerais uses a tone full of meanings to approach the narrative that surrounds his name:

My name, I'm da Silva. My name is Paulo Sérgio da Silva. Paulo da Silva. But Nazareth is a name that is part of this situation that I put myself in, of this place, of that experience that passes through the arts, that experience of art that makes me invoke that name, Nazareth. <sup>3</sup>(Ellwanger, 2016, p. 172)

In his speech, the artist contemptuously mentions his Christian name: "Paulo da Silva", he says. His speech reveals the generic content he attributes to the surname, which, for him, means little or nothing. As the most popular surname in Brazil, "Silva" does not refer to any type of ancestry or inheritance in particular. Nazareth, his grandmother's first name, transformed into the surname of his artistic persona, brings up all his genetic and cultural background, a gap that the artist seeks to fill in through the entire course of his work. His relationship with his grandmother's figure is also his relationship with his own past.

In 2013, Paulo Nazareth was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale. However, his physical presence at the exhibition site is not possible due to the artist's belief in not stepping on European soil without having traveled all over Africa. Thus, Nazareth chooses to send a set of works to the exhibition, next to which two Guarani-Kaiowá Indians stood. These individuals were sent by the artist to report, on European soil, the horrors of the indigenous genocide that has occurred in Brazil since its colonization by European people.

The relationship between the artist and the indigenous is established through his search for the reconstruction of his indigenous memory, through which he sees a parallel between the Guarani-Kaiowás and the Krenaks, their ancestors, since both peoples passed through a kind of "expropriation" of their land. Both in Minas Gerais - in the case of the Krenaks - and in Mato Grosso do Sul - in the case of the Guarani-Kaiowás - a land division took place and ended up "pushing"

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3. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

the indigenous people to reserves that, according to the artist, were nothing more than “manpower reserves” (Ellwanger, 2016, p. 174).

In 2012, Nazareth finally got in touch with the indigenous people of Mato Grosso do Sul, where he stayed overnight, in order to learn to pray “for the world not to end” (Ellwanger, 2016, p. 175). There, he is in charge of writing the history of the Kaiowá people, including the death of the chief Nísio Gomes, murdered in 2011, after leading the repossession of a territory, challenging the local agro-business.

I arrive there, some time later, in this place, to learn to pray, and to listen to these stories of death and genocide, that are happening, that are happening and that is something invisible.<sup>4</sup> (Ellwanger, 2016, p. 176)

The matter of invisibility is repeatedly present in Paulo Nazareth's work. What emerges is a willingness to archive all of his discoveries, not only in the sense that his own memory - including what he will possibly rescue from ancestor memories - is not lost, but in the sense of giving some visibility to these narratives, thus filling in their own gaps and the gaps in history.

In the photographs, sometimes, we would appear in the background, the boss always in front and the *bugres*<sup>5</sup> in the background. [...] Who is this person in the back? Seeking this information. I think this message comes and goes, maybe even between these worlds and even this awareness, which is a long process of discovery. It is very difficult, it is a process of total erasure.<sup>6</sup> (Nazareth, 2019, p. 15-16)

His quest is to retrace the paths of his grandmother Nazareth and the relations of these peoples with their ancestry and the theme of invisibilization appears in a coherent way in the artist's own origin, so present and so vigorous that it becomes responsible even for naming him.

It is in the Right to Funeral that I speak of this place as well, of this meeting and that right, also a right of the dead, which is the right to funeral. Nísio Gomes did not have his funeral. He's a missing person, like ... I don't know about my grandmother, we don't have any news. Nazareth Cassiano de Jesus too, we don't know if she had a funeral, if she had another family. She is a missing person.<sup>7</sup> (Ellwanger, 2016, p. 178)

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4. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

5. In an interview held between 2015 and 2016 by the Brazilian researcher Ana Mattos Porto Pato, Nazareth himself defines “bugres”: “At the turn of the 19th century to the 21st century, the construction of the railroad connecting [the Brazilian states of] Minas [and] Espírito Santo starts. As a result, the land is subdivided and many of the indigenous peoples of the region leave their territory, their villages and go to the cities. But the assimilation process didn't quite happen, they never become Brazilian citizens, they cease to be Boruns and begin to be called bugres, go to work on the farms and are catechized.” (Pato, 2017, p. 112, translated from the original in Portuguese).

6. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

7. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

Paulo Nazareth's compulsion to repair the loss of his ancestral memory and his indigenous heritage through the physical loss of his maternal grandmother is what drives his work. In his artistic career, an ultra-exposure is used to compensate for this absence. Consciously or not, it permeates all of his work through photographic, video or written records, seeking to document his actions and projects as completely as possible. It becomes clear as a process that goes against his past history, an attempt not to let time take care, by itself, of telling future generations who this Paulo da Silva was.

Seligmann-Silva refers to contemporary art as a time when

[...] artists will shuffle archives, question borders, try to shake powers, reveal secrets, reverse dichotomies, to explode them. The watchword is to anarchive to collect the ruins of the archives and reconstruct them critically.<sup>8</sup> (2014, p. 38)

While inevitably building his own mythology, the artist ends up setting aside chapters of his own history. The more details of a story that are told, the more those that are not told become evident.

According to Derrida (2011, p. 12-13) in classical antiquity, the archon was a figure who possessed political power, who made and represented the law, was a recognized authority and, therefore, it was in his house that official documents were stored. His ability to ensure the safety of this archive and to interpret it was evident in that society.

Paulo Nazareth questions the role of the Museum as archon as he creates the work "DECRETO [DECRET]", from 2006, in which he writes a document, naming as Art all of the actions he performed from then on, until the date that suits him, thus becoming "immune to the Law and Justice, and cannot be judged, condemned or criticized" for his actions, "which can only be revoked by a commission of artists"<sup>9</sup> chaired by him. Authenticating the document, he seeks to give it an official character and, in this way, invert the logic of legitimation perpetrated by the Museum. He takes not only the power to self-legitimize as an artist, and all his work as art, but he is also responsible for documenting this act and safeguarding the document that makes it possible.

In an interview granted in 2019, Paulo Nazareth tells the story of the family that, fleeing an Italy recently defeated by Ethiopia in 1896, at the Battle of Adwa, occupies the Borum territory in the region of the Vale do Rio Doce. The patriarch of that family, in addition to being a sheriff, becomes a notary public judge, and thus provides all the paperwork that gives him property on the land. This farm blocks the circulation of an entire people through their own territory. "A group of 1,200 indigenous people cannot own this large territory, but a farmer, one

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8. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

9. All quotes in this paragraph were adapted from the original piece, in Portuguese.

person, can own this territory [...].”<sup>10</sup> (Nazareth, 2019, p. 15-16) Understanding that mastering the papers was of great use to the Italians who occupied the Borum territory of the indigenous people of Nazareth Cassiano de Jesus is what makes Paulo Nazareth, decades later, use paper to build his narrative, reconstructing that of his ancestors, while moving through his own land: the territory of art.

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10. Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.