

EN

Paulo
Nazareth
Patois / Patuá



01_02

27_04_2025

WIELS WIELS WIEL

“ The center of the world lies where we were born. ”

— Paulo Nazareth

For over fifteen years, Paulo Nazareth has methodically traversed the Americas and the African continent, his bare feet touching the soil in an ongoing performance that reveals how colonial cartographies and systemic racism have shaped the landscapes of modernity. His paths, deliberate and slow, transform displacement into a form of storytelling, revealing how movement etches histories into bodies, languages, and borders. In the spaces of WIELS—a former brewery whose industrial architecture echoes histories of labour and transformation—his exhibition *Patois/Patuá* embodies these journeys through an intricate assemblage of words, images, and sounds, weaving together stories that reach far beyond the personal.

The exhibition's bilingual homophone title, *Patois/Patuá*, encapsulates two powerful acts of defiance that resonate throughout Nazareth's work: *patois*, those non-standard, vernacular languages that resisted colonial standardisation, and *patuá*, handmade amulets rooted in Afro-Brazilian traditions. These talismans, brought to Brazil by enslaved Islamic West Africans, carried Arabic-scripted charms that would merge Islamic, African, and Catholic practices into objects of personal protection. This

convergence of resistance finds particularly fertile ground in Brussels, a city officially divided between French and Dutch, where numerous other languages coexist in varying states of recognition or invisibility. Together, these terms illuminate how language and culture can serve as armour, reshaping imposed structures into tools of survival and resistance.

At the heart of this resistance lies Nazareth's own identity, proclaimed through his declaration: "I am Paulo. I am called Paulo Nazareth. Nazareth comes from my mother's mother, Nazareth Cassiano de Jesus." Through this name, he claims an ancestry marked by systemic violence: his grandmother, confined to the infamous Barbacena Asylum—known as the "Cemetery of the Living"—was one of over 60,000 victims of torture, neglect, and mass death targeting Brazil's marginalised population. "Being Nazareth is my work. I began to carry this ancestor. My grandmother became a kind of *carranca*, like those that protect navigators in Brazilian waters. This *Egun* (Yoruba for "ancestors") that protects and walks with me..."

Like names themselves—so often mispronounced, changed, or erased—Nazareth's work embodies the complex dynamics of migration, assimilation, and resistance, operating simultaneously as markers of exclusion and portals of ancestral memory. By wearing his grandmother's name as a protective talisman, he transforms absence into presence, making her his most intimate and cherished *patuá*. Through this act, he becomes more than a storyteller but a living archive, his identity functioning as a vessel where erased histories resurface to confront their contemporary manifestations.

This concept of the living archive finds powerful expression in CAM (The Immigration Cooperative), an ongoing project that opens the exhibition. Here, visitors encounter African immigrant workers, their stories woven into the artwork through their lived experiences of navigating Brussels' opaque immigration systems. Archival boxes and case files transcend their bureaucratic origins to resonate as vessels

of shared struggle and echoes of a collective history of displacement and survival. Through this installation, migration emerges not as a free-flowing transit but as a constant negotiation with visible and invisible presences and boundaries.

These accumulated stories materialise dramatically in the exhibition's first room, where metal mesh structures are scattered across the space—a material found in construction sites, migrant camps, and temporary settlements worldwide. These industrial screens, simultaneously symbols of precarious division and provisional shelter, display various works while creating a space that resists linear navigation, alluding to the boundaries and thresholds that shape migration narratives. Here, the multilingualism that permeates Nazareth's work takes the form of a vast assembly guided by this artist-storyteller, its poetic structure amplified by many voices from different temporal and geographical coordinates, often inhabiting the liminal spaces between stamps and permits.

Within this dense constellation of works, *For Sale* emerges as a particularly incisive critique of the colonial gaze. Nazareth commodifies himself as an "exotic man", advertising his image in multiple languages that trace complex histories of commerce and colonisation. The title, stark and transactional, weaponises the marketplace's vocabulary, exposing the dehumanising lens through which Indigenous and African bodies have been viewed—and sold—for centuries. The work deliberately echoes the legacy of human exhibitions, like those infamously staged in Brussels' Royal Museum for Central Africa. Yet Nazareth's self-commodification subverts the expected narrative: he refuses to allow his image to be consumed without critique. By making the exoticism of his identity explicitly transactional, he wields it as a tool of resistance, transforming the languages of commerce into sharp-edged mirrors that reflect the violence of the colonial gaze.

Moving beyond this critique of capitalist logistics and trade, Nazareth presents *KaÁguy Rupigua*. This sonic and photographic work is an

antidote to the dire effects of agribusiness and monoculture in the wild life and indigenous lands in Brazil. In a country where vast swaths of native forests and indigenous lands are systematically cleared for soy-bean plantations and cattle ranching, the work documents Nazareth learning Indigenous animal names from children of communities who have faced centuries of systematic violence, from colonial-era massacres to contemporary land grabs. These recordings echo through the exhibition's halls like distant memories or endangered breaths, becoming oral amulets that safeguard knowledge against the twinned forces of ecological devastation and Indigenous genocide.

This preservation of endangered knowledge finds another form in *Palmares/Wakanda*, where Nazareth's embroidered work bridges two Black utopias across time and space. Palmares, the legendary self-governed 17th century community of escaped enslaved people in Brazil, who resisted Portuguese colonial forces for nearly a century, converges with Wakanda, the fictional African nation from Marvel's comic Black Panther, which imagines an African society untouched by colonialism. Through delicate, deliberate stitches, Nazareth entwines historical defiance with contemporary dreams of freedom.

In stark contrast to these delicate threads, his site-specific video installation *Ode to the Sovereignty of Africa* commands the entire second room, where decaying flags signal the increasing fragility of nation-states. Their colours fade as symbols of imposed boundaries crumble. Mounted on scaffolding poles, the 54 flags of the African continent states speak to both the artifice of colonial borders and the lingering scaffolds of power. This new work furthers a career-long investigation: How do Africa's artificial borders continue to scaffold Europe's and Western prosperity and welfare?

The exhibition's spatial journey culminates as visitors ascend the industrial staircase to encounter *Oi Ori Buruku*, a video where a Nigerian immigrant stands atop São Paulo's Edifício Itália, cursing the

city in Yoruba. The projection faces a panoramic window overlooking Brussels, overlaying the two towns. The title itself—translating to "bad mentality" with "Ori" referring to the essence of being—speaks to the violence of forced adaptation. These curses, bridging centuries of violence, transform linguistic preservation into an act of defiance. The immigrant's voice resonates not as a plea but as a declaration, a refusal to succumb to the erasures demanded by urban modernity.

This theme of resistance culminates in Nazareth's deliberate choice to refuse travel to Europe until he had first visited every African country, underscoring his critique of how artistic circulation often replicates colonial routes. His presence, embodying the resilience of cultural legacy and oral traditions, manifests through Paulo Nazareth Ltda., a network of family and collaborators who activate the exhibition in his absence. Together, they transform the space into a living archive of stories passed across generations, their voices defying silencing and transcending the boundaries of mortality and oppression. These fragmentary yet undeniable traces remain accessible only to those willing to listen, turning the exhibition itself into a testament to the enduring power of narratives that refuse to be erased.

Curator: Fernanda Brenner

Assistant curator: Mel Marcondes

BIOGRAPHY

Paulo Nazareth (old man born in the city of Borun Nak [Vale do Rio Doce] Minas Gerais) lives and works throughout the world. His work is often the result of precise and simple gestures, which bring about broader ramifications, raising awareness to press issues of immigration, racialisation, globalisation, colonialism, and its effects in the production and consumption of art in his native Brazil and the Global South. While his work may manifest in video, photography, and found objects, his strongest medium may be cultivating relationships with people he encounters on the road — particularly those who must remain invisible due to their legal status or those who are repressed by governmental authorities. In certain aspects, Nazareth deliberately embodies the romantic ideal of the wandering artist in search of himself and universal truths, to unveil stereotyped assumptions about national identity, cultural history, and human value.

