

The Photographic Work of Mario Cravo Neto

Written by Fernando Castro R.



A few years ago I read a Time magazine review of the book *The History and Geography of Human Genes*. The review revealed factual details of fifty years of population genetics research. [1](#) Some of these facts seemed to me as momentous as the Copernican Revolution, the Theory of Evolution, and the discovery of DNA as the mechanism of heredity. Unfortunately, scientific facts are often incorporated into the functioning ideological background of society all too slowly. The one fact I would like to connect with my reflections of Mario Cravo Neto's work is that Europeans are genetic hybrids with 65% Asian genes and 35% African genes. In a sense, Cravo Neto's works express the truism that the manifestations in his culture of world mythologies belong to all people like him, and perhaps even, all of us. Thus, his work ought to be looked at not for its exoticism but for its catholicism.

A question that has puzzled me for many years is why so many Latin American artists are inclined to address issues of cultural identity, even when, at times, the particular cultural themes

they treat are not connected with them genetically. Cravo Neto, for example, is not conspicuously African. Of course another fact of genetics is that what is conspicuous is only phenotypical whereas what defines an individual molecularly and therefore, what endures in heredity, is genotypical. Was it not the point of Nelson Pereira dos Santos' movie *Tenda dos Milagres* (1975) that many of the prominent European families of Bahia (Cravo Neto's hometown) were cousins of an Afro-Brazilian anthropologist they discriminated? Cravo Neto does not run away from the African culture of his world; quite the contrary, he immerses himself in it. With the 65/35 ratio as an established fact, no further argument is needed on the genealogical level to regard diverse communities simply as one human conglomerate. Its corollary is that there is no genetic foundation for any particular phenotypic group to claim dominance. On the other hand, the reason for concerning oneself with specific cultures of the world cannot be genetic affiliation (which is shared), but cultural milieu (which is heavily dependent on personal history).



Cravo Neto is not, by any means, the first Brazilian artist to concern himself with Afro-Brazilian issues. He was preceded by the Brazilian filmmakers of the so-called Cinema Novo who in the 1960s and 1970s took up the banner of the African culture of resistance to the ideology of branqueamento (whitening) of Brazilian culture; among them, the two mentioned in this essay, Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira dos Santos. In music, poet Vinicius de Moraes and

musician Baden Powell recorded the album "Os Afro-Sambas" (1966) which contained songs about Yoruba deities such as Iemanjá, Xango and Ossanha. De Moraes described the effort thus, "... realizar un novo sincretismo: carioquizar, dentro do espírito do samba moderno, o candomblé afro brasileiro, dando-lhe ao mesmo tempo uma dimensão mais universal." [2](#) (to undertake a new syncretism: to make the Afro-Brazilian candomblé in the style from Rio de Janeiro, within the spirit of modern samba, giving it at the same time a more universal dimension). Cravo Neto's contribution to this "new syncretism" was to bring his sculptural and staging sensitivities into the field of photography when the medium in Latin America was politically committed to its documentary mode.

For the middle class Latin American artist, the cultural manifestations which may not seem linked genetically to her/him are often the very ones that nurture her/him since childhood. This relationship is illustrated in images like "Shelter" (1990), where a fair-skinned child is held in dark-skinned arms. Conflicts with one's nurturing world arise as one's historical awareness matures and it becomes poignantly clear that one belongs simultaneously to the culture of the victors who write official historiography and also that of the victims, whose history official historiography hides. It is a very pressing conflict because inaction implicates you as accomplice. When resolution is sought in art its aim is to restore the vision, value, and history of those marginalized from mainstream culture and for the artist, to culturally find her/himself in the world.

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