

# MISTRAL

Journal of Latin American Women's  
Intellectual & Cultural History

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## **Reimagined Family Ties: Redressing Memory through Photography in Aline Motta's *Pontes sobre abismos* and *Filha Natural***

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To cite this article: Maria Emilia Fernandez. 2022. "Reimagined Family Ties: Redressing Memory through Photography in Aline Motta's *Pontes sobre abismos* and *Filha Natural*." *Mistral: Journal of Latin American Women's Intellectual & Cultural History* 2 (1): 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.21827/mistral.1.39899>

### **Abstract:**

This article investigates the work of Aline Motta, a contemporary Brazilian artist who is proposing different ways of looking at the past while also addressing the interlocking forms of oppression at work in the present. Through her collaborations with ancestors, in which photography plays a crucial role, the artist reflects on the colonial trauma of over three centuries of genocide, slavery and colonization in Brazil. Moreover, I argue that her work invites a rearrangement of our perception of time and contributes to a critique of linear temporality, evincing the falseness of any narrative of the past as single, stable and flowing in only one direction. This research is guided by questions such as: How can photography serve as a medium of fabulation and of imagining family ties across time and space? And how can these gestures signal the way, if not toward healing, towards an ever-incomplete practice of redress?

### **Keywords:**

Memory; Redress; Aline Motta; Photography; Kinship; Brazil

## Reimagined Family Ties: Redressing Memory through Photography in Aline Motta's *Pontes sobre abismos* and *Filha Natural*

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*Reverence for the ancestors is actually a reverence for life; for continuity and change. [...] Here the past becomes the source of inspiration; the present, the arena of perspiration; and the future, our collective aspiration.*

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, 1997, 139

*The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds.*

bell hooks 1995, 64

In her artistic practice, Aline Motta (Niterói, RJ, Brazil, 1974) attempts to narrate what is oftentimes unspeakable or deemed invisible – the voids and gaps in the archives, the silences in family albums, the folds in time and history. Motta's works encourage the active investigation of those absences and furtive presences that make themselves felt across multiple temporalities and dimensions. Through her research, the artist shines light on the strategies deployed by her ancestors, which have enabled her to be here today, presenting a political and poetic approach to consider the reverberations of those histories. By choosing to include portraits of her family members, Motta proposes particular ways of looking at a past marked by slavery and genocide while also reflecting on the interlocking forms of oppression based on race, gender and class that continue to plague Brazilian society. However, I contend that her practice goes beyond denouncing the traumas of colonization, touching on topics such as love, trust, the meaning of family and the complex contradictions that contribute to everyone's identity. Moreover, I argue that she proposes a way of reimagining frameworks of kinship as a form of redress. By articulating new lines of descent that constitute a (re)membering of those fragmented narratives that remain in the archives, Motta is addressing present structural, everyday racism while also performing and expanding the possibilities of inhabiting the future. In doing so, her videos, photographs and installations can be seen as a form of redressing those stories obscured or erased in the official records, opening a space for much needed discussion.

In order to explore this argument, I will analyze *Pontes sobre abismos* [Bridges over the Abyss] (2017), the opening to Motta's trilogy of video works, which includes *Se o mar tivesse barandas* [If the sea had balconies] (2017) and *(Outros) Fundamentos* [(Other) Foundations] (2017-2019). In this first video, Motta follows the trails in the archive in search of her great-grandfather's identity, Enzo Pereira de Souza, the white son of the family who employed her black great-grandmother, Mariana. His name eventually emerges in the artist's research, featured in the headlines of old newspaper social columns, but with each mention of his name in the archive comes the haunting absence of Mariana and the child that he disowned, a baby girl who would grow to be the artist's grandmother, Doralice. Motta's affectionate quest to rewrite the genealogy of her

own family and unveil the power relations that shaped her family tree becomes a way of retelling the history of Brazil and that of many Brazilian families.

This article will look at how photographs of Motta's family members are presented in her videos, playing a key part in the rituals she composes for her films. Photography is a vehicle of embodiment in Motta's work, allowing her ancestors to witness the unraveling of their past as it resonates in the present and beyond – or in the artist's own words, “across permeable and unstable temporal dimensions” (Motta 2020a, 22). By looking closely at *Pontes sobre abismos*, I consider questions such as: How can photography serve as a medium of fabulation, a support to imagine family ties across time and space? How can these intergenerational dialogues become a form of thinking about the future and inventing new lines of filiation? And how can these gestures signal the way, if not toward healing, towards an ever-incomplete practice of redress?

To engage with these interrogations, this article also draws on the analysis of Motta's video and photographic installation titled *Filha Natural* [Natural Daughter] (2018-19). In this work, the artist sets out to investigate the origins of her great-great grandmother Francisca, who was possibly born around 1855 in a coffee plantation in Vassouras, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The artist relies on oral histories and scarce documentation to fabulate who might have been Francisca's ancestors, and what her life might have looked like toward the end of the nineteenth century, living near one of the epicenters of enslavement in Brazil (Eltis 2017, 131). Based on the death certificate of someone with the same name and approximate age, who died at the *Fazenda de Ubá* [Uba Farm], the artist weaves together the fragments of a potential story that then intersects with that of Claudia Mamede, a community leader from Vassouras with an uncanny resemblance to Motta's only surviving portrait of her great-grandmother Mariana, Francisca's daughter. Mamede appears in the video as a kind of ghost; her presence at the *fazenda* comes to challenge those histories of enslavement witnessed by the master's house. Against this background, I argue that the artist's strategic use of photography proposes a way of imagining kinship beyond genomic articulations, extending her ancestry as a form of redressive action, one that seeks to build a bridge between the living and the dead.

### **Tell me a Secret: Listening to Images Across Time and Space**

Doralice, Motta's grandmother, was 99 years old when she told her secret. In 2010, two years before she passed away, she shared with her granddaughter a missing piece of the family tree, a name that would send Motta on a long research journey that continues to unfold today. We learn about this secret half-way through *Pontes sobre abismos*, when Motta conveys to the viewer her grandmother's confession: “I never knew my father. He never acknowledged me as his daughter. My father's name is Enzo, Enzo Pereira de Souza” (Motta 2017). We are told that the artist had a hard time locating him, but that she eventually found his name in old newspapers, mentioned frequently in the gossip columns, along with the advertisements of his parent's hat shop, the same family who had fired Mariana, Doralice's mother, after finding out she was carrying Enzo's child.

In an interview with photographer Gabriel Cabral, the artist confessed feeling torn about sharing her grandmother's story and making it central to *Pontes sobre abismos*. What circumstances justify or warrant the revelation of a secret, she wondered. Was this even her secret to tell? (Motta 2020c). However, after reading “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by social-rights activist and poet Audre Lorde, she decided she would rise to the challenge and speak about her family history. In her 1977 short essay, Lorde makes an argument for sharing

and putting into words that which matters the most to each of us, including difficult histories that run the risk of being misunderstood. Writing in the context of the civil rights movement in the United States, she directed her plea to the Black population, and to Black women in particular, to rally together and speak up against a country that insisted on making the tyranny of racism a norm, and the threat of violence based on racialization, a quotidian reality.

Motta was profoundly moved by Lorde's essay. Although keeping quiet can also be a form of resistance, a mode of survival even, Motta realized that in this case, her grandmother's secret could have a social dimension in so far as it unveiled a path to address similar stories, where the same abuse of power and hypocrisy could be traced to the archetypical Brazilian family. In a sense, to talk about the Marianas and Doralices in Brazilian society is to look past an idealized miscegenated subject, to embrace a lineage of African descent while also confronting the violent imposition of a European kinship. Motta's choice to open up about her family's history honors the resilience of her ancestors and echoes Lorde's attempt to break those silences that immobilize us.

*Pontes sobre abismos* begins with a sequence where the enlarged photographs of the artist's grandmother and great-grandmother are shown flowing in the wind against a brooding sky [Figure 1]. The light captures that moment when it's impossible to tell if it's dawn or dusk, if the day is dying or being born – a nod to Motta's "awareness that life cycles are intrinsically bound to the cycles of the natural world" (Motta 2020a, 24). The black and white images appear as though printed onto a semi-transparent rectangular cloth about two meters long, with their heads facing one another, as though they were connected. Those scenes transition to a tight frame of a calm sea, as though the wind that had previously been blowing on the images of her ancestors was now shown caressing the crests of the waves.



Fig. 1. Aline Motta. Stills from *Pontes sobre Abismos*, 2017. Three-channel video installation, 08:28 min. Courtesy of the artist.

Later on in the video, these enlarged photographs as well as those of Motta and her mother are transported and submerged in water at different places. Although it is not made explicit in this first chapter of the trilogy, these portraits were filmed in Brazil, Portugal and Sierra Leona. Some of these pictures are shown transferred onto textiles while others appear printed as tiles on regular letter-sized paper, fragmented and then put back together on screen [Figures 2-3]. These images are shown against rural and natural landscapes, by the seaside and inhabiting ruins that the forest

is slowly taking back. By showing them in these different scenarios but never specifying the country or even continent where they are, the viewers are invited to make their own conclusions, to read the setting as Brazil or Portugal – taking their cue from the Portuguese narration – or choosing to read the location as a non-descript geography, where beaches, forests and mountains can be found. This lack of specificity with regards to the filming location serves to blur the lines between a “here” and “there”, between the familiar and the foreign that the names of countries might evoke. Instead, we see the images floating in the wind, or in and out of the water, metaphorically and spiritually reaching across the Atlantic Ocean, making the sea a site of exchange. Sometimes the current seems to embrace the black and white portraits of the artist and those of her elders, as though it were offering them shelter or invigorating them with new life. However, for those viewers who learn about Motta’s travels to make the film, these same scenes reveal how photography is symbolically made to bridge the waters that connect Brazil and the African continent.



Fig. 2. Aline Motta. Still from *Pontes sobre Abismos*, 2017. Three-channel video installation, 08:28 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3. Aline Motta. Still from *Pontes sobre Abismos*, 2017. Three-channel video installation, 08:28 min. Courtesy of the artist.

*Pontes sobre abismos* might take as its point of departure Doralice’s secret, but Motta refrains from simply presenting the archival documents or isolated facts from her research and instead creates an immersive, three-channel video projection that absorbs the viewer. Realized with funds from Rumos Itaú Cultural 2015-2016, this work is a synthesis of multiple experiments and learning experiences for the artist, cooked on a low fire over the course of two years of intense research, traveling, filming and editing, as well as several more years developing in Motta’s mind. As Motta has expressed, she needed time, financial support to focus and the emotional maturity to discern how to best approach these subjects in a way that would allow her to narrate the facts while leaving enough space for the viewers to fill in the gaps in her story with their own (Motta 2020d).

There is rigor to every frame in Motta’s video, an exacting, almost precious care with regard to the color and composition. In her own words, she begins “by building photographs, which in turn become frames, in an attempt to create a temporal juxtaposition” (Motta 2020a, 23). By placing one after another, the frames become a sequence, a film, but in its internal logic the video



continues to defy a simple, linear reading. Moreover, *Pontes sobre abismos* has a cinematic quality that attracts and seduces the viewers, an aspect that the artist has addressed in some of her statements about the work. The images have a weight to them, partly because of the scale at which they are projected, as video-installations, but also because she narrates their story with aplomb. Motta commented in an interview that there was no reason why these images should be anything but perfect (from a technical standpoint); to her mind, having scenes that captivate the audience is not just an aesthetic choice but also a political strategy (Motta 2020e). By managing to keep the attention of visitors for over eight minutes and dispelling the idea that the visual arts are something boring, cryptic, or elitist, Motta aims to create a space for conversation and debate, “attracting people’s attention to then talk about the issues one wants to talk about, to establish a dialogue” (Motta 2020e).

The artist’s films invoke the personal and collective memories brought to the foreground in official records, in identification photography, birth and death certificates, but also in family albums. Her choice to use enlarged official documents and identification photography to represent herself and her family is a way of inviting careful listening to how these images resonate within us. The standard black and white, 3x4 portraits, also called passport-sized photographs, take on a central role within *Pontes sobre abismos*.<sup>1</sup> At times, the images are seen through the water, so that they appear to vibrate with the current; other times, they are simply held by hand, fixed to a building or branch, but the more we see them the more they reveal their subtleties [Figure 4]. Doralice’s impeccable dress, shiny earrings and coiffed hair frame a pair of eyes that softly gaze beyond the camera, as though she were not really there. In contrast, Mariana stares back, her hair perfectly pulled away from her face, but not quite in defiance; hers is a strong look that could verge on harshness and yet inspires something tender as well.



Fig. 4. [Detail] Aline Motta. *Pontes sobre Abismos*, 2017. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

“Neither silent nor inaudible, these photographs resonate just below the threshold of hearing. They do not speak, but they are not mute,” to use the words of black feminist and theorist

<sup>1</sup> The standard size of these is 3 by 4 centimeters, or 1.18 x 1.57 inches.

of visual culture, Tina Campt (2017, 10). Her writing on this subject suggests that, if we listen to images, we are gradually able to look beyond the genre and form of “compulsory photography” made to satisfy the regulatory needs of the state. One might recognize the legacy of the mug shot in the official passport-sized portraits, in which we are expected to stand fully frontal to the camera and put on a neutral facial expression. However, by listening in to the lower frequencies of these photographs and feeling rather than seeing them, we gain “access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects,” beyond the classificatory imperatives of colonialism (Campt 2017, 5).

Campt proposes recalibrating these vernacular images made of black people as quiet, everyday strategies of affirmation, as a practice of visibility from those who have been erased for centuries. Putting into practice Campt’s theory, one should ask how these photographs document certain sensibilities as well as evoke a range of feelings and affects in others. One could say that Wilma, the artist’s mother, looks to the camera as though empowered by knowing something that we don’t. There is a calm, self-possessed, almost provocative feeling about her image, and the slightest of smiles in the corner of her mouth. Wilma’s portrait, as do those of her ancestors, convey much more than her just her likeness; they each project an energy, a frequency, that cannot be distilled into the facts of their passports or other official documents.

Then there is Motta’s photograph. Shown as a child, in deference to her elders with whom she shares the screen, the young Aline is the only one that appears smiling, whole-heartedly, her milk teeth showing. She looks to the camera without the reserved or muted look that grownups learn to put on for official photographs, as though weighed down by the very thought of government bureaucracy. The artist’s smile is contagious, full of innocence and none of the weariness evident in the adult faces, still able to embrace that photographic encounter. However, something else emerges when one observes these four generations together, either in the same frame or in consecutive ones, a kind of visual call-and-response that takes places throughout the video, connecting multiple temporalities. Motta’s grandmother calls out and her own mother responds. “There are so many things ingrained in the work that are actually values; it’s the repetition, a scale of respect and consideration, honoring older people and how they survived in a way that now this collective voice can emerge,” she reflected during an interview (Aline Motta, unpublished interview with the author, São Paulo, April 22, 2022). Circling back to Campt’s proposition, to listen to Motta’s image alongside those of her ancestors “is to be attuned to their unsayable truths, to perceive their quiet frequencies of possibility—the possibility to inhabit a future as unbounded black subjects” (Campt 2017, 45).

The change in scale and materiality of these images also meant that Motta had to find new ways of relating to the photographs, through her body and the camera. On the one hand, they were now transferred onto textiles taller than her, almost two meters long and seventy-five centimeters wide. On the other, they had acquired a semi-transparent quality that allowed her to play with opacity, with partially seeing through an image and having the portrait become a kind of filter, a veil through which to apprehend what stood on the other side. These textiles could be transported, hung from trees and placed underwater, in rivers and oceans, which would in turn add another layer to the viewer’s understanding of the photographs, inviting free associations between the portraits and their new surroundings.

Something similar happens with the official documents that have also been transferred onto textiles; they bend and curl, they get stuck on branches and caught in the reeds. They are practically illegible on screen, but they still come across as archival records, wills, birth and death certificates, however, they are depicted surrounded by nature, conquered by the laws of the elements. Motta’s

enlarged birth certificate appears in this context, but hers can be deciphered at certain points: the daughter of an interracial marriage, a white father and a black mother, Motta was still registered as *branca*, white.<sup>2</sup> Through this and other gestures, Motta's practice addresses the doctrine of *branqueamento* [whitening] and the eugenicist policies that were promoted in Brazil during the nineteenth century, as well as the people who survived them, pointing to the ways in which these ideas have transformed into social discourses, prejudices, inequality, classicism and racial discrimination under the guise of a racial democracy.

In other scenes, her and her ancestors' photographs are shown printed as fragments, each piece as big as a letter-sized sheet of paper. These portraits can be seen being assembled on camera, without giving viewers access to the full picture. Since the photographs are also those that can be seen on the textiles, they are familiar enough to be conjured up in their entirety, to be pieced back together in the imagination of the spectator. As put forward by the artist, "fragmentation becomes methodology and creative drive. We might be fragmented, but we are not broken" (Motta 2020a, 22). I suggest that this exercise invites one to (re)member these portraits along with the hands that perform the action on screen. To accept this invitation is a way of reflecting on the multiple gaps and erasures that exist within the archives when it comes to Black families, but also to work with the documents that are available. "We mistakenly believe that all archives have been burned or never existed in the first place. There is in fact extensive documentation, for example about slavery in the Southeastern Brazilian coffee region of the Paraíba River Valley in the 19th century," explained the artist in an interview for the *Goethe-Institut Brasil* (Gonzatto 2020). What is still missing according to Motta is a more comprehensive study of this material, from a focus that doesn't recenter the elite, the coffee magnates and their heirs, but instead puts forward a reparative perspective for those who were enslaved or ex-slaves.

To look critically at the photographs and official records that exist demands a different kind of chronicle, one that can recognize the redacted or opaque facts as points of departure to narrate non-hegemonic histories. The task at hand requires an understanding of history as part fiction, a negotiation both with and against the archive that embodies some of the propositions put forward by black feminist historian Saidiya Hartman. In her well-known 2008 article, "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman describes the act of revisiting and re-writing counter-histories of slavery as inseparable from crafting a history of the present, as one that "strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past" (Hartman 2008, 4). She goes on to give a name to this practice of imagining that which cannot be verified, coining the term *critical fabulation*. Motta's artistic practice in many ways articulates Hartman's fabulations, developing hypotheses in relation to her genealogic research and imagining what could or might have been. For Hartman, like for Motta, narrating these other histories is not a way of filling in the omissions in official discourses but a form of speculating to bridge the silences and envision an alternative future.

### **At the Crossroads of Spiral Time**

It might sound simple, even obvious, but by having two photographs printed on the same textile, "connected by the head" as Motta states in the audio of *Pontes sobre abismos* – it became possible

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<sup>2</sup> In the third video of the trilogy, (*Outros*) *Fundamentos* (2017-2019), Motta addresses the politics of colorism and racialization. She complicates this discussion by remarking on how she identifies as black, and is considered black in Brazil, but was constantly referred to as "oyinbo", "white" or "caucasian", during her travels in Nigeria.



to literally fold one portrait over another. As a result, the faces of both subjects now coincided, their eyes, noses and mouths aligned: the gaze of Mariana could be made to match Doralice's, the look of Wilma could be made out through Motta's wide-open eyes. Moreover, they were able to see both forward and back, behind and straight ahead, unfolding a complex temporal question in space (Motta 2020d). Through photography and film, Motta began exploring the new meanings these images could acquire from their capacity to see back and forth at the same time. In her video trilogy, as well as in *Filha Natural*, she has found ways of combining multiple temporalities in a single image, creating situations in which different times can coexist. At a symbolic level, they produce an intersection point, a meeting ground for her and her ancestors.

For example, in *Filha Natural*, we follow the artist's footsteps in search of Francisca Maria da Conceição, her great great-grandmother who lived enslaved at a coffee plantation in Vassouras. Upon finding the death certificate of someone with that same name, who lived in that time period and died in 1918 at the *fazenda de Ubá*, Motta dives in to find out as much as possible about the farm and its owners, Elisa Constância de Almeida and José Pereira de Almeida. In their will and in the farm's inventory, which included around 200 enslaved people listed as part of their "assets," appears a "Francisca." From that piece of evidence, the artist went on to draw from several different sources – including two stereoscopic photographs taken in the 1860's by German-Brazilian photographer Revert Henrique Klumb – to propel her reconstruction of a time when Francisca might have lived at that farm [Figure 5]. Klumb's images, both taken on the porch of the master's house, are appropriated by Motta in various ways. Not unlike the portraits of her family in *Pontes sobre abismos*, these are enlarged and transferred onto cloth, and then propped up with tripods on different spaces around the Pereira de Almeida's property.

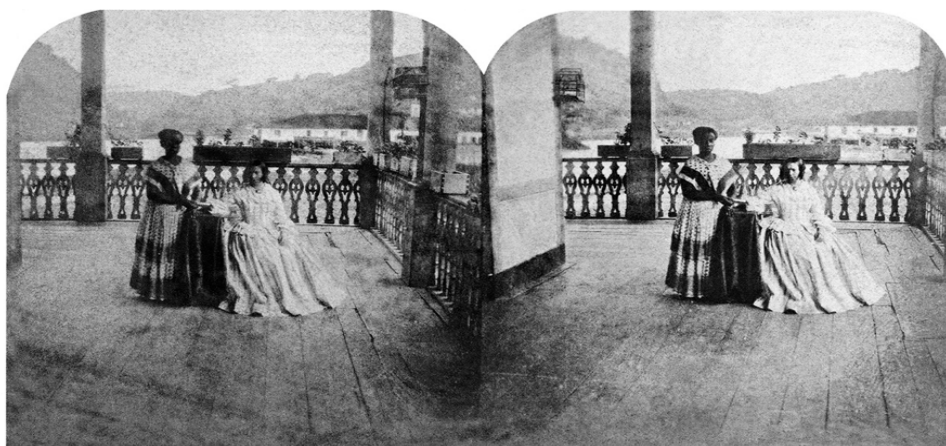


Fig. 5. Revert Henrique Klumb (c. 1830 - 1886). Stereoscopic photographs on the porch of the *Fazenda de Ubá*, c.1860.

One of the most haunting scenes constructed by Motta in this video (and which has also been reproduced as a large-scale photographic installation) shows community leader and Vassouras local, Claudia Mamede, on a tennis court, standing under a black umbrella [Figure 6]. It appears that the rain has just stopped, leaving behind a few puddles on the uneven asphalt surface of what was once the coffee drying terrace of the fazenda, directly across from the house's porch. Dressed in black, as though attending a memorial service, Mamede looks on to one of Klumb's photographs depicting an enslaved black young woman who Motta could not identify in the

archives, standing next to a seated white woman, presumably from the Pereira de Almeida family. Three meters long and three meters tall, the photograph has been installed in the middle of the tennis court and in front of it, in one of the puddles, one can make out the reflection of the young black woman, standing beside Mamede as though her presence had been conjured by Motta's investigation. Klumb's enlarged photograph appears as a sort of time portal opened in the fabric of the twenty-first century, and by layering different time periods, Motta highlights the affinities and connections, the shared oppressions but also the shared values and dreams, of multiple generations of Black women. With these kinds of scenes, the artist foregrounds her understanding of time as a cyclical movement, a choreography where the two standing figures observe each other, echoing one another, as though the past were looking at its future, returning the gaze to our present.



Fig. 6. Aline Motta. Still from *Filha Natural*, 2018-2019. Video, 15:52min. Courtesy of the artist.

In relation to her films, Motta has stated that “each frame is composed in such a way that it contains all temporality: the past, the presentification of the past, and a more or less dystopian dimension of the future,” revealing an understanding of time that is perhaps best described by the image of a crossroads (Motta 2020a, 23). In its most basic form, crossroads can be thought of as the space created at an intersection point, where two lines, paths or roads, coming from different directions, meet. The poet and theorist of Afro-Brazilian religious performance, Leda Maria Martins, has written extensively about the notion of the crossroads or *encruzilhada*, which she describes as a symbolic space where different ethnicities, languages, knowledge and beliefs meet. Reading this term in the context of Motta's practice, this article looks at crossroads less so from the religious point of view and more in terms of its philosophical and spatiotemporal potential harnessed from African and Afro-Brazilian epistemologies, as “a place of centering and decentering, of intersections and deviations, texts and translation, confluences and alterations,

influences and divergences, fusions and ruptures, multiplicity and convergence, unity and plurality, origin and dissemination” (Ramos 2019; Martins 1997, 28). According to Martins, as a philosophical concept present in many African and Afro-Brazilian cultures and the religions that developed from them, the crossroads is as “sacred place of intermediation between different systems and instances of knowledge being frequently translated by a cosmogram that points to the circular movement of the cosmos and of the human spirit that gravitates the circumference of its intersection” (Martins 2021, 42).

While an in-depth discussion of the above mentioned cosmogram, known as dikenga, or the Kongo, Bantu-Kongo or Bakongo cosmogram, lies beyond the scope of this article, it is nonetheless key to grasp its relation to Motta’s poetics, her understanding of temporality and the relationship she envisions with her ancestors [Figure 7]. Originated in Central Africa, the Bakongo cosmogram is a symbolic representation that synthesizes the intertwined cycles of life, the universe and time. This Congo-Angolan and, therefore, Afro-Brazilian perception of the cosmos, and our place in it, informs Motta’s works on every level, and one can find sediments and traces of it in most of her artistic projects to date. To discern the most relevant elements in such a complex and sacred symbol, I quote the artist’s own explanation of the cosmogram included in *Water is a Time Machine*, a short essay that also functions as a script or structural backbone for the talks and conferences she has given about her practice in the past three years:

According to this cosmogram, a being is born at six in the morning, becomes an adult at noon, grows old at six in the evening, and becomes an ancestor at midnight. The cycle is circular, transmutational, and interrelational, and it is repeated every day with varying degrees of its own physicality. A fine line of water called Kalunga separates the dimension of the living from that of the dead.

(Motta 2020a, 24)

Seeing *Pontes sobre abismos* and *Filha Natural* through the lens of the crossroads allows one to better understand the artist’s attempt to capture all temporalities in a single frame. The inclusion of family portraits and photographs is meant as an invocation of family members to bear witness to the present, as well as to the futures their stories will yield. In this sense, photography becomes a way of meeting them at the *encruzilhada*, where ancestral knowledge and values are revisited, founded anew, recycled, reinvented and reinterpreted.

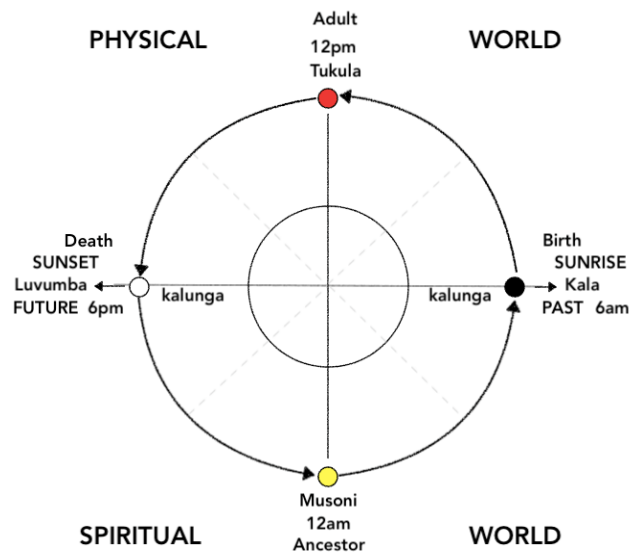


Fig. 7. Diagram of the Bakongo cosmogram. Image by the author.

To return to the scene in *Filha Natural* discussed above, the reflection of the young black woman in Klumb’s photograph in the puddle of the tennis court can be read as though she were Mamede’s ancestor, in close proximity, looking on from the other side of the Kalunga. If we are each, on some level, born each day and becoming one with our forebears every night, then the temporal distance that would otherwise seem like abysses separating us from our ancestors, in fact become bridges. Furthermore, the crossroads brings with it the production of what Martins has described as *tempo espiralar*, a spiral time that, unlike a Western perspective, is cyclical in nature and is grounded on the relationship of the past with the present and into the future [Figure 8]. Time, even when measured in calendar intervals, is marked by memories and echoes, by temporalities that curve and expand both forward and back, always in retrospective and prospective modes. A “spiral, is what, to the best of my knowledge, illustrates that perception, conception and experience [of time]”, writes Martins (2021,14). Western characterizations of time are more associated with the notion of linear time, a succession of moments that goes from the past and into the future in the shape of an arrow or a train thrust forward. In contrast to this conception, recognizing the past as a place of cumulative knowledge and experience that also inhabits the present and the future can rearrange our perceptions of time and contribute to a critique of linear temporality, evincing the falseness of any narrative of the past as single, stable and flowing in only one direction.

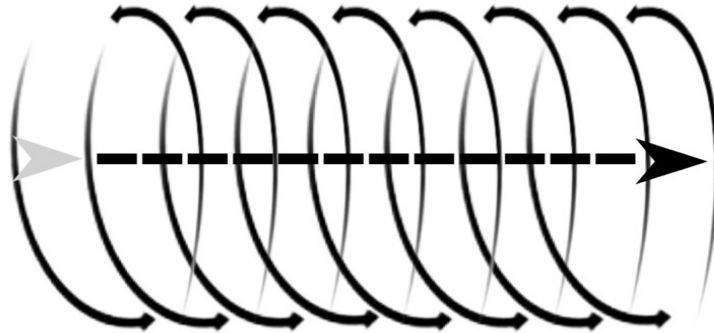


Fig. 8. Diagram of Tempo Espiral [Spiral Time]. Image by the author.

### **Ancestral Dreams: Beyond Genes and DNA Testing**

When asked how she had arrived at the idea of submerging the enlarged photographs of herself and her family members, having them float on makeshift rafts or rolled up by the current, Motta said she had dreamt them. For 15 years, she had worked hard as a script supervisor on movies and commercials, constantly on film sets, pushing through 12-hour shifts and getting little rest. She felt exhausted, tired to the point that she had trouble falling asleep. However, when she got her first grant, the Rumos Itaú Cultural, she was able to dedicate herself to her own projects and found herself sleeping again. “It was magic,” she told me,

I was so disconnected from an artistic practice that I just needed that time of solitude, of being in touch with this spiritual realm. Then every time, every day, I would wake up and, in those moments – sometimes I didn’t even know if I was still sleeping – that’s when the images started coming. These images started coming, the water just started flowing, really flowing.

(Aline Motta, unpublished interview with the author, São Paulo, April 22, 2022)

Her dreams had allowed her to imagine a world in which she could talk to people who had already passed away, a dimension where she could project the future and then go back to the past to make it happen, or make it something entirely different.

That the realm of the oneiric can open up or facilitate the communication with our ancestors is a proposition held in many different cultures. A similar account is given by Kimbwandênde Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, Congolese philosopher and scholar of Central African cultures and *bantu-kôngo* cosmologies, who describes that in those cultures, ancestors continue to talk to and among their communities through dreams and visions, through “the biological, material, intellectual and spiritual treasures accumulated in scrolls [ku mpèmbe], the past, the perpetual bank of the generating/driving forces of life” (Fu-Kiau 2001, 71). Motta’s reply also resonated with the account of the “canto-imagem Maxakali” [Maxakali song-image], included by Leda Maria Martins

in her book *Performances do tempo espiralar, poéticas do corpo-tela*. Martins was introduced to this form of song by pajé Toninho Maxakali, musician, poet, healer and community leader of the Tikmũ'ũn Indigenous peoples, a “cantor de infinitos cantos” [a master of infinite songs] (Tugny 2019).<sup>3</sup> Although she does not consider herself an expert in the vast and complex knowledge or traditions of the Tikmũ'ũn, who today live in the valley of Mucuri, in the state of Minas Gerais, Martins nonetheless attempts to give the reader an account of a specific aspect of their ancestral culture: the songs they dream and by means of which they preserve and share the linguistic, musical, mythological and ecological memory of multiple peoples who, at one point, lived in the vast Atlantic Forest region between the states of Bahia, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo.

Tikmũ'ũn peoples dream images that transform into songs. These images are the spirits of their ancestors that come to them in their sleep, allowing them to inhabit the dream and by extension the body of the sleeper. All beings and the cosmos appear in their dreams, making no distinctions between human ancestors, insect kin, animal, trees and plant elders. He or she that dreams their ancestors, becomes their father/mother; they must feed the image-ancestor that they have dreamt by turning them into song. In Martins' words, “when the dreamer wakes up, the image becomes song and the song, in turn, produces images, in a continuous process of transformation and metamorphosis that is contiguous and perennial” (Martins 2021, 126). These songs are an invitation not unlike Camp's argument, to go beyond what our eyes can see, to open up the possibilities of all our sensory perceptions and allow ourselves to listen to images, to see the images created by songs. Moreover, these chants “perform and compose the memory of the future” as the Tikmũ'ũn “sing and dance not only to remember their ancestors, but to be remembered by their ancestors” (Martins 2021, 132-133). To a certain extent then, Tikmũ'ũn people use songs to assert their familial ties across time and space, with the human and more than human. The relationship between themselves, their forebears and their descendants, is one marked by time moving forward and back, simultaneously, molding and being shaped by the present. As long as the ancestors remember, their descendants will continue to exist.

This dislocation of linearity, akin to the notion of spiral time, is one that can be appreciated in Motta's videos and photography time and time again. *Filha Natural* collapses the time between Mamede and the portrait of the young enslaved woman, having them coexist in the same space through post-production techniques. Moreover, the singularity of past, present and future time is muddled in the very structure of *Pontes sobre abismos*, which reads as a loop, and through the foregrounding of Motta's relatives, protagonists who are no longer alive but can be made present through photographs. Their images traverse landscapes and ruins in Vassouras (Rio de Janeiro), Mariana and Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais), the north of Portugal, where her father's side of the family came from, and Sierra Leone in West Africa, to whose population, according to her DNA test at the time, she had the closest genetic match (Motta 2020b). As part of the budget submitted for the Rumos grant, she had proposed tracing back her genealogy through archival research, oral histories and a DNA test that would contribute to determine her genetic ancestry. Since 2016 however, the insights of her genetic data have been updated to reflect a growing genomic database, and they now point toward Central Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>“Toninho is one of the notable masters of the traditional indigenous communities who lived in the immemorial lands of the Americas and who leaves silently. [...] Toninho was a singer of infinite songs. He kept, as a pure form of existence, an innumerable poetic, mythical and musical ensemble that the peoples to which he belongs have been producing over the centuries” (Tugny 2019).

<sup>4</sup>The percentages in Motta's results have already changed three times since she performed the test in 2016. It is her belief that having them point toward Central Africa instead of Western Africa makes more sense as historically it is



In a recent interview, Motta commented on the accuracy and utility of genetic ancestry tests to help determine one's origins: "They are a kind of fiction of one's ancestry, you can't take them too seriously from a scientific point of view," she explained (Motta 2020b). Because the tests are interpreted against genomic databases in which people of European ancestry are overrepresented, and Indigenous and African populations are underrepresented, the results can be misleading, or inconclusive at best. When asked if she would recommend the test, her reply was open ended: "It depends on each person; it is a search that is valid. The trip to Sierra Leone was important to me and getting tested may be a possibility but the science has not yet reached an acceptable level of reliability" (Motta 2020b). Brazilians, like many other groups around the world, are probably still better off doing additional archival research to complement those DNA results. A more detailed discussion around genomic articulations of kinship, Blackness and Indigeneity falls beyond the purview of this article, but these brief considerations signal toward Motta's understanding of ancestry in all its complexity, as one that holds consanguineous relations as well as those born out of other factors and affinities: love, care, shared histories, values and traditions, or even a remarkable physical resemblance, as is the case of Claudia Mamede.

Ancestry, conceived not just as a sequence of genetic material, but as the relationship to one's ancestors, who may or may not be blood relatives, is fundamental to many cultures and it is a vital concept that is echoed in different social practices and expressions. From a *bântu-kôngo* cosmoperception, we are all potential mothers and fathers of those who will come later on, but we are also mothers and fathers already, regardless of whether we have children or not. Fu-Kiau notes about the concept of family, *Buta*, that "a man/woman without child has always, in accordance to kinship relationship, those to whom he/she is father/mother" (Fu-Kiau 2001, 42). This perspective is taken one step further by Motta when she writes about the role of grandmothers as healing mediators in every community. When asked about the knowledge encompassed in and through the performance of grandmothers in our societies, she is quick to add nuance to that very category:

Grandmothers sometimes are not men, and are not women, and sometimes they're not old. Some people, they have these roles in their lives, or at some point in their lives, they are grandparents to someone. Although I don't have children, sometimes I have to put on my grandmother's clothes [...] because it's not a person, it's an entity. It's an elder. It's something in between. It's the mediator of this world.

(Aline Motta, unpublished interview with the author, São Paulo, April 22, 2022)

For the artist, that person was her grandmother Doralice, an actual blood relative, she played that role, but it could have been somebody else. Doralice's secret opened the door for another family to be born along with the other half of her genes, the Pereira de Souza genes.

The search for Motta's genealogy in the archives, on her father's side, was fairly straightforward – they had all married within the family, between cousins – and the artist managed to trace that bloodline back to 1690, when her first Portuguese ancestors arrived in Brazil. On her mother Wilma's side, she could only go back four generations, to Francisca, which, for many afro-descendent families is already quite hard to achieve. However, in response to those gaps in the archives, Motta has sought to establish other kind of lineages, fabulating her ancestry from a

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known that the south east of Brazil, the area of Rio de Janeiro where her family is from, saw a greater trade of enslaved people from the Congo-Angola region. (Motta 2020b)

potential shared family member, for example. Towards the end of *Filha Natural*, the Vassouras community leader sits inside a church and slowly unveils two photographs wrapped in white cloth – one depicts Mariana, Motta’s great-grandmother, and the other shows Nair, Mamede’s grandmother [Figure 9]. This time, their passport-sized portraits are printed on a different medium, on a reflective surface, not unlike a mirror, that allows them to incorporate their surroundings. At a material level, the photographs reflect the presence of their onlookers, opening the potential for one’s face to match theirs, for our eyes to become their own. The artist employs photography in this case as a way of imagining kinship beyond genomic articulations, signaling to the possibility of a mutual past as a form of redress.



Fig. 9. Aline Motta. *Still from Filha Natural*, 2018-2019. Video, 15:52min. Courtesy of the artist

### Redressive Actions: Of Scars, Healing and Reparations

*Pontes sobre abismos* ends with a fable that tells of how the leopard got the marks on his fur.<sup>5</sup> While watching an animation based on Eadweard Muybridge’s early experiments with moving images and animal locomotion [Figure 10], we learn that his rosettes are in fact burn marks, scars caused by his friend Fire during a tempestuous visit to the Leopard’s home. The narration is left unadorned, without hints on how to read the relation between Doralice’s secret, the search for Motta’s origins and a tale about what makes the Leopard a leopard.<sup>6</sup> The ambiguous nature of the

<sup>5</sup> From Motta’s narration in the video, we learn that in ancient times, the Leopard was very good friends with Fire and would visit him regularly. One day, the Woman Leopard asked if she too could meet Fire and suggested he bring his friend home. Fire eventually accepted the invitation, and asked the Leopard to build him a trail of dry leaves so that he could make his way there. Upon seeing her house in flames, the Woman Leopard asks, “is this your friend?” (Motta 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Motta herself has confessed that she wasn’t sure how to finish the video when she decided to add the fable that her guide in Sierra Leone had told her (Aline Motta, unpublished interview with the author, São Paulo, April 22, 2022).

story has led scholars such as Kenia Freitas to interpret it as an origin story for the feline, whose scars have come to make him who he is, to the extent that all his descendants, all leopards, have inherited this genetic trait. The rosettes are then the result of a traumatic experience that continues to be present, a pain that symbolically continues to shape future generations (Freitas 2020). In the context of *Pontes sobre abismos*, she establishes a parallel between these scars and the trauma that constitutes part of the contemporary Black experience post-slavery and colonization.

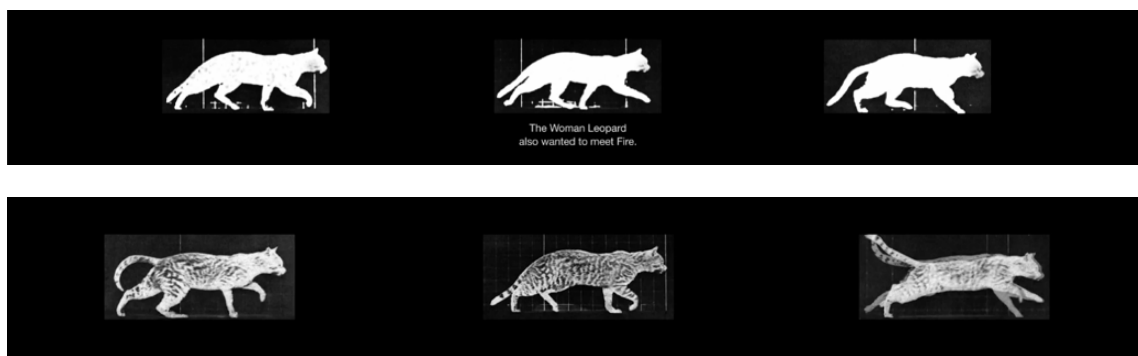


Fig. 10. Stills from *Pontes sobre Abismos*, 2017. Three-channel video installation, 08:28 min. Courtesy of the artist.

To some extent I share Freitas’ reading of the fable and how it serves to understand Motta’s approach to Afro-Brazilian families and their formation within a country structurally founded by slavery, the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the occupation of their lands. However, I contend that there is more than that to the inclusion of the fable in *Pontes sobre abismos*. The Leopard’s lesson goes beyond embracing or owning the scars of our past, the painful histories and traumas that have shaped us. Those burn marks tell other stories as well, such as having survived and resisted a tragic encounter with the Fire, and having wanted to welcome Fire into their home. The reparative approach that escapes Freitas’ interpretation lies in *how* we choose to tell these difficult stories and to whom, and what these narratives can then say about us, and in so doing, contribute not just to who we are but who we want to be. As simple as the Leopard’s tale might seem, it also speaks about certain values and intentions that give context to that disastrous evening. Rather than approaching it just as an origin story or a cautionary tale, I suggest here a more narrative approach.

The fable makes reference to friendship and cultivating strong relationships: it speaks about trust, on the part of the Leopard who crafts the path of dry leaves to bring the Fire home, and on the part of the Woman Leopard who invites an unknown friend into her house. We can imagine that the Woman Leopard values generous hospitality and wanting to share in what was important to her partner.<sup>7</sup> By listening to these counternarratives, ciphered in the fable’s economy of language, one is also practicing a way of naming and thinking about the character of resistance, often hiding in plain sight as small-scale and everyday forms of refusal. It is these efforts that I frame as redressive actions, following Hartman’s formulation in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Redress is often equated with reparation or healing, as though these were synonymous, when for Hartman it is evident that they are distinct. In Hartman’s words, “redress is itself an articulation of loss and a longing for remedy

<sup>7</sup> Not even the Fire can be made a villain in this story, for he accepts the invitation only after much insistence – perhaps he knew he could hurt his friend the Leopard.

and reparation,” an impossible form of compensation in the face of the incommensurability of the loss (Hartman 1997, 77). Because of its inevitable failure, redress will never be fulfilled, it cannot restore or bring back anything, nor can it remedy loss; what it offers is “a re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation” (Hartman 1997, 76). Redress can be a way of coming together to name the pain but also to find strength and joy in that shared space with others

A single narrative risks framing the leopard only as a victim, or worse, as responsible for having invited his own trauma in the form of Fire. In contrast, a multi-historied approach acknowledges “the history that hurts, the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas,” to use Hartman’s words, but it does so while highlighting the ways in which people have resisted, demanded justice, and flourished beyond that hurt (Hartman 1997, 51). To elucidate this argument, one need only look to *Pontes sobre abismos* and *Filha Natural*. Motta does not make the silences and voids in the archive her main focus, and neither does she take a vindictive approach to her search of the “Pereira de Souza” or the “Pereira de Almeidas”, making the men who abused their power and fathered natural daughters into villainous protagonists. Instead, she tells stories from the standpoint of the women in her family, opening a space for conversation that can attest to their strength and resilience. Extending her lineage based on more than genetics, she embraces her invented lines of descent as a way of redressing those fathers who refused to acknowledge their own kin.

Motta is often asked about the possibilities for healing through her work. *Does she still think it is possible to close those wounds? From her point of view, what role can art play in this process?* And other such questions get formulated to her during interviews (Gonzatto 2020). Her replies vary, but she never fails to respond with pragmatic skepticism, denouncing the lack of public policies to match the artistic discourses that condemn racism. She has voiced her concerns repeatedly about a society that eschews the responsibility of making these fundamental changes, adopting legislation that can confront the issues of discrimination and violence based on race, but also gender and social class (Motta 2020d). Motta bemoans the whole arsenal of theoretical terms that help avoid these matters or even talking about racism to begin with – terms like “racial democracy”, “harmony between races” and other concepts employed to appease an urgent debate. Still, the artist is clear on what her role in this struggle is, particularly having been born in Brazil:

You see so much inequality and so much racial stigma and prejudice and racism. You have to do something about it. My way is through art. Some people are going to become politicians, some people are going into education, which I love. I feel I'm an educator more than an artist, in the sense that I have to educate through my means, through the way that I know best, which is by creating these works that can communicate.

(Aline Motta, unpublished interview with the author, São Paulo, April 22, 2022)

Her words speak of the power of imagination without romanticizing its capabilities to impact reality in the present. From a pragmatic point of view, no amount of redress, symbolic healing, or critical fabulation, can be matched by financial reparations in helping avert destitution today, but these other approaches can change people’s minds, even if they go about it very slowly. Motta’s work is already grounded in that future: she looks back to the past with the conviction that tomorrow will have been written in the present.

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