QUASEILHAS: A PERFORMATIVE AND TRANSMEDIAL MEMORY

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Abstract

Quaseilhas *("Almost Islands"), a theater play written by Afro-Brazilian author Diego Araújo, premiered at Barbalho Fort, Salvador da Bahia (Brazil), in April 2018. The set consists of a three-room wooden shed placed in the courtyard of a historic castle in Salvador da Bahia, designed to contribute to the entanglement of various memories inscribed in time and space: as the spectators can only attend the play in one room at a time, they have only limited access to the overall events of the play which moreover is transmitted in an unknown language, namely Yorúbà. The shed also refers to the stilts built close to the shore, where the majority of the population is of Afro descent. Araújo borrows features from the* alárinjó *theatrical form, which blends performance, song, dance, projections of clips, and music, drawing the spectators into a vortex of a polyphonous and intermedial process of remembering fragments of the Middle Passage, slavery, and the difficult living conditions of socially marginalized communities. In its aesthetic, the play also refers to Afrofuturism, highlighting how the memory of the past should be the basis for reimagining the future.*

Keywords: Black Atlantic, Intermediality, Afro-Descendants, Memory, *oríkì*, Afrofuturism

Introduction

Quaseilhas ("Almost Islands") is the title of a play written by Afro-Brazilian author Diego Araújo[1] that premiered at Barbalho Fort, Salvador da Bahia (Brazil), in April 2018. Araújo studied fine arts with a focus on theater at the School of Theater at the Federal University of Bahia (Universidade Federal da Bahia, UFBA). Together with performance artist Laís Machado, in 2017 he founded ÀRÀKÁ, a group of artists who work together on various projects (theater, performance, experimental arts, community work) with a transdisciplinary approach linking Afro-diasporic and African artists.[2]

Quaseilhas has attracted considerable attention, as it is the first Brazilian play performed exclusively in an African language, namely Yorúbà. Furthermore, it has also been appreciated for its complex approach to the construction of memory and history in a country with a large

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[1] Diego Pinheiro is the writer's pen name; his family name is Diego Araújo, which is the name he requested I use in this article.

[2] ÀRÀKÁ website: https://plataformaaraka.wixsite.com/araka.

Afro-descendant population and the traumatic heritage of slavery and its repercussions in contemporary society.

In the larger context of Afro-Brazilian theater, the valorization of African heritage and its linkages with the African continent via cultural and religious practices has been an important part of the phenomenon from the start, namely with Abdias Nascimento's Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN, "Black Experimental Theater") in 1944. While early troupes adopted a Brechtian approach to the main objectives of raising consciousness about inequality in Brazilian society and transmitting a didactic message, from the 1970s onwards—when troupes were often based in Bahia, e.g. O Bando do Teatro Olodum (Douxami, 2019, pp. 32, 45)[3]—more cathartic elements were favored, as well as those integrating audiovisual and performative elements of the rituals of Candomblé (ibid., pp. 32–51). Christine Douxami underlines how these references were also used as markers of authenticity, as in the case of the play *Ajaká*, as early as the 1970s:

> In this quest for authenticity using Candomblé as an ethnicity marker, Antonio Godi, director of the Grupo Palmares Iñaron (founded in 1973), worked with Mestre Didi to create *Ajaká, iniciação para Liberdade* (Ajaka, Initiation to Freedom, 1978) in both Yoruba and Portuguese. This play narrates an African legend about Ogum, the god of metallurgy. (Ibid., p. 44)

Interestingly, the articles on *Quaseilhas* do not mention *Ajaká*, the first Brazilian play to be composed partially in Yorúbà. However, *Quaseilhas* is new also in the way it employs Yorúbà, as the texts are translations of stories originally told by the writer's grandmother in Portuguese and recounted in the form of a Yorúbà oral genre, the *oríkì*. The fact that the whole play is in a language the local public does not understand forces the spectator, lost and disoriented, to confront the rupture with cultural and historical knowledge that the slave trade and the plantation system have effected. It is therefore not a matter of authenticity in *Quaseilhas*, but rather that of a fragmented transmission of knowledge in the context of the oppression of indigenous languages and cultural practices, and consequently, the loss of control over the construction of history and identity, and thus, of a positive notion of the future.

The text that announced the play on Sympla, a Brazilian platform for cultural events, offers some approaches for interpreting this very complex play, which is outstanding in several ways:

QUASEILHAS: Returning to the Future to Reinvent the Past
A visit to memories to remember the future. The search to transcend the limits of time. This is what **QUASEILHAS** is made of, conceived, directed, and with *oríkì* by Diego Pinheiro […] The scenic work makes a transit between the gaps of the Afro-diasporic memory, taking as its starting point the family memories of the creator and his collaborators, Laís Machado, Diego Alcantara, and Nefertini Altan, mixing visualities, songs, and performativities. **QUASEILHAS** is the first Brazilian stage play written entirely in the African language

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[3] See also Alexandre, 2017; Brown et al., 2014; Tavares Lima, 2010.

Yorúbà. Paying a visit to the memories of the past in order to remember the future. A quest for an exit of the limits of time. Quaseilhas, conceived, directed, and with oríkì by Diego Pinheiro—deals with all of this […][4] [5]

The text underlines the play's entanglement of past and future, while memory is its basis for imagining and reinventing both the future as well as the past. Past, present, and future are intertwined in such a way that they are always simultaneously present; so the play thus questions the concept of time passing in a purely linear sequence. While the title itself, *Quaseilhas*, highlights the spatial aspect of the play, the concepts it deals with—namely memory, past, and identity—are temporal ones. The "almost islands" refer to the neighborhood of Alagados in Itapagipe, built close to the shore and on the water on the outskirts of Salvador da Bahia, where Diego Araújo's family used to live. It also refers to the Middle Passage and to houses built on stilts, for example those in the neighborhood of Makoko in Lagos (Nigeria). Araúja's family has preserved some knowledge of their origin—namely, the Nigerian city Iléṣà—and heritage, as his grandmother still speaks Yorúbà and uses *oríkì*, a Yorúbà oral genre, to tell stories that carry on memories of the community. The texts were translated from Portuguese into the Yorúbà-language *oríkì* genre for the play. Furthermore, Araújo also used photos of his own family in building the play's complex audiovisual narrative, interweaving African origins, memories transmitted since the time of the Middle Passage, and the contemporary impressions and experiences of Afro-descendants in Brazil—which could also be valid for other places in the Americas. The idea that the imagination of the future must be built on the past is conveyed by references to Afrofuturist elements in the play that visualize the entanglement with the past mainly in the ways the actors are dressed.

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[4] **"QUASEILHAS: retorno ao futuro para reinventar o passado.** Uma visita às memórias para lembrar do futuro. A busca por sair do*s limites do tempo. É de tudo isso que é feito o **QUASEILHAS**, com concepção, direção e oríkì de Diego Pinheiro […] A obra cênica faz um trânsito entre às lacunas da memória afro-diaspórica, tendo como ponto de partida as memórias familiares do criador e dos seus colaboradores, Laís Machado, Diego Alcantara e Nefertini Altan, mesclando visualidades, canto e performatividades. QUASEILHAS é a primeira obra cênica autoral brasileira integralmente em idioma africano, o yorùbá. Paying a visit to the memories of the past in order to remember the future. A quest for an exit of the limits of time. **Quaseilhas**, conceived, directed and with *oríkì* by Diego Pinheiro—deals with all of this." Source: https://www.sympla.com.br/quaseilhas.

[5] **QUASEILHAS: retorno ao futuro para reinventar o passado**

Uma visita às memórias para lembrar do futuro. A busca por sair dos limites do tempo. É de tudo isso que é feito o **QUASEILHAS**, com concepção, direção e oríkì de Diego Pinheiro […]. A obra cênica faz um trânsito entre às lacunas da memória afro-diaspórica, tendo como ponto de partida as memórias familiares do criador e dos seus colaboradores, Laís Machado, Diego Alcantara e Nefertini Altan, mesclando visualidades, canto e performatividades. QUASEILHAS é a primeira obra cênica autoral brasileira integralmente em idioma africano, o yorùbá. Paying a visit to the memories of the past in order to remember the future. A quest for an exit of the limits of time. **Quaseilhas**, conceived, directed and with oríkì by Diego Pinheiro - deals with all of this. https://www.sympla.com.br/quaseilhas (last access: 12.03.2021). Translation into English is mine.

For this piece, Araújo combines performance, music, and audiovisual techniques with acting; thus it is a very complex artwork, transgressing most of its genres to become a transmedial work of art. I therefore suggest speaking of a transmedial work rather than, e.g., a hybrid one, as the notion of transmediality includes the process of negotiating and combining various codes, genres, and themes, as well as references to other works or contexts, within one artwork. The notion of the process is particularly important in this case, as it will not limit *Quaseilhas* to being seen as a combination of cultural references from different cultural and sociohistorical settings, in this particular case Brazil and Nigeria; it would also allow for highlighting the surplus of meaning that the piece generates through a continuous transmedial process that creates a world, a complex universe, speaking to all the senses of the spectators by transgressing the boundary between stage and public, between different genres, epochs, and regions, etc. (Rajewsky, 2005; Ritzer & Schulz, 2016). On the conceptual level, *Quaseilhas* therefore entails the participative process of remembering a past that is present both in its enactment as well as in the experience of contemporary Brazil, stirring questions about the construction of identity based on the absence of history and the suppression of memories that are inscribed in the living spaces of the city of Salvador. As such, the performance creates a chronotopical event that allows one to experience and to participate in the overlapping narratives relating the past, the present, and the future and linking Brazil with Africa. The inextricable entanglement of time and space in the context of the Black Atlantic literally takes form in the set conceived and built for *Quaseilhas*. In order to make the complex arrangement of space, time, narrative lines and acting parts of the play more comprehendible, I will start by explaining the set before dealing with the stories told in the form of Yorúbà *oríkì*.

The Performance Space as Space-Time Capsule
In the inner court of the seventeenth-century Forte do Barbalho in Salvador da Bahia, a rectangular wooden shed was built to evoke the appearance of both storage barracks (fig. 1) as well as the wooden huts of the slums of Salvador. The house contains four small rooms (fig. 2). Three of them are used as "stage" for the actors. The spectators can only enter one room, while the actors can move from one room to the next. All the rooms are dark; just a few bulbs are there to be switched on or off depending on the scene.

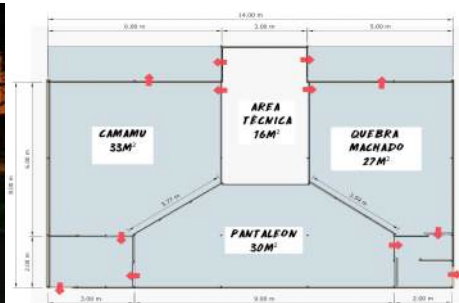**Fig. 1.** The set at Forte de Barbalho.   **Fig. 2.** The plan of the set.

Photo by Shai Andrade. All photos courtesy Diego Aráujo.

At first sight, Camamu looks like a tiny bedroom. To the left is a row of old wooden chairs into which the spectators squeeze for the two hours of the play. In front of the chairs, to the right, a large bed occupies most of the remaining space, while partly behind the bed, opposite the spectators, short films and photos are projected onto a wooden wall. Sometimes, the curtain is lifted to reveal the musicians, who are in the technical booth in the center of the four rooms. On the opposite side is the second room, Quebra Machado, which can be seen when the curtains on either side of the technical booth (situated in between these two rooms) are lifted. The floor is covered with sand, a television set is placed on the lefthand side, and several bulbs hang from the ceiling. The spectators have to line up against the wall facing the window in the /wall that links the room with the technical booth. The third room, Pantaleon, is a transitory space, as the room has two doors in opposite corners that link it with Camamu and Quebra Machado. Again, the spectators must line up against the walls. The center of the room is occupied by a bathtub, behind which the wall serves as a projection screen and, when the curtain is lifted, has a view of the technical booth.

It must be added that the windows never open completely; there is always a gossamer veil filtering the light. While the spectators cannot observe any of the acting except what takes place in front of them, it is possible to hear music, noises, and the voice of a narrator (Diego Araújo himself, as an omnipresent—hetero- and homodiegetic—narrator; cf. fig. 3) throughout the play; thus, the audio track assures continuity in space and time, which refers to the importance of the oral transmission of knowledge and history.

The fact that the wooden structure is situated in the central yard of a seventeenth-century fort evokes the marginal space where the descendants of slaves used to live, and brings this marginalized space to the heart of the slave system, the fort, that was built by the Portuguese. The layout obliges the spectator to enter the court via the central gate of the fort, from which one can see the perishable wooden shed amid high walls of immense rocks and stones. The spectator finds him- or herself in a space that visualizes the confrontation of ephemeral memories from the margins of colonial power, in opposition to the construction of memory by the official history, which is meant to be solid and eternal.

Entering the rooms of the shed means entering these oppressed and marginalized spaces, their stories and memories. The darkness and extremely high humidity during the rainy season—heightened by the use of water in the rooms during the performance—creates a suffocating atmosphere that conjures associations with the poor living conditions of stilt houses, with dim lighting or none at all. The atmosphere likewise evokes the bellies of the slave ships where the human cargo was stored, or rather locked up, in a dark, sticky, humid space. Neither space can be controlled by its inhabitants; thus, the inability to control the space or even one's own movements is transferred to the spectator, who has to squeeze him- or herself in a row against the walls, sweating in a hot, dark, and humid room, unable to leave or even move for two hours. S/he is exposed to overwhelming sensation of the benumbing, all-pervasive heat and

humidity, while the sounds and lights are coming from too near or too far; thus the feeling of being lost is intensified.

One could take the reading of the set's symbolism even further by understanding the sheds as a time-space capsule that is simultaneously in the past, present, and future and in none of them at all. It represents the sensation of being caught somewhere from which one cannot escape, and where one is undergoing the traumatic experience of losing the memories and culture that links them with their origins. The slaves were seen as trade goods, their humanity called into question. The set could also refer to the womb, the eternal return[6] of the question of origins that is linked to the loss of memory and the external definition of identity imposed by the white colonizers. Participation in the performance is therefore meant to be a journey through time and space, not only as far as Afro-descendants are concerned, but also for every spectator who is drawn into the vortex of slave history and its aftermath, social segregation in plantation-based societies.[7]

Telling Stories and Fragmented Memories

The spatial arrangement of the set in the courtyard, and of the set as a space divided into three compartments, separated from but linked to each other, determine the larger context of the memories and the stories that are told, as well as the ability to access, listen to, and understand the stories. Furthermore, there is the fourth room, the technical booth, at the center of the shed, where the director and musicians control the projections, the light, music, and sound. The writer of the play, Diego Araújo, is also present in the booth, like the conductor of an orchestra, controlling the complex interplay of acting, singing, video-clip projections, sound, and light arrangements, as well as the height of the curtains on the three windows linking the booth with each room. Araújo takes his mother's and grandmother's stories about their family's origins, going back to their Yorúbà ancestors who were sold to Portuguese slave traders, and translates them into Yorúbà.

Fig. 3. Diego Araújo. Photo by Guto Muniz.

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[6] See also Benítez Rojo, 1997.

[7] See e.g. Glissant, 1981.

The stories have various layers one has to pierce in order to grasp some of their meanings: behind the official version of history—the walls of the fortress—there is the dark shed, a time capsule that the spectator must enter to access parallel universes of stories and meanings. The omnipresent narrator controls the arrangement of the fragments. While the actors are wandering between the rooms, entering the scene with talking, drums, and songs in Yorúbà, the spectator also experiences the loss of a language that his or her ancestors might have spoken and its unintelligibility. It conveys the difficulty of keeping memories and knowledge alive when the language and the transmission of culture are forbidden to the point of partial or full erasure. The use of *alárinjó*, a sixteenth-century Yorúbà dramatic that combined music, song, mask, dance, and the participation of the audience—as well as the reenactment of mythical past and "cult-related expressions such as incantations"[8] that have evolved over the centuries—allows for the mixing of various elements, as Araújo does in *Quaseilhas*. The basic pattern of the verses is based on the *oríkì* genre. By employing *oríkì*, Araújo adds another, complex layer in terms of historical, literary, and cultural references, as the genre is a short form with a condensed description of a person or an event that allows this knowledge to be transmitted to the next generations.[9] Karin Barber has explained the meaning of *oríkì* in terms of its historical, social, and poetic qualities:

> The project of *oríkì* is not to chronicle events and indeed is not narrative at all. But there is a sense in which *oríkì* are intrinsically and profoundly historical, both in terms of their genesis and in terms of their present-day function. They represent the "past in the present," the way the knowledge of the past makes itself felt stubbornly and often contradictorily today. They represent a way not just of looking at the past, but of re-experiencing it and reintegrating it into the present. This is one of the reasons why *oríkì* are valued. (Barber, 1989, p. 14)

Therefore, Araújo's use of *oríkì* reflects his objective to make the entanglement of past, present, and future visible, audible, and livable in a participatory dialogic performance, involving all the senses, in order to offer the experience of time-space travel without moving oneself, but being "moved" by emotions and by participating in various spatial and temporal junctures. As Barber explains, the genre contributes to the history of an individual or a community in an associative manner:

> *Oríkì* are more than a mnemonic device for the storyteller, they are the pegs on which the whole narrative is staked out, the teller moving from one "explanation" to another, concluding each episode with "And that's why they call our people such-and-such." One could see *oríkì* as a mnemonic aid for the oral historian; but one

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[8] Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013. See also Adedeji, 1969.

[9] When I asked Araújo if the texts are available in the form of a script, he told me that the texts cannot be read or discussed outside the context of *Quaseilhas*. Therefore, I cannot analyze the text in relation to the performance/play.

could with equal justice see the oral history as an amplification of an essentially non-linear, disjunctive form […] (Ibid., p. 17)

In the description of the set, we have already seen the nonlinear arrangement of fragments, disjunctive elements that are combined, repeatedly but differently each time, by the interaction between the actors and spectators, as well as with the fragments of stories injected into the process by photography, sequences of filmed interviews, and song. The intrinsically polyphonic quality of the *oríkì* and its open structure is highlighted by Barber as follows:

> But if *oríkì* are a concatenation of fragments from different times, referring to different things, then they are also a collection of diverse voices. Different bits were composed by different people. The performer of any given realisation of the tradition does put her own mark on the collection. She selects as she thinks fit, strings the elements together, often invents tenuous and temporary links between them or allows them to silt up in certain semi-permanent ways according to a principle of association or thematic drift. She also on occasion interpolates inventions of her own or incorporates materials she has raided from other sources. (Ibid., p. 20)

Quaseilhas combines the open format of the *alárinjó* with the *oríkì* genre to connect the fragmented bits and pieces of the contemporary experience of Afro-descendant inhabitants of the marginalized neighborhoods of Salvador—and, by extension, other places and spaces, in the sense of the "repeating island" proposed by Benítez Rojo—with fragments of memories from communicative archives (see Assmann, 2011).

Fragmented Stories

Having given an overview of the complexity of the overall concept of *Quaseilhas*, I would like to give some detailed insight into the fragmented stories told via the performances taking place in the three rooms. As the text is not translated, most of the spectators have to make up their own interpretation of the script, the sound, and the audiovisual projections, which are limited to the room to which they are confined during the play.

The story told in Camamu

One enters the room to find a large wooden bed, covered with a red sheet, occupying most of the space (fig. 4). Turning to the left, one can take a seat on low wooden chairs that oblige the spectators to sit in a confined, narrow space, facing the bed and the wall that is partly behind the bed, so that the images projected on the wall sometimes overlap with the acting in front of it. Above the bed are a bulb and a faucet. The remote sound of drums and singing approaches until one female actor enters the room, carrying a white enamel bowl on her head. The cloth wrapped around her shoulders and the bowl on her head conjure images of women in West Africa. She lies down on the bed while the singing and music—also coming from the other rooms—continue and echo each other, creating a larger space than the one the spectators are confined to. The movements on the bed recall the convulsive contractions of a woman giving birth, but could also hint at contorted movements under torture. At a certain moment, the actor opens the faucet so that both the bed and the floor are flooded, as if the room were on a ship whose planks let seawater pour in with every wave (fig. 5). In this way, the spectator shares the actor's experience of being imprisoned in a moving, dark space, without knowing where

s/he is headed or for what objective. The suffocating atmosphere of heat, the steam of sweating bodies, the impossibility of moving, and the constant threat of physical pain create an experience of traumatic anxiety. The only moments of relief are the moments when the actor leaves the room and the spectators are limited to experiencing the parallel "events" in the other rooms through the sounds of the music, drumming, and singing. From time to time, projections on the wall bring light into the dark room, showing short clips of the wooden stilt houses as well as of photos of members of Araújo's family, followed by historical footage of Salvador de Bahia; the projections thus create a continuity between official, documentary footage and subjective, personal visual archives. In an interview, Araújo explains:

> The ancestor and the womb are the same thing […] An Atlantic womb full of currents and gaps regarding the Afro-diasporic memory. Voids created in the slavery and post-slavery process that took away from the Afro-Brazilian people the right to build their family trees and their memories in a positive way throughout these four centuries of diaspora.[10]

The Camamu room underlines the symbolic meaning of the painful rebirth, the rite of passage, as one of the foundational elements of the diasporic experience in the Atlantic historical context. In this way, the performance in this room serves partly as a synecdoche of the Middle Passage.

Fig. 4. The Camamu room.   **Fig. 5.** Woman on bed.

Photo by Guto Muniz.   Photo by Guto Muniz.

The story told in Pantaleon
In the Pantaleon room, a partly filled bathtub sits in the center takes up most of the narrow space. From the ceiling and the wall, some bulbs are hanging, there is one water tap (fig. 6). At one point, two women and a man enter from the door on the lefthand side, singing, crossing

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[10] "'O antepassado e o útero são a mesma coisa,' explica Pinheiro. Útero atlântico repleto de correntezas e de lacunas a respeito da memória afrodiaspórica. Vazios criados no processo escravagista e pós-escravagista, que tirou do povo afro-brasileiro o direito de construir de maneira positiva suas árvores genealógicas e suas memórias ao longo desses quatro séculos de diáspora." Source: https://correionago.com.br/portal/primeira-obra-brasileira-em-yoruba-quaseilhas-ocupa-mercado-iao-em-salvador/.

the room, and leaving at the other side. At another point, a male actor enters repeatedly, each time bringing a bucket of water to fill the bathtub. His comings and goings reach their climax when he climbs onto the sides of the tub, standing above the "abyss" with one foot on each side, making the tub move slightly swing like a boat by his movements. Later on, the second female actor enters, switching the lights on and off, drawing very close to the spectators leaning against the wall where the bulbs are hanging. The spectators are drawn into the vortex of light and darkness, of accelerating bursts of coming and going, jumping, and dancing that seem to communicate the rising tide. The male actor is wearing baskets and a black hoodie, as well as long braids (fig. 7) that connote African American subcultures. Each of the three characters is therefore linked with areas and cultural phenomena of the Sahara region, with the transatlantic musical rhythms and the subversive culture of rap in a continuous flow linking back to the experience of the Middle Passage. The climax is certainly the moment when the dancer undresses and lies down in the bathtub, her body covered completely by the water (fig. 8). Once again, the symbolic image of the return to the womb is enacted—the return to mythical origins and the painful rebirth after arrival. In between the climactic moments, clips are projected, showing the grandmother of the director as well as his sisters and nieces—the matriarchal lineage on which the transmission of knowledge is based. Having submerged herself in the bathtub, the actor steps out and approaches the projection screen, trying to touch the women's faces, as if they were lost memories that reappeared and that she was trying to capture and reconnect with. The going under the water in the bathtub may be seen as the experience of the Middle Passage, which obliges the individual to start anew, severed from his or her origins and previous bonds. The moment when the actor touches the screen visualizes the process of remembering—how she tries to connect with fragments of memories and sound, being forced to rebuild her world.

Fig. 6. The bathtub.   **Fig. 7.** The actor standing on the tub.   **Fig. 8.** "going under."

Photo by Tailla de Paula.   Photo by Patrícia Almeida.   Photo by Tailla de Paula.

The story told in Quebra Machado

While Camamu focuses on the belly of the ship, a confined space of pain, loss, and reliving, and Pantaleon on movement between two places—the room having two entrances or exits—and a moving ship/bathtub floating on imaginary waves, the third room, Quebra Machado, is linked with land. The floor is covered with sand, which evokes connotations of sandy beaches as departure and arrival points, but also connotations of the desert, referring to West Africa, spaces of migration, and transition. The male actor is wearing goggles with bulbs attached to them. It seems as if he is trying to find something in the distance, as well as read and understand the traces in the sand. His acting visualizes the search for lost memories in the

past, in abandoned countries. It also refers to fortune-telling practices like geomancy, as in fig. 9. In addition, the TV set in the room accelerates the loss of orientation, showing only visual noise. The bulbs light up the path with only a limited radius of light, so visibility is restricted. The curtailed vision symbolizes the disorientation of losing the knowledge of one's historical and cultural origins and heritage, which includes the effects of the interrupted transfer of knowledge. The disconnect from their own mythology explaining the world obliges Afro-descendants to reinvent their world based on fragments, which are conveyed by the projections (fig. 10) of the grandmother, who embodies the transmission of knowledge and the reinvention of the world in Brazil.

Fig. 9. "Reading the sand."   **Fig. 10.** Projection of the grandmother.

Photo by Tailla de Paula.   Photo by Guto Muniz.

The In-betweens: Visual, Sonic, and Symbolic Connections and Ruptures
As the spectator is confined to one room, he experiences only the events taking place in the same room. But there is still sound coming from elsewhere, as well as video projections on the window and wall. With these additional elements, Araújo builds a universe that goes beyond the space of one room. Sometimes, when the curtains of Camamu and Quebra Machado are opened at the same time, glimpses into the other rooms are possible. As the two rooms are opposite each other with the technical booth in between, the view is obstructed, but still allows for observing the shadows moving on the other side. Conversely, the spectators sometimes see the silhouette of the director/narrator behind the slightly transparent fabric of the curtains. In this way, the set depicting the barracks also uses light and shadow to create a space that varies between different grades of confinement and expansiveness by sound and visual fragments added by projections and the use of mise en abyme. Araújo succeeds in visualizing the disturbances of the channels of transmission of memories and knowledge, so that the spectator can experience the loss of meaning for himself; he thus has to make his own effort to combine and arrange the fragments of knowledge transmitted in an unknown or forgotten language, as well as in the unconnected pieces of sound, tales, and images. It seems as if the music and rhythms alone create the continuity between the spatial and temporal elements, and which allow this continuity to resume as part of a larger rhythmic pattern even after interruptions and pauses. Baranzoni and Vignola use the concepts of polyrhythm, tidalectics, and creolization—referring to Deleuze/Guattari, Brathwaite, and Glissant,

respectively—in combination with the notion of performance to conceive of locality as a "rhythmic movement":

> Through this kind of rhythmic movement, which originates and is originated at the same time, we become capable of grasping and feeling a concept of locality that is neither fixed in a specific territory nor represents a central and ancient place: rather it is a particular way of *giving* place, continuously becoming something else, and as such proliferating, through different territories, by a singular language, sound, movement. In brief: a certain kind of expression that marks a poetic territory *to come*. (Baranzoni & Vignola, 2019, p. 167)

Araújo creates this poetic territory with *Quaseilhas*, which is continuously becoming something else with the different reconstructions of memory by each spectator in their respective context. The play allows entry to a locality that must be brought to life by the shared experience of the actors' performance, joined by the spectators to create a poetic time-space that transcends the past, the present, and the future. The play turns into a quasi rite of passage during which the spectators live some of the loss and estrangement caused by the forced and violent rupture with one's origins.

Beyond Fragmented Memories: Afrofuturistic Perspectives

While the core of the play focuses on memories and the linkages between past and present, there are elements that go beyond the questions of how to reconstruct fragmented memories in a violent historical context. The Brazilian critic Aldri Anunciação underlines the importance of the references to Afrofuturism in *Quaseilhas*:

> Another disturbance provoked by this performance is the aesthetic dialogue with what we call Afrofuturism (Mark Dery). The antinomy between the object-memory that traditionally tends to throw us towards a narrative of the past, and the Afrofuturism that imposes itself in the scene of *Quaseilhas*, promotes yet another challenge to the audience, who is impelled to re-signify the blackness that is so commonly associated (in the arrogant wing of the analytic contemporaneity) to a primitive and regressed figural. In 2018, the symbolic speed of Afrofuturism […] crosses the Bahian performance *Quaseilhas*, sealing the complex temporal articulation of the narrative that associates past, present and future through Yoruban oríkìs of his author-director. (Anunciação, 2018)

Anunciação stresses—en passant—one of the most important aspects of *Quaseilhas*, namely how the reenactment of the past can open up perspectives on futures that might depart from the continuing sociopolitical marginalization of Afro-descendants in Brazil. The hints at imagining the future are mainly embedded in the costumes of the actors: the gowns, hoodies, and black stripes on their arms and goggles seem to evoke outfits from cyberpunk and science fiction films (see fig. 7, 9, 11, 12), alluding to past and future, African American elements, all used in Afrofuturistic narratives.

Fig. 11.   **Fig. 12.**

Photo by Shai Andrade.   Photo by Shai Andrade.

Through the aesthetic of both the decor and the clothing, Afrofuturism becomes an integral part of the back-and-forth wanderings in the time-space continuum. The references to Afrofuturism are even more evident in the posters announcing the play. They show faces and heads that are partly comprised of mineral elements, so that the human body seems to be composed of more than just "flesh," carrying connotations of hybrid beings like cyborgs. The collage in fig. 13 shows a floating being or an island composed of vegetal, human, and earthen elements. The poster turns the Afro-descendant person into an "almost island," a detached island floating on the sea without any orientation. At the same time, the hybrid being also floats in the air, linking it with representations of time travel and the science-fictional imagination of the future (fig. 14).

Fig. 13.   **Fig. 14.**

Source: https://plataformaaraka.wixsite.com/quaseilhas/fotos Fig. 13 and Fig. 14.

In an article, Kodwo Eshun explains the importance of Afrofuturism to the conceptualization of history and possible futures in the context of the history of slavery and its aftermath:

> In this context, inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial. The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective. (Eshun, 2003, p. 289)

Araújo tries to bring a proleptic perspective into *Quaseilhas*, as the actors seem to come from the future, reliving traumatic moments in the past. Going back and forth in time and space enables the spectators to question projected futures of Afro-descendants in Brazil that seem to be limited to the designated marginalized and inferior social spaces. A change in the perception of Afro-descendants as not being predefined by their violent past would be the premise of a changing imaginary for possible futures. Eshun speaks of disturbances of "the linear time of progress":

> By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates. (Ibid., p. 297)

The time-traveling capacity of the three-compartment-shed unsettles the official linear conceptualization of Afro-descendants' history, combining fragments of diverse stories that comment on and question each other, provoking uncertainty that yields open questions at best.

Bill Ashcroft also draws our attention to the construction of time in postcolonial contexts:

> Memory refers to a past *that has never been present* not only because the present is a continual flow, but because memory invokes a past that must be *projected*, so to speak, into the future—not only the future of its recalling, but *the future of the realm of possibility* [emphasis mine] itself. This process deploys a radically transformed sense of the relation between memory and the future: The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, re-figuring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (Bhabha 1994, 10) This leads me to conclude that a proper understanding of the capacity of the creative spirit to anticipate the future requires a rethinking of the nature of time itself.[11]

In this sense, "the future of the realm of possibility" is staged in the Quebra Machado room, where the television set has no picture, indicating that no preconceived images or concepts are there; the actor, meanwhile, is searching for these ideas and concepts while wearing the goggles (fig. 8). The search for the future in noisy screens, nonexistent images, and in the sand underlines the uncertainties that have to be answered by the past, but that also leave room for imagining a future different from the past.

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[11] Ashcroft 2013 100. Ashcroft is referring to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994).

The changing perception of the past is also inscribed in the moment when the actor stands astride the bathtub symbolizing the slave ship. The descendant of the slaves controls the movements of the ship as well as the memory of the passage. By taking control of the vessel, he brings the enduring curse on slave descendants to an end. (fig. 15).

Fig. 15. Standing on the rim of the bathtub. Photo by Patrícia Almeida.

As Araújo has underlined in an interview, his strategy is to address the "non-time" that Afro-descendants inhabit: "non-time" circumscribes the entanglement of loss of memory, violent disruption with one's origins, and the lack of alternative futures.[12] With *Quaseilhas*, he has created a time-space-capsule that allows spectators to relive traumas in order to escape the repetitive vortex of fragmented history so that new imaginaries of the future can open up. *Quaseilhas* takes the spectators on a time-traveling journey to parallel universes in the past and present, showing how the future can be reinvented and creating different images and prospects for it.

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[12] See http://agendacultural.ba.gov.br/quaseilhas-obra-cenica-de-diego-pinheiro/

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