

When literature, oraliture: Afrofuturist dialogues with Lu Ain-Zaila

Lu Ain-Zaila (PUC-Rio)

Interviewers

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PALIMPSESTO

1) How do you define Brazilian Afrofuturist fiction? How does it differ from and resemble Afrofuturist fiction from other parts of Latin America and Central America?

LU AIN-ZAILA

Our fictions are narratives we elaborate, laden with philosophical values and cultural markers of Black peoples in any space, universe, or temporality. This characteristic is very real and vibrant in Brazil, but I cannot affirm it for Latin America because our contacts are still scarce. But Latin Black literatures are made from memories and manifestations as means of fictional inspiration, and our idea of technology and technoculture will certainly be more comprehensive than a simple connection with machinery. And from what little I know, it's something just beginning, younger than our history, so let's wait. However, even having a young field of writing that just turned ten years old, this didn't come out of nowhere; it is supported by a democratic reality and rights that didn't exist; we are fruits of this generation. Other Latin countries are experiencing certain political and social issues that affected us twenty, thirty years ago and are part of our social and psychological construction, but with the added benefit of having timelines they can look at and correct trajectories. This is important.

The will and vision of those doing it out there are drawing from diverse sources. And when we talk about differences, we also talk about the size of this population, which ends up expanding this occupation compared to countries where the Black population is smaller. And in general, it would be easier to investigate Black speculative fictions instead of Afrofuturist ones, because the speed of the process is very different in each place.

PALIMPSESTO

2) We can see a predominance of female characters in your works; is this intentional? What creative processes do you choose in constructing this female protagonism?

LU AIN-ZAILA

Yes, there is an intentionality because we started from scratch, so for me, it made sense to write stories with Black protagonists without the burden of a present gap in Afrofuturism, but we still need many presences to have more varieties of protagonism. The literary path is not easy; it is Black, and this marks both the access of authorship and the access of this movement, which has taken very interesting steps despite economic difficulties. And my creative process occurs especially by thinking of them as *muntu*, people who have potential, vital energy that transcends gender but at the same time connects. The research base is the same, the knowledge and values too, but the development happens as the story improves, and this makes them what they are, without inspirational limits.

PALIMPSESTO

3) Thinking about works produced in the Global South, can *aquilombar* (the act of forming a quilombo/community of resistance) as a device of resistance and cultural clash be found in Brazilian Afrofuturist fiction? If so, how is it organized? If not, how could it be practiced?

LU AIN-ZAILA

All Black movements have this purpose of resistance and persistence in affirming that we are here to live and maintain ourselves as integral people on our own terms. Afrofuturist literature is a Black literature that speculates, a more elaborate field that uses cultural, historical, philosophical, social, technological elements, etc., this *aquilombamento* that Beatriz Nascimento identified in our population through experiences and approximations/separations in political, social, and affirmation moments, among others. This *aquilombar* does not reach us in such a conscious way, but in the construction of being Black, it improves through experience and awareness of the Black identity that we are shaping. The idea of authorial protagonism and Black protagonists already gives us a place to start the *aquilombado* conscientization process between life

and literature, marked by encounters and questioning. And this is evident in the Afrofuturist literary movement.

PALIMPSESTO

4) Another point we can highlight in your works is the cultural heritage of African peoples, based on the relevance of the word and ancestry. For you, what is the importance of orality and traditional African oraliture in Afrofuturist works?

LU AIN-ZAILA

This is an Afrofuturist mark, of Black literature. This identification gives us ties to our history, culture, and everything that stands and is written. We cannot say we have oraliture because we didn't have the chance for an oral tradition in the terms that happen in an African country. What we learn from books and written/oral testimonies here is of another order; we have manifestations that speak, yes, but it is not a normalized access to the Black body. There, it's something that starts in the cradle, it's in the language, in the proverb, in the food, it's daily, you don't ask, it just is. So we understand that we don't have oraliture. Here is an Afro-diaspora, and this clearly marks how Black bodies came to be here and in other continents, through slavery. So what we have here are the variations: orality, oraliture, the writing of memory, memory itself, readings of Black philosophers, of Leda Martins, of Azoilda Loretto, and of those who teach us between here and there. So we reconstruct ourselves through vestiges, encounters, persistence, and everything else that came and was maintained by passed memory that goes beyond the written idea; it is a universe not measured by forms.

PALIMPSESTO

5) The Brazilian literary scene has grown considerably, especially with the expansion and greater dissemination of works featuring and written by Black authors. Despite this, the number of readers in Brazil, especially young people, has decreased. How can Afrofuturist literature encourage children and teenagers to read in this technological reality we are living in?

LU AIN-ZAILA

There's no way the literary universe can grow without readers, at the same time that Black literature has never systematically and truly figured as part of the publishing

market. One cannot affirm such a thing, and Afrofuturist literature is much more outside this official market than within it, including the places and modes of circulation. If we consider such research, I don't remember it in any periphery, in any fragmented Black literature event, so the universe investigated is the same as the canon with few differences. Thus, what we have are data of vestiges, around, and those who are doing it out there don't see this decrease, but an increase that will not be registered, as Samuel Delany already said in *Racism and Science Fiction*, about when they will start to worry. Therefore, it is obvious that I am not in this market, and so many other authors are not either. But I don't even know if we should depend on this market to elaborate data, thinking here of Marcelo Paixão at the time of the HDI; perhaps we should build other means to do this, and the guiding thought should also be different, thinking about the generations formed out there with data that never heard their name. It is suspicious, and its data should also be viewed with caution. Thus, I can say that we already encourage reading through the movements we make, and that there is no such idealized internet world, but rather a problem of access to literature that schools without decent collections will not be able to handle, the PNLD format does not help, reading mediators are a hallucination when they should at least be in municipal cultural centers, and there are no circulating buses to move classes, corruption itself is an obstacle starting from school meals. In short, the lack of a project is a project of alienation to be overthrown. And the internet itself is not an object of detachment; we must consider it as a tool for dialogue dispute and that it can also be a means to read. It is a long-term process that is already in a non-cohesive movement of transformation, so let's keep doing it until we see the difference.

PALIMPSESTO

6) Territory and peripheral scenarios always appear in your plots. How can territorialities be inserted into Afrofuturist works so that cultural imaginaries are decolonized?

LU AIN-ZAILA

I have already written stories in space, on other planets, but mixing the territorialities of Black people is something that changes our vision of the value of the lives present there. But you need to place yourself as a witness to memory. What historical Black places have you visited? Is there a state policy for tourism in these spaces, or is it something "apart," including resources for heritage sites? This is a constant question when

we write, even without directly dealing with it, because elaborating and understanding the territory and the territorialities within it is a system of meanings constructed by people, as Milton Santos taught so well. Hence, I will be aware that my story will eventually be forgotten, but what remains of it is the turning point. The importance of who is there in the narrative and the certainty that these are possible places to tell stories, not focusing on difficulties as a motive, but focusing on improvements, on the right to life, and this is relevant.

Thus, we become a cognitive territory, a body of narratives of a mixed territoriality, where Black people and the professions they exercise are also issues we must deal with, because who taught us that Black people who sell food, snacks, fix cars, are employees cannot be decisive when it was they, for many of us, who made it possible for us to graduate within the system's procedures? It is necessary to self-criticize the idea of people's value, importing what a person truly is, beyond social status.

PALIMPSESTO

7) Following up on the previous question, given the growing debate around anti-racist education and the consolidation of Law 10.639/03, how can we think about deconstructing single stories through Afro-Brazilian and Afrofuturist literature?

LU AIN-ZAILA

It is an arduous movement of Black literature as a whole and also embraced by Afrofuturism as a part. The Afrofuturist idea is an interesting means to mobilize all ideas, but in the school environment, it is also a powerful tool for debate and fun. In this field, we have Prof. Dr. Helena Rocha from UFPA – Belém/PA with master's and doctorate degrees in classroom practice, with freely available materials, with the Cartodiversidade methodology, with the first discipline of Ethnic-Racial Relations to have Afrofuturism as content within a mandatory course, training people from various courses in licentiates, showing the possibility of literatures in countless disciplines, and believe me, we don't need computers for this, not as a rule. It's a huge opening because the word technology is very much about the idea of machines, and this doesn't help us because we have many *gambiarra*s (makeshifts/hacks), more than technologies within what the market names as such. So what about everyday or ancestral technologies? Many times I call them artifacts, knowledges as they were already called because in internet searches the terms get lost, add meanings, and we have to be careful not to be looking for degrees of value in the

wrong places. So for me, education meeting Afrofuturist literature is important and what we have happening most, compared to other branches of Afrofuturist arts, because it is the one whose ideas arrive quickly, by hand, by email, by link, carries implicit values, goes directly to memory, instigates the imagination in details of bodies, voices, brings smells and sensations that we had never connected before in such terms, with central vigor even. And it doesn't require more elaborate means of transmission. The word sense is always our most effective and immediate communication.

PALIMPSESTO

8) Taking into account that we need to "southernize" our references more, who would you highlight in the contemporary Afrofuturist scene that deserves to be mentioned?

LU AIN-ZAILA

There isn't one name; there's a universe of knowledge and people doing it from everywhere. We are just beginning, even if they believe ten years is a lot, it's not. There isn't a boom; it's a Black movement that has a lot of work ahead, imaginations, and we need people to read our narratives and take our thoughts as references to understand what Afrofuturist literature is about. But in a country that denies the place of philosopher to Nêgo Bispo, there's no doubt the path is long.

The academic structure still doesn't allow our expertise to be present on examination boards, so who has been building curricula about our bodies? Something that precedes this movement, and this is a very serious problem. So, we need this history to be recorded in its proper terms, mainly through Black thought. There's no way to talk about this literature with discourses of "southernizing" while practicing the same invisibilities as always. This is a debt that should also be charged to academia, to its role as a place of Brazilian social thought that historically acted against us and has not yet committed ethically to undo what it did to create and maintain the sociological gap (Sociology of the Gap), as Mário Augusto de Medeiros so well named it.

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She was a jury member for the São Paulo Literature Prize 2024 and focuses on the importance of imagining and concretizing Afrofutures and positive futures.

Danielle da Silva Leal: She holds a degree in Literature – Portuguese/Literatures from UERJ, a specialization in Brazilian Literature from UERJ, and a master's degree in Brazilian Literature from UERJ. She is a doctoral candidate in Brazilian Literature at UERJ. Her research focuses on the literary production of Eliana Alves Cruz. She is a member of the research group "Narratives of Black Women as a field of investigation and a strategic universe for confronting institutional racism in the SUS" at Fiocruz.

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