

STAGING DISPLACEDNESS: THE DISTURBING SPATIAL CONCEITS OF EDGAR NKOSI WHITE'S DRAMA *

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Abstract: Emerging from the author's own diasporic experience in the Caribbean, the UK and the United States, Edgar Nkosi White's drama reflects the reality of the racially-oppressed from multiple perspectives. Focusing on the theatre's spatial expressivity, this essay analyses the metaphorical value of his theatrical spaces. Through these deterritorialized geographies, the readers and spectators of Edgar Nkosi White's theatre are able to recognize loci of racial confrontation from a cross-cultural viewpoint, thus enlightening their perception of the global, conflictive space they share.

Key words: Drama, Theatre Semiotics, Black theatre, Racism, (Post)colonialism.

Resumen: A partir de la experiencia diaspórica del propio autor en el Caribe, el Reino Unido y Estados Unidos, el teatro de Edgar Nkosi White refleja la realidad de las víctimas del racismo desde una perspectiva múltiple. Tomando la expresividad espacial del teatro como eje principal, este artículo analiza el valor metafórico de los espacios escénicos de su obra. A través de sus geografías desterritorializadas, los lectores y espectadores de Edgar Nkosi White pueden reconocer lugares de confrontación racial desde una perspectiva transcultural, iluminando así su visión del espacio global y conflictivo que comparten.

Palabras clave: Literatura dramática, semiótica teatral, teatro negro, racismo, (post)colonialismo.

As suggested by Peter Brook in his seminal work *The Empty Space* (1968), spatiality is an inherent quality of the theatre. Borrowing from his famous definition of this performing art, "[one] can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst somebody else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 1968: 11). As the representational art *par excellence*, the theatre has a lot to say about spatial relations, including the influence that they exert on the human beings inhabiting them. In particular, dramatic texts that spring from histories of territorial usurpation and human exploitation often present in a poignant way disturbing associations between spatial configurations and certain socio-historical conflicts. This is certainly the case of many postcolonial plays in which, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne

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Tompkins contend, “space becomes a force that potentially determines [all] relationships rather than simply affecting them” to the extent of almost becoming “a performer rather than the medium on or through which the pageant of history seems to merely unfold” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 146). Space is also a prominent stage system in the corpus of playtexts that are generally denominated as Black drama which, for historical, geographical and political reasons, share several aesthetic and ideological grounds with many postcolonial plays.

As an author of Caribbean origin and thanks to his diasporic life-experience—developed mainly in the United States but also in Britain and the West Indies—the playwright Edgar Nkosi White can be regarded as a representative of these two closely-related theatres. In his dramatic work, he vividly depicts situations of displacedness which are mostly provoked by racially-oppressive practices in multi-ethnic territories. Racial oppression is spatialized at various levels in his plays, but this essay will focus on a heterogeneous group of locales that imbue the dramatist’s *oeuvre* with a high degree of metaphoricality. In the representation or analysis of complex socio-cultural phenomena, spatial conceits may act as symbolic bridges across distinctive perceptions and experiences. In fact, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put it, “[m]ost of our fundamental concepts are organised in terms of one or more spatialisation metaphors” (McAuley 2000: 210). As will be shown, the symbolic spatialities of Edgar Nkosi White’s drama cast light on the general experience of ‘being (in the space)’ by staging the particular viewpoint of the racialized displaced.

One of the author’s most illustrative settings for portraying the experience of racial displacement is the oneiric “high-society restaurant” in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* (White 1973: 51). The theatricalization of this locale creates an uncanny effect by swaying between the aesthetic poles of Naturalism and Anti-Naturalism. Hence, in a recognizable scenario of racial discrimination, the play’s protagonist and his wife are not admitted into this restaurant because they are Black (White 1973: 51-61). At the same time, the name of the place, “Hagia Sophia”, transforms the setting into the allegorical domain of sacred wisdom (White 1973: 51, 53). “Hagia Sophia” is elevated further to the realm of divinity and, hence, to ultimate sovereignty, when it is learnt that the cook is called ‘Le Dieu’ (White 1973: 55, 59). The use of Greek and French not only to designate the restaurant and the cook, but also the wine list (White 1973: 60), together with the Mozart piece heard as background music (White 1973: 59, 61) clearly signal the Eurocentric nature of the presentational space. On the whole, the restaurant in this piece is portrayed as an exclusive club for White authority to which the Afro-American couple are consequently denied admission, even if they appear to know more about European culture than the White American diners accepted into it (White 1973: 59, 61). In this respect, the restaurant undermines the apparently transcultural spirit of American society, highlighting instead the insurmountable lines of its racial demarcations.

The scene’s “vocabulary of stage placement,” to use Cameron and Hoffman’s terms (Elam 1980: 66), ascribes further meanings to this presentational space. Hence, while trying to be admitted in the restaurant, three White couples are said to “circumscrib[e]” the two Black characters (White 1973: 51). In African traditional cosmology, as reflected in

Paul Carter Harrison's description of African-American dancing modes (Harrison 1972: 70), the circle signifies the cohesiveness and power of the community. In Edgar Nkosi White's theatre, however, circularity is significantly permutated into the *solo-and-circle* formation. This composition disrupts the cohesive presentation of a mono-ethnic community to graphically highlight the configuration of multi-ethnic societies that are characterized by racialist relations: in them, as in the *solo-and-circle* format, those who are discriminated against are simultaneously entrapped by and detached from their oppressors. The composition of the restaurant scene certainly signals the Afro-American couple's social entrapment owing to their skin colour and, by extension, that of the Black-bourgeois "ethclass," as Milton M. Gordon would put it (Gordon 1964: 160), in White-dominated America. The spatial configuration of the restaurant, together with the aforementioned Eurocentric signs, ultimately represent this place as a temple of racialist acts of communion in which Black people are excommunicated.

Vessels, be they ships or boats, are another symbolic space that is ascribed a spiritual value in Edgar Nkosi White's work, even if in this case they constitute the victim's shrine. In the context of the Black diaspora, the presence of a ship, as Paul Gilroy maintains, "immediately focus[es] attention on the middle passage" (Gilroy 1993: 4). Indeed, theatrical ships are potent reminders of the Atlantic slave trade, as well as of migratory movements of Black people around the globe. As such, they may be considered icons of a diasporic Black identity, understood as resulting from processes of human mobility mostly dictated by imperialist, postcolonial and neocolonial imperatives. In this sense, to African-derived communities ships are symbols of dispersal as well as of a silent feeling of solidarity in the face of uprootedness and racial rejection.

Ships are made present onstage in several of Edgar Nkosi White's plays, each of them highlighting several aspects of this polysemic space in the discourse of the "Black Atlantic", as Paul Gilroy phrases it (Gilroy 1993). Some of these vessels present certain continuities between slave ships and new enslaving realities. In *Fun in Lethe*, for instance, national, racial and social-class markers criss-cross in the night boat that takes the Afro-Caribbean protagonist to Dublin across the Irish Sea: while the main character and a young couple are shown lying on the boat's floor and "writhing with nausea," an Englishman returns to his cabin "apologetically" stepping over them (White 1970: 98). In *Lament for Rastafari*, a boat renders the problematic link between ethnicity and class, harbouring as it does the vicissitudes of West Indian migrants in New York in their daily boatripe to work (White 1983: 73-4). From a distinct perspective, the ship in *The Crucificado* also highlights the links between racial and class membership when Morose and Soledada are shown "aboard a ship off Europe" (White 1973: 124). Significantly enough, the ship-scene is defined by a stage direction as a "[s]urreal fantasy of the middle class" (White 1973: 124). The real foundations of the Black couple's voyage are actually linked to White (neo)colonial supremacy, as it is Morose's White father that has financed the trip in exchange for his illegitimate son's work. The dramatic background to Morose and Soledada's cruise hence renders the allegedly luxurious ship-space a fettering domain to the two characters: it not only provides them with a false respite from their oppressive lives, but also reinforces Morose's relationship to his father and his company, significantly referred to as "the plantation" in the play (White 1973: 128).

The connotations of the ship in *The Lovesong for Langston* point in a different direction: as the setting of some of Langston Hughes' real-life trips, such as his voyage to Africa (White 2001: 19-22) or Cuba (White 2001: 92-3), the ship in this play evokes the peripatetic life of many Black artists as well as the—all too often imposed—travelling essence of Black cultures. As the poet once said, "I have learned that there is at least one Negro everywhere" (Pettinger 1998: ix). Langston's ship in Edgar Nkosi White's play constitutes a veritable transcontinental vessel that is part of a pan-African network worldwide; yet, as the play demonstrates, the space is not exempt from poverty and racial oppression. In this sense it reflects the history of the "Black Atlantic" which, as Alasdair Pettinger contends, "began with the trauma of the enforced movement of people" to eventually "become a domain in which even the most mundane forms of travel can become exceedingly difficult" (Pettinger 1998: xiii).

It is, nevertheless, the ship staged in *The Burghers of Calais* that more overtly spatializes the errant navigation of the Black Self in a racist world (White 1970: 48-52). In this play, a dream-like scene reproduces a leper-ship carrying seven of the famous Scottsboro Boys with their lawyer (White 1970: 49). The image created by the ship onstage, which is denied anchorage in ports, theatrically portrays the experience of exclusion beyond the Scottsboro Boys' case of racial injustice. As Gaston Bachelard puts it, "[t]he communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance" (Bachelard 1964: xvii). Indeed, the ship's errancy does not only stand for the Scottsboro Boys' perpetual wandering between American prisons and courts of justice, but also echoes the erratic direction of slave ships which, in Caryl Phillips' words, for long periods "ploughed the ocean without any real understanding of where they were, until they finally made landfall at Jamaica, or Barbados, or Charleston, or some other port..." (Phillips 2000: 33). The ship's recreation of the mythical *Stultifera Navis* or Ship of Fools (White 1970: 48) provides this presentational space with a symbolic power that surpasses chronological linearity, theatricalizing instead "errant blackness", as Merle Collins phrases it in a poem (Collins 1992: 69), in a world that resembles a sea of folly¹.

The farcical tones that tinge the end of the leper-ship scene in the play aforementioned acquire more salient shades in another symbolic space in Edgar Nkosi White's work, that is, a garbage can. The choice of this peculiar space as shameful abode to three characters in the secondary piece of *Fun in Lethe* reflects the playwright's resort to the grotesque in order to ridicule the racial divide (White 1970: 105). As Geneviève Fabre contends, the grotesque mode "allows a constant interplay between the fantastic and the ordinary and reveals the absurdity of the world" (Fabre 1983: 198). The dramatist's theatrical garbage

¹ The connection between the sea, the Middle Passage and the Black characters' circumstances in a modern world favoured by the Expressionist ship in *The Burghers of Calais*, is underscored in Edgar Nkosi White's drama at a referential level, as with Barzey's allusion to a recurrent dream of a ship carrying Black men "all in chains" in *Ritual by Water* (White 1984: 47). Its communal value is underlined in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* when Bob tells his friend that "[they]'re all in the same boat" (White 1973: 15), the symbolic load of the ship or boat figure in the discourse of Black history tinging this popular saying with specific meanings. Finally, in *I, Marcus Garvey* the image of the *Stultifera Navis* is somehow re-anchored in a twentieth-century backdrop through the reference to *The Black Star Line* (White 1989: 245), the ship whereby the leader attempted to return Black people their dignity by taking them back to Africa.

can reproduces this interaction between fantasy and ordinariness, constituted as it is by a huge pit with an overhanging disposal chute for garbage into which a West Indian watchmaker, a Trinity College Student and a retired Greek professor have been thrown (White 1970: 105).

The stifling, reductive spatiality of the pit exacerbates the racial tensions between the three characters, eventually leading the White professor to devise a hierarchical disposition of the space whereby the student and himself may counteract their fear of the Black character. Thus, he tries to submit the West Indian man to his colonial vision of the world by saying:

Look, as long as you're here you'll take orders for me... I mean us. We must have some semblance of commonwealth here. Insofar as we must maintain a contiguity and society. Now you will take your meal and necessities after us. I think it best also that you sleep by the North wall, Aengus by the right and I in the center. We shall have to do something about sanitation also. Hmmm... yes, all human waste shall go in that corner... Yes... (White 1970: 110).

The professor's spatialization of the garbage can, with his self-ascribed central position, his location of his student by his side and his shunting the Black character to one of the space's margins, as well as his organization of the activities to be carried out in it, renders the setting a place contiguous with the world outside, in which race is synonymous with either domination or subordination.

Despite the absurdist overtones of the scene, reinforced through the Beckettian reference to "the bog"², the theatrical pit does not exist in an undefined space, as an allusion to Dublin demonstrates (White 1970: 105). It does not exist outside history, either: the reference to the Commonwealth situates the figures and space they are depicted in into a (post)colonial context that inferiorizes the West Indian watchmaker while at the same time restoring an imperialist spatial organization that ensures White hegemony. More generally, the garbage can in *Fun in Lethe* enhances the sordid nature of racialist relations, its shabby conditions dramatizing the spiritual poverty of those entrapped within nodes of racial domination. Human and spatial impoverishment become interlinked in the White student's words when he says, "we are lonely here, we three. Lonely with ourselves. The yourself, the myself, the ourselves. Lonely among the rinds and pits" (White 1970: 112). Racism is shown to taint the space of human relations itself, transforming it into a land of waste where past forms of oppression are recycled only to make the space become more deteriorated: this is scenically conveyed through the loads of garbage intermittently thrown into the pit (White 1970: 105), which accumulate as the action proceeds. The metatheatrical framework in which the garbage can is embedded underlines the symbolic potential of this space, thus providing its confined geometry with a strong metonymic character. Through it, larger fictional spaces can be viewed as an absurd giant pit into which oppressors and oppressed are cast³.

² Beckett 1965: 15.

³ Hamartia provides this vision in the primary play of *Fun in Lethe* when, paving the way for the signification of the secondary piece, he affirms in the middle of a racial argument: "This whole country is going to explode soon —the inevitable conclusion of too much accumulated garbage. And everybody is going to say that it all doesn't make any sense" (White 1970: 84).

The cemetery is another scenic location that stands out in the playwright's *oeuvre*, both at presentational and referential levels. In *The Mummer's Play*, it is the silent witness to Miss Nancy's loneliness when she visits her husband's grave (White 1970: 148-50). At a certain point a Black man interrupts Miss Nancy's soliloquy and asks her for directions to find his wife's tomb. Through the lady's indications, the space becomes further defined, resembling a city of death in which the dead conform a landscape in their own right (White 1970: 149). In *The Wonderful Year*, the cemetery is the setting of Mamacita's funeral (White 1970: 239-42), which confirms the lethal power of a plague that afflicts the play's dramatic universe. New York's Woodlawn Cemetery is recreated in *Lament for Rastafari*, in which it becomes an appropriate site for Lindsay's pan-Caribbean ritual, given that, as is said in a stage direction, "so many West Indians have been laid to rest [there] with a century" (White 1983: 77). In *Redemption Song*, the graveyard of a Caribbean village constitutes Legion and Verity's clandestine meeting place (White 1985: 69-71). In it, the pulse of life is united with that of death, especially when a stage direction reads that the "slow darkness of the graveyard covers them" while they kiss (White 1985: 71), thus making the cemetery a spatial announcer of Legion's eventual murder. The importance of the space of death in Edgar Nkosi White's theatre is reinforced by numerous scenic and verbal references to graveyards, graves, ashes, funerals, funeral parlours, morticians and gravediggers, which are present in these and other plays⁴.

The image of the cemetery brings together connotations generated by other spaces of the playwright's work. Hence, the graveyard staged in *Lament for Rastafari* is coherent with the author's departmentalized portrayal of big cities in his drama. Segregation in cemeteries is indeed the definitive spatial expression of the colour line, as implicit in Nicolás Guillén's words when he observed that in New York, "the blacks have no option but to remain in 'their' district, to study in 'their' university, to pray to God in 'their' church, and even to sleep eternally in 'their' cemetery" (Pettinger 1998: 119). The recurrent interaction of Edgar Nkosi White's Black figures with the space of the dead reinforces the perpetuation of this oppression in contemporary times. The fact that the cemetery is presented as an intimate, welcoming space, as in *The Mummer's Play* and *Redemption Song*, underlines by negation the quality of homelessness of the characters' cities, villages or countries. The abundance of graveyards ultimately reminds reader and spectator that, as Albert Memmi asserts, "the path of racism leads ... to the cemetery," and that this is a question of "anything but the ongoing process, more or less hidden, more or less affirmed, of symbolic destruction whose end is the dehumanization of its victim" (Memmi 2000: 116). The cemeteries in Edgar Nkosi White's work may thus be understood as spatial signs of the limbo-like domain to which the victim of marginalization is condemned: denied a full existence in life, the cemetery offers an ultimate home to the racially-oppressed; it is the only place in which the possibility of having space is not denied, even if it is granted

⁴ Additional examples are found in *Fun in Lethe* (White 1970: 73), *The Mummer's Play* (White 1970: 145, 165), *The Wonderful Year* (White 1970: 188-95, 209, 211), *Segismundo's Tricycle* (White 1971: 141), *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* (White 1973: 14), *The Crucificado* (White 1973: 131), *Lament for Rastafari* (White 1983: 58, 66, 70-3), *The Nine Night* (White 1984: 34), *Redemption Song* (White 1985: 34, 36, 50, 65 81) and *Les Femmes Noires* (White 1985: 157).

in a state of ‘not-being.’ This paradox actually defines the deathlike existence of the discriminated against.

Besides their particular connotations, the symbolic settings analyzed so far share certain spatial features that are also significant to Edgar Nkosi White’s dramatization of displacedness. Excepting ships, the heavenly high-society restaurant, cemeteries and the garbage can are attached to the symbolic geometry of the vertical axis, whereby the spatial semes ‘high-low’ have traditionally been associated, amongst others, with semanticized features such as immortality and ephemerality, respectively. In this sense, the playwright’s emphasis on the ‘low’ spatial seme through the cemeteries and the garbage can highlights the disempowered nature of his characters as well as their condemnation to eternal invisibility in a world that is unlikely to immortalize them. As Anne Ubersfeld maintains, “the valorization of high, a sign of spiritual (and social) elevation, is linked to a culture and to an image of the heavens as source of value and authority” (Ubersfeld 1999: 116). In the microcosm of Edgar Nkosi White’s theatre, with clear links to Christianity, the authoritative celestial world is either invisible or presented as a discriminatory domain, as the oneiric restaurant demonstrates.

The predominance of the ‘low’ spatial category, with its strong terrestrial nature, also reminds reader and spectator of the wordliness of the conflicts represented in Edgar Nkosi White’s theatre; in his plays, eschatology is thus linked to ordinary life. Through his theatrical cemeteries and garbage can, the dramatist takes reader and spectator on an imaginary downward journey to darkness whereby aspects of discrimination that remain hidden or obliterated in the surface world are brought to theatrical light. The dramatic descent suggested by these spaces is reinforced by other domains that correspond with the ‘low’ spatial semes and which are either represented or referred to in his plays, such as the tube (White 1970: 80; 1983: 123; 1983: 175; 1985: 153-4, 160-2), houses underground (White 1970: 124-5) or hiding places under the earth (White 1985: 23, 39). The frequent resort to dark spaces of death or dirt provides Edgar Nkosi White’s figures with an additional vividness, aware as they are of their ephemerality and marginalization. At the same time, if in the polarities of verticality it is possible, as Gaston Bachelard puts it, to oppose the rationality of upper spaces, such as the roof, to the irrationality of lower domains, like the cellar (Bachelard 1994: 17-8), the symbolic settings of Edgar Nkosi White’s plays underline the irrational side of racist societies, to which oppressed figures are relegated and in which they struggle to survive⁵.

Regarding the horizontal axis, vessels remain the main spatial conceit to link the dramatist’s Black figures to a larger, more complex, limitless space. Nevertheless, as suggested by their particular connotations, ships and boats confine Edgar Nkosi White’s figures to the errancy of homelessness or, at its most specific, to the geometry of in-betweenness that is definitory of the migrant’s form of ‘being in the space’ as well as of that of the racially-oppressed. This way of perceiving and experiencing spatiality is also

⁵ The image of the underworld is actually one of the main isotopies of the playwright’s work, as reflected in the scene entitled “Study for Underworld” in *Les Femmes Noires* (White 1985: 160-2) and, more significantly, in the title that comprises some of the author’s earliest pieces, namely, *Underground: Four Plays* (White 1970). Emphasis on the space that is not seen and yet exists as a domain of resistance provides his work with an important subversive load.

conveyed verbally in Edgar Nkosi White's plays, as when the West Indian character in *Man and Soul* asserts, "[b]etween and between is the way we live between and between of things" (White 1983: 138), or when the South African dancer exiled in London claims to be confined "always and ever in the land of 'almost'" in *The Boot Dance* (White 1985: 137). The sense of unstableness that these words exude is certainly reproduced by the unsettling spatiality of the ship. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the playwright does not resort to more anchored, horizontally-oriented spatial conceits so as to reproduce the interstitial experience of the socially-displaced. In actual fact, certain spatial tropes like the bridge are regarded as unrealistic metaphors in the racialized worlds he dramatizes. Thus, when in *The Nine Night* Lisa attempts to approach her Black father-in-law by suggesting that "people should build bridges," the West Indian man pretends not to recognize the symbolic value of the White girl's words, replying, "[y]ou mean like navvies on the road?" (White 1984: 19).

As Ralph Ellison said, "[t]he work of art is [...] an act of faith in our ability to communicate symbolically" (Uno and San Pablo 2002: 23). The symbolic settings of Edgar Nkosi White's theatre do surpass idiosyncratic boundaries to conform a deterritorialized geography in which the only spatial markers are the borders identified by the victim. In this way, the disturbing presentational places of the dramatist's work reflect, as Avtar Brah phrases it, "a rupture between signifier and signified" that enables reader and spectator to perceive the spatial—and, thus, human—experience of the racially-oppressed from a multidimensional, cross-cultural perspective (Brah 1996: 203-4). Far from giving rise to hopeful loci of transcultural communication, these deterritorialized domains evoke instead the anxiety of the alienated Self. As perpetually conflictive spheres, then, they only pave the way for reconciliatory forms of life beyond the stage frontier. In Thulani Davis' words, "[t]he challenge is to make theater a public space where many private worlds can be seen and heard; to make a public space where the fictional boundaries of the past can be our metaphors, rather than our prisons" (Uno and San Pablo 2002: 23). Edgar Nkosi White's drama satisfies this challenge by overtly indicating the referential value of his spatial conceits, hence enlightening our way of behaving in a global space in which we are all mutually-dependent.

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