

Transformation and Option: A Spatial Study of Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics*

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Nilo Cruz is a Cuban-American playwright, whose Pulitzer-winning *Anna in the Tropics* has earned his national fame. Based on spatial theory proposed by Lefebvre and other scholars, this paper explores spatial transformations and characters' options from three aspects: social space, psychological space, and theatrical space. Social space is both a physical social product and a projection of social relations. Cruz focuses on spatial practice in the cigar factory and reflects the transformation of American society and production methods, which leads to the conflict between tradition and modernity. Psychological space shows the spatial subject's psychological state in social relationships. Cruz portrays cultural displacement of Cuban immigrants and indicates their quest for identity and spatial belonging through memories and spatial transcending. Theatrical space presents a symbolic stage place. Cruz uses theatrical techniques such as juxtaposition along with sound and lighting. He goes beyond the context to make options predestined and attempts to reconstruct the spiritual order in the tragic ending, thus implying a possible eternity of memories. The interweaving of multi-dimensional transformations and options reveals Cruz's reflection on social reality and his humanistic concern, extends beyond the stage via Tolstoy's classic and provides a new perspective on the interpretation of this play.

Keywords: Nilo Cruz, *Anna in the Tropics*, space

Introduction

Nilo Cruz (1960-) is a Cuban-American playwright who is the first Latin American dramatist to win the Pulitzer Prize. He is often praised as "a poetic chronicler, a documentarian of the presence of Latin people in American life" (Gener, 2003, p. 23). He is one of the least self-imitative playwrights and his writing practice seeks a breakthrough in human inquiry and self-choice. His plays often place dramatic conflicts in a socio-historical context, purporting to find a balance between politics and literature. *Anna in the Tropics* is widely considered as his stylistic departure. It is the first play in his oeuvre to "paint a naturalistic portrait of dreams of Cubans outside the island" (Gener, 2003, p. 93).

Cruz's experience of emigration from Cuba and observation of social development in the United States have endowed him with spatial consciousness in his oeuvre. As he recalls in an interview, "Cuba has changed tremendously. I have changed, too. I guess sometimes I fear what the impact of going back would be on me" (Gener, 2003, p. 23). In his writing practice, the setting of *Anna in the Tropics* shifts from Latin America to the

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United States, signalling change *per se* as the underlying motivation for the play. In the title of this play, “*Anna*” alludes to “*Anna Karenina*” while “*Tropics*” can be interpreted as Florida or the tropical island Cuba. The dual reference of “*Anna*” and the displacement of “*in the Tropics*” indicate Cruz’s spatial consciousness. Based on this, transformations of space in the theatrical text mainly point to changes in social reality, cultural background, and literary context, which in turn affect characters’ options and their fate. Under the guidance of spatial theory, this paper scrutinizes space in a three-pronged mold, from social space, psychological space, to theatrical space.

Social Space: Tradition and Modernity

According to Lefebvre (1991), social space is both a physical social product and a projection of social relations. Set against the dramatic backdrop of the manufacturing center of hand-rolled cigars on the eve of the Great Depression, *Anna in the Tropics* brings to life tensions between tradition and modernity. The emergence and development of modernity occurs through the production of social space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 95). Thus, emerging social space is encroaching on the old-established one. In the portrayal of a Cuban cigar factory amidst productivity changes, the gradual transformation in society is projected onto this play, which embraces modes of production and social relationships. Given the dialectical relation between society and space, the transformation of space has influenced society as well. Thus, the contradictions arising from the modernization exposed in the script have led to a dispute over modes of production.

Social Transformation: From Natural Space to Abstract Space

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) has put forth the idea that natural space is irretrievably disappearing. The evolution of capitalism has given absolute priority to cities and industry, so much so that natural space is constantly being swallowed up by the burgeoning abstract space. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams (1978) elaborates on the contradictions in the transition from “country” to “city” during industrial revolution. The sense of civilized order is praised as well as achievements of production and trade. However, the undercurrent of greed and unrest is swirling behind the roaring economy. Likewise, Cruz reflects changes in spatial practices concerning the demise of natural space initiated by the process of modernization.

From the standpoint of Lefebvre (1991), natural space is deemed as the foundation of human existence. Juan Julian, the lector, feels asphyxiated in cities because the buildings seemingly steal away the oxygen. He compares living in a city to living inside the mouth of a crocodile. “The teeth of culture, the mouth and tongue of civilization” (Cruz, 2003, p. 41) make him feel uncomfortable. Thus, he is eager to go back to nature and returns to the park at weekends where he could find the verdure. He is discontented with the expansion of capitalism and is skeptical about the rationality of city planning. In this regard, the fragmentation of modern life has led to a break with tradition, and thereby the sentimental attachment to natural space has been destroyed.

However, Lefebvre has pessimistically pointed out that everything is conspiring to harm nature and that natural space will disappear from our view soon (1991, p. 31); capitalism has produced abstract space, which includes “the world of commodities, its logic and its worldwide strategies” (1991, p. 53). Cruz reflects the infiltration of commodities through the change in cigar consumption. As machines entered tobacco production, advertising and media campaigns established a new tobacco market: “Hollywood movie stars were smoking cigarettes at that time. The public accordingly imitated them to “prefer a quick smoke” (Cruz, 2003, p. 53). People are immersed in the novelty brought by mass production but ignore their swelling desires. The lector, Juan

Julian, blames it on “the fast mode of living” (Cruz, 2003, p. 53), where the consumerist feature of space has projected commodity fetishism into daily life.

In addition, in such space where efficiency and function dominate, abstract space completely ignores human interaction and the subtle experience between human beings and space. The intrusion of machines standardizes the cigar laborers who operate them, and ideology in abstract space completely neglects the richness and diversity of human beings and their intrinsic nature. People become passive and numb machines under the domination of the standardized space. In such a rigid and monotonous spatial structure, humans lose their emotional connection with space, and therefore abstract space cannot form part of body as natural space does.

The Choice of Production Methods: Machine-produced or Hand-rolled Cigars

In this play, machines act as a symbol of modernity. Lefebvre rightly points out that workers no longer operate “tools” but serve “machines” (1991, p. 344). Cheché’s choice of production methods is in accordance with the expansion of capitalism, maximizing efficiency by homogenization and standardization. Industrialism, driven by machines, has brought the pace and order of the city under its domination. The invasion of machines has promoted the division of labor, requiring individuals to focus on only one aspect. Cheché asserts that machines mean “the modern world, modernity, progress and advancement” (Cruz, 2003, p. 50). Apart from that, he denies the existence of lectors and claims that some factories have fired them.

From the above, we can get a glimpse of typical traits of urbanites from Cheché. One of them is giving absolute priority to profits and efficiency. Cheché worries that “all these other cigar companies have the leads” because they use “machines that do tobacco stuffing at the speed of light” (Cruz, 2003, p. 51). His concern for sales implies a rationalized association between urbanites and the monetary system. Thus, commodities are calculated by means of a standardized currency. In this context, urbanites choose to implement a numerical method to create homogeneity. As a result, they become calculating and selfish. Moreover, Cheché is “not interested in giving any money to listen to a lector read romantic novels” (Cruz, 2003, p. 52). In the abstract space invaded by machines, emotions and diversity of individuals are suppressed by mass production, the centralized system, harsh rules, and the dehumanized production environment. Therefore, machines take control over the order of production and consequently turn workers into numb machines under the domination of abstract space.

Contrary to Cheché the workers choose to rely on tradition and resist the homogenization of abstract space through “recoding.” Large-scale industrialization and urban expansion have turned the world into a wasteland, and science has decoded the sacredness. The process of “desacralization” transforms space into geometric forms (Jameson, 1997, p. 22). When workers celebrate the new cigar brand that will be launched into the market, the owner of the factory Santiago proposes baptizing it and naming this well-crafted cigar “*Anna Karenina*” (Cruz, 2003, p. 70). Tolstoy’s literary classic recodes the handmade cigar and endows it with artistry and irreplaceability. On this point, the workers attempt to create new “differential space” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52) to counter the tendency towards homogeneity in abstract space, thus preserving the diversity and uniqueness of “works.”

Apart from that, these workers’ solidarity with handcrafted production is a confirmation of self-existence and resistance to the “docile body.” Machines are stealing their jobs and relegating them from subjects to appendages in production. Once machines encroach on production, workers will inescapably lose their autonomy over the labor process and become victims of efficiency. Furthermore, the lectors not only assume the role of

entertaining and relaxing workers, but more importantly, educating them. Some cigar workers may be illiterate, but they can “recite lines from *Don Quixote* or *Jane Eyre*” (Cruz, 2003, p. 27). When lectors are being fired from factories, nobody can hear them read over the sound of machines. In fact, workers are deprived of their right to get knowledge. According to Foucault (1982), space can be seen as a medium through which power transforms and disciplines the individual. By virtue of internal surveillance and regulation, space has the power mechanism to forge individuals into new forms of subjectivity. In this respect, it is precisely the projection of space under bourgeois hegemony.

Psychological Space: Conflict and Integration

Psychological space serves as the “encrypted reality” that can be decoded by literature (Soja, 1996, p. 80). Cruz's spatial consciousness in *Anna in the Tropics* lies not only in geographic migration and socio-economic shifts, but also in cultural displacement. The concern for spatial displacement is one of the main features of postcolonial literature, and it is also where the crisis of postcolonial identity lies (Ashcroft et al., 2002, pp. 8-9). As a Cuban-American playwright, Cruz constructs characters' psychological space in this play to present the existential plight and identity anxiety of Cuban immigrants in the United States. Through his writing practice, Cruz embodies the different attitudes of the Cuban immigrant family towards the culture of their homeland and shows the function of psychological space in the production of identity.

Cultural Displacement: Imaginary Homeland and Third Space

The modern diaspora is a minority group settled and living in a receiving country, yet they maintain close emotional and physical ties to their homeland (Mishra, 2002, p. 17). The geographical alienation gradually leads to the blurring of memories of homeland country. In addition, the penetration of American culture leads to the continuous dissolution of the original identity. Homeland can be a physical space or an imaginary space (Tong, 2004, p. 52). For Cuban immigrants, geographical distance and infiltration of foreign culture gradually alienate them from their homeland in psychological space. Juan Julian, “the best lector from west of Havana” (Cruz, 2003, p. 11), came to this new land for the first time, just like the early Cuban exiles. He shows great curiosity about this new world. After he tells Conchita how he has become a lector, Juan asks if she has ever been to New England. “I always wanted to go there. I wonder what New Englanders are like. I haven't met anybody from up North” (Cruz, 2003, p. 43). Juan's innocence and curiosity imply an exploration of the new world and the consequent exclusion.

Additionally, the infiltration of American culture always affects the formation of identity and a sense of belonging. Chech é Santiago's half-brother, is half-Cuban and half-American. However, Ofelia claims that they “didn't know he was part of the family ... but he is really from a town up north” (Cruz, 2003, p. 20). Cheché's origin is ambiguous, but what is certain is that his Cuban identity has completely evaporated, as Conchita maintains that he comes from another culture. Through Juan Julian (a newcomer to the country), Santiago (a first-generation immigrant who clings to the culture of his homeland) and Conchita (a second-generation immigrant who suffers from cultural differences), Cruz presents different characters with different degrees of cultural dislocation, thus reproducing the process of constructing ethnic identities in psychological space.

The Cuban-American world of Ybor City is close to what Bhabha and Soja refer to as “third space,” where Cuban immigrants' languages, cultures and identities are mingled, with a strong sense of cultural dislocation. Homi K. Bhabha (2012) argues that the most visible element of identity is the interstice, or the borderline of

cultures. Soja (1996) points out that the concept of third space has the multiple meanings that Lefebvre gives to social space—it is both a space that is distinct from other spaces (physical space and mental space, or first space and second space) and a mixture that transcends all spaces.

Moreover, third space is “an open space of possibilities” (Soja, 1996, p. 87) that provides conditions for cross-ethnic cultural identities and spatial practices. Juan Julian describes Ybor City as “a city in the making” and “all so flat all around” (Cruz, 2003, pp. 9-10). The lector deems that there isn’t any place where one could hide. In this regard, the construction of third space allows everyone to alleviate identity politics and bridge the cultural barriers. Avtar Brah (1996) contends that after experiencing migration, immigrants tend to generate a homing desire. However, the “home” in this concept is not necessarily the birthplace of the first-generation immigrants, nor the immigrant country full of cultural conflicts and identity anxiety. In Scene Two of Act One, Ofelia dreams that they will construct a city which resembles the one in Cuba (Cruz, 2003, p. 22). This is a highly idealized space of belonging and an imaginary space that can provide emotional support and alleviate identity politics.

The Anxiety of Identity Selection: Identity Confusion and the Hybrid of Identity

Generally, Cruz reflects the identity confusion of Cuban diaspora after spatial displacement, portraying the existential anxiety of American Latino immigrants and reflecting on the clashes and reconciliation between the dual identity. The conflict between Cuban heritage and American culture has long influenced their personal identity. The alienation from both their native culture and foreign culture prompts them to seek a new cultural orientation and reconstruct their psychological space, thus alleviating their anxiety about identity selection. Cruz sets the *tabaquería* (which refers to the cigar factory), a location with specific Cuban significance, as a narrative context. His choice of geographical space represents a cultural metaphor, thus influencing the construction of characters’ psychological space. As for Cuban immigrants, apart from getting lost in social space, cultural displacement leads to a dislocation of ethnic identity, which in turn causes anxiety about identity selection.

For the diaspora in exile, the identity produced by cultural dislocation is rooted in the “retelling” of the past (Hall, 1997, p. 210). Hiring lectors for the laborers is a recurring tradition at this Cuban tobacco factory. Teodoro, who read for them for ten years, died three months ago, so Ofelia insists on hiring the next best lector to “retell” the convention. Similarly, the younger daughter, Marela, is excited about the arrival of the new lector and hopes to “have him here once and for all” (Cruz, 2003, p. 12). In fact, support of the laborers and adoration of Conchita for Juan Julian stem from a deep-rooted attachment to their motherland. Naturally, the lector constitutes an emotional connection with their memories of their homeland. Cruz’s writing of Cuban elements in the play embodies a collective memory rooted in the Cuban community. Memory implies continuity with the past, and common behavioral habits, beliefs and value systems form the medium of cultural transmission and emotional ties, thus enhancing the sense of belonging to the space. Psychologically, these Cuban immigrants once again become a whole, finding a concrete meaning and a solid foundation for their existence.

However, “absence” of homeland always affects the purity of such repetition and imitation, not to mention the invisible penetration of culture from the immigrant country. Prohibition, officially named “Volstead Act,” which forbade the brewing, transportation, storage, and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States, was in effect since 1920 and lasted until 1933. Interestingly, Cruz sets this play in 1929, apparently still at the time of Prohibition. Thus, the alcohol party to celebrate the new cigar brand gives a metaphorical meaning that dissolves

the center and the periphery, as well as the selfness and the otherness. Party participants include the lector Juan Julian, workers (from Cuba, Spain, and Napoli in Italy), the Santiago family and Chech é There is no hierarchy, no color, no class, no race, no gender in the carnival, and all the boundaries of space can be crossed.

Such space fosters the formation of a hybrid sense of identity. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that cultural identity is the moment of identification and is carried out within the discourse of history and culture, not in essence but in orientation. At the party, Ofelia proudly claims "Americans are good at movies, radios, and cars, but when it comes to dancing ... That's why I think alcohol is prohibited, because most Americans don't know how to dance" (Cruz, 2003, p. 70). Dancing is what the Cuban nation is known for and is passionate about. On top of that, they are baptizing their new cigar and adopting the ancient way to taste the new cigars in turn. It not only registers a catharsis of emotions, but also puts people from different cultures in the same cultural space. In such space, through various forms of imitation, barriers of psychological space are eliminated, and new collective memories are established. In this sense, it is the transcending of space that manifests a means of cultural mingling.

Theatrical Space: Destiny and Eternity

Besides constructing social space and psychological space, Cruz applies dramatic techniques to transform theatrical language into a living image of theatrical space. In general, theatrical space is the direct reading material of theatrical text. According to Michael Issacharoff (1981), space in the theatre can be divided into theater space (the place used for performance), stage space (the stage and set design) and theatrical space (space as used by an individual playwright). Based on this, Hanna Scolnicov (1987) further classifies theatrical space into theatrical space within (on-stage space) and theatrical space without (off-stage space).

Contextual Alteration: On-stage Space and Off-stage Space

In on-stage space, Cruz simultaneously presents different scenes through theatrical techniques such as juxtaposition and window framing device, enhancing the conflict and contrast of the drama. In addition, he uses sound and lighting effects to stress the flow between different scenes and reflect the changes in theatrical space.

Cruz overlaps Spanish and English in this play to create the ambiguity of understanding the text. In Scene One of Act One, Santiago and Chech é are speaking Spanish at the cockfight while Marela, Conchita and Ofelia are waiting for the lector to come, and their conversation is in English. The juxtaposition of two languages indicates the dual identity of the Cuban immigrants. Meanwhile, it makes the audience feel struggling between the space which symbolizes the mixture of cultures. Moreover, Cruz applies "window framing device" to juxtapose the scene in *Anna Karenina* and that in the cigar factory. Scolnicov (1987) notes that "window framing device" means that one story is embedded in another story through a "window." In this way, the embedded story becomes "the catalyst" of thematic presentation. Consequently, the lector serves as the "window" and the story of *Anna Karenina* becomes "the catalyst that changes the lives of the cigar workers" (Gener, 2003, p. 23).

Similarly, Cruz's use of lighting on stage reflects the dialogue between the space of Tolstoy's context and that of this play itself. Lighting helps to create a transformative space and takes the role of being a flow to movement from one scene into another. In Scene Two of Act Two, "spotlight on Juan Julian sitting on a chair. He begins to recite a passage from *Anna Karenina*. He remains isolated from the action of the scene" (Cruz, 2003, p. 62). Spotlight emphasizes that the reading of the lector is facilitating the development of the plot, making the juxtaposition of scenes natural and meaningful.

The off-stage space is a dynamic, virtual, and extended space. *Anna in the Tropics* breaks through the temporal and spatial limitations inherent in the script and greatly expands its discourse space (Xu, 2014, p. 121). By virtue of Tolstoy's classic book, this play serves as an affirmation of the power of art, thus resonating with a wider audience in off-stage space. In his essay "The Alphabet of Smoke," Cruz (2019) remarks that cigar brands have a certain allure, since some of them have been named after the greatest ill-fated love stories ever written. As if the smoker is to experience the enraptured heights of a romantic passion from a puff of a *Romeo y Julieta* or a *Madame Butterfly*. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* seems like such "cigar smoke" diffusing in the off-stage space while the audience appears to be "the smoker" experiencing the affections.

In addition to evoking the characters' own emotions, literature influences the audience's sentiments in the off-stage space. Particularly, *Anna Karenina* as fiction and *Anna in the Tropics* as drama conspire to allow the audience to break the boundary of the contextual space and establish "a new textual space" (Xu, 2014, p. 121). Furthermore, when Conchita asks Juan Julian why he chooses to read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the lector gives the reason that "Tolstoy understands humanity like no other writer does" (Cruz, 2003, p. 42). Cruz connects theatrical text with the contextual space in which modern audiences live, thus evoking their reflection on humanity. Literature, as a collective memory, has manifested the power of going beyond space. In this regard, Cruz attempts to cross the context and go beyond the stage, thus resonating with modern audiences.

The Catalyst for Romantic Options: On-stage Destiny and Off-stage Eternity

Cruz (2019) observes that both literary reveries and cigar smoke permit one to escape the weight of the world and defy the laws of gravity. Listening to the lector provides cigar laborers with information about their individual essence and creates emotional parallels to their own lives. In *Anna in the Tropics*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* plays a catalytic role in unfolding the plot. The overlapping and interweaving of literary context constantly foreshadows the fate of characters. The story of *Anna Karenina* serves as a magic spell guiding these characters. Consequently, its role as a catalyst for their romantic options has created a sense of destiny on stage.

Cruz recalls in his interview, "because of *Anna Karenina* being at the center of the play, I find there is no one main character in this particular script. If we really had to search for a main character, it would be Tolstoy's book" (Gener, 2003, p. 89). Tolstoy's book is like "a book of destiny" that envelops the characters in this play, which appears from time to time to sway romantic options of characters. *Anna Karenina* has ignited Marela's romantic imagination about love: she wears "an elegant coat and fur hat" to "pose as Anna" (Cruz, 2003, p. 55) for the label of new cigar brand, which is named after Tolstoy's book. Furthermore, guided by the lector's reading of *Anna Karenina*, Conchita and Palomo reflect on their marriage and bridge their relationship after the quarrel. Similarly, Santiago and his wife Ofelia repair their intimate relationships through this book. By virtue of the romantic relationship of Levin and Kitty in *Anna Karenina*, Santiago and Ofelia gradually find emotional parallels to their own lives.

Like Anna's death in *Anna Karenina*, the lector is seemingly cursed and is shot dead in the ending. Traditionally, it is considered as a signal of the end of tradition. Although the reality is that the lectors were removed from the factories after 1931, Cruz still attempts to reconstruct the spiritual order and retain tradition and memories on stage. In this way, the ending creates an off-stage eternity of literature and indicates a possibility of continuation concerning literary memory behind the superimposed tragedy. When the lector died, the factory lapses into silence again. Ofelia remarks, "this silence is louder. Much louder. Much louder" and she feels "as if a

metal blanket has fallen on us" (Cruz, 2003, p. 82). It is noteworthy that the oxymoron "louder silence" and the metaphor "metal blanket" illustrate their resistance to the silence which represents obedience to the domination of machines. Consequently, they are seeking to continue reading, which symbolizes that the eternity of literature sheds a hopeful glow on the tragic ending.

Although the lector has disappeared in cigar factories, the ending still tries to keep the reading continuing. As Conchita says, "stories should be finished or they suffer the same fate as those who die before their time" (Cruz, 2003, p. 83). They continue to read stories and attempt to conspire against the same fate. As Cruz remarks in an interview (Tichler & Kaplan, 2012), "I know that in my own humble way I've tried to give lectors a place in the theatre, so they can read aloud one more love story." In this way, Cruz's creation of this play is to bring lectors back to the stage, thereby reconstructing a spiritual order on the "wasteland" of the modern world. In this sense, Cruz rescues Cuban memories from oblivion and makes the tradition of lectors immortal in theatrical space, thus transcending space to reach an off-stage eternity among modern audiences.

Conclusion

Transformation serves as the underlying motivation and drives the characters to take their own options. In this play, Cruz shows his concern for social reality and reflection on the identity of Cuban-American immigrants in his theatrical practice. In the construction of social space, he acutely observes the flaws of city planning and human alienation exposed during industrialism and capitalism. Characters' psychological space presents the existential plight and identity anxiety of Cuban immigrants and their attempts to construct third space that fosters the formation of a hybrid identity. In theatrical space, Cruz goes beyond cultural context by virtue of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, thus reconstructing the spiritual order and rescuing Cuban memories from oblivion. All in all, the interweaving of multi-dimensional transformations and options provides a new perspective to interpret this play.

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