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America's "Corridor of Uncertainty": Racial Spatiality in the Poetry of Maya Angelou and Lisa Suhair Majaj

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Abstract:
The interplay between race and space is not a new theme to be visited in literary works especially in those written by authors of multi-ethnic origin. However, with the advance of the interdisciplinary study of racial spatiality, the impact of spatial structure on the network of social relations in multiracial societies has been given more specialized focus. More particularly, the question of whether racially mixed societies like the US, in which racist practices have long been institutionalized, can become raceless has brought to the fore the possibility of replacing existing racist policies with more race-neutral ones through reassessing the spatial construction of racialized areas in those societies. To this end, the study analyses the interplay between race and space in the poetry of two ethnic-American women writers, the African American Maya Angelou (1928-2014) and the Arab-American Lisa Suhair Majaj (1960-) by examining the extent to which space in a selected body of their poems is represented as hierarchical, contingent, disputable and/or interactional. This comparative analysis is done to underscore the need to push research

in the study of racial spatiality towards a comparative approach through which the race-space relationship is more comprehensively examined and assessed.

Introduction

Reading the recently published Palgrave book *'Race', Space and Multiculturalism in Northern England: The (M62) Corridor of Uncertainty* (Tayob, Hall, 2020), in which the authors challenge the mistaken assumption that northern England is a failed space of multiculturalism, the question of why racially mixed communities are usually perceived as failed multicultural spaces has resonated. The recurrent interracial conflicts in those communities are one reason. The "essentialized ethnic 'difference'" (ibid., p. 7) strategies which policy-makers integrate into the governmental systems there is another. The racially segregatory lifestyles which make it hard for ethnic groups to "maintain the social trust and solidarity essential to the social welfare systems" (ibid.) in those communities is a third reason. But the question is to what extent do these reasons validate describing racially torn societies as failed spaces of multiculturalism?

Prioritizing the socio-political element in analysing multiracial experiences is expected to result in reductive or misrepresented images of "minority-dominated urban spaces" (ibid.), as is the case with the M62 corridor which has traditionally been labelled England's "corridor of failure" (ibid.). A less politically involved approach, however, is expected to shift focus to other aspects of this experience, specifically the spatial aspect which shores up the role space plays in the formation of social relations in multiracial societies and paves the way for a more empirical, and thus a more prejudice-free, understanding of those relations.

With the integration of space into the assessment of the multiracial experience nowadays, the question of the success or failure of such an experience takes a new role. In literary and critical studies, a new interdisciplinary approach –known as racial spatiality – has recently been brought to the fore to study the impact the spatial structure of contemporary societies has on the network of social relations between racially diverse members. In the article titled "Racism out of place: Thoughts on whiteness and an anti-racist geography in the new millennium" Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake highlight the revolutionizing impact the study of racial spatiality has had on refuting several of the currently popular claims about race and space, among which is the claim that racism has

become too old-fashioned a phenomenon to be seen in contemporary societies which boast of having multiracialized populations (2000, pp. 390-392). Thus, at the time that numerous contemporary societies have become homes to racially diverse populations, the fact that social balance is spatially hard to strike between different ethnic groups and the native populations in some of them shows that the current spatial structures still reproduce the same old racial hierarchies.

With racism still spatially present in contemporary multiracial societies which boast of having become race-free zones, several questions arise. Can the spatial structure of a place hinder the process of acculturation of the racial groups living in it? Why is the spatial structure of multiracial urban societies perceived as a product of its racially segregating social order? And is there hope of replacing existing racist policies with more race-neutral ones by reassessing the spatial construction of racialized areas in those societies? These questions, amongst others, are raised in this study which attempts to answer them in a comparative context[1] by examining the interplay between race and space in the poetry of two ethnic-American women writers, the African American writer Maya Angelou (1928-2014) and the Arab-American writer Lisa Suhair Majaj (1960-).

The study of racial spatiality

Though the interdisciplinary study of racial spatiality is rather new, the interplay between race and space is not.[2] In an article titled "Social geographies of race: connecting race and

[1] In literary works representing spaces where social relations extend over two or more racial groups, it is important to pay attention to how social relations that exist between one ethnic group and the native population of that society and between the different ethnic groups are spatially constructed. Hence, the need to push research in the discipline of racial spatiality towards comparative studies which analyse the representation of space in the works of writers belonging to multi-ethnic backgrounds. In the Introduction to the book they edited *New Geographies of Race and Racism* (2008), Claire Dwyer and Caroline Bressey dwell on this point arguing that many of the spatial messages contemporary writers of racially different origins send in their works ascertain that the old racial hierarchies which are claimed to have become extinct are still being reproduced "through institutional structures and discourses" (p. 26). This realization, as they explicate, highlights the role multi-ethnic literary works play in rejecting existing racist policies by reassessing the spatial construction of racialized areas in multiracial societies.

[2] In "Gender, Race and Space in Nella Larsen's Passing" (2015), Margaret Gillespie argues that despite writing in the early years of the 20th century when "the boundaries of racial and gender identity were being drawn more sharply than any other period in the nation's history,…" (Abstract), Larsen has been able to draw the line between race and space accurately.

space" (2011), Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura trace this relation to "long-standing historical roots of the race-space connection in the process of imperialism" (p. 1934) which has been employed to control racially inferior people through colonizing space. Racial discrimination, in this regard, is to a large extent spatially constructed and this, for critics interested in this area of literary criticism, has shored up the necessity of integrating the two separate studies of race and space into an independent interdisciplinary field of study to help find a common ground on which the processes of spatialization and racialization can be approached and analysed.

Studying race from a spatial perspective can help assess the extent to which contemporary global communities where different races and ethnic groups coexist have become race-blind spaces. In the introduction to the book he edited *Race and Ethnicity: Across Time, Space and Discipline* (2004), Rodney D. Coates argues that studying social relations in a spatial context shows the extent to which race has still been institutionalized in societies where racialised space does not naturally come into being, but must be reserved and sanctified by corporate bodies of law, custom, and practice. Racialized spaces, and how people are grouped within them, help to identify, understand and expose the hegemonic hierarchies that structure systems of racial oppression, legitimacy, and ideology. The examination of race across space allows us to explore these spatial dimensions and explore the terrain of race (Coates, 2004, p. 10).

Exploring the spatial dimensions of a society tells us a lot about what racial practices still exist: what policies and measures have been undertaken by those communities to put an end to racial discrimination in public spaces and what procedures have been applied to provide the needed services and facilities there.[3] Not to forget that studying space also tells us about the different forms of resistance that racially and ethnically different people are currently taking part in to make the racially hierarchical spaces they live in more human-friendly.

To be able to judge whether a social space is race-blind, the different spatial structures in which inter-racial interaction takes place have to be analysed to figure out the extent to which they reproduce the same old racial hierarchies. This approach, as Caroline

[3] Lefebvre (1991) uses the term "lived space" to refer to the space which "encompasses both the 'perceived spaces of material spatial practices and the 'conceived space' of symbolic representations and epistemology".

Knowles explains in *Race and Social Analysis* (2003), leaves some hope for change given that those spatial structures are not fixed, and can, thus, be restructured (pp. 80-81). When space is contested, racial structures are contested as well.[4] Not only does space share in the making of racially prejudiced hierarchies and practices, but it helps challenge them as well. In their discussion, Neely and Samura dwell on this point as well, noting that, when taken to extremes, spatial forms are maintained by the same othering processes race works by. A good example they give is the "ghetto" which is a spatial manifestation reproducing the same hierarchical system the institution of racism works by. Clearly, as space intersects with race, it "[serves] to naturalize" (2011, p. 1943) its discriminatory policies and its "'othering' processes that establish and maintain particular racial and spatial positioning" (p. 1942). The moment the spatial structures of society are shaken, its racial hierarchies can be shaken as well. This, no doubt, gives some hope for considering the possibility of freeing some of the racialized spaces from the race-tied discriminatory practices and policies enacted against racially and ethnically different groups in them (pp. 1939-1940).

For those interested in this new field of study, it is important to understand that the space-race dialectic cannot be understood unless it is politicized. The two processes of spatialization and racialization revolve around a hierarchical power system extending across an intricate web of social relations which are spatially constructed. This means that the two processes must be contextualized to be best blended into one area of study. A race-free space cannot be described as such if it is not contextually studied. Out of a tangible context, space comes to acquire the same naturalizing feature that race has traditionally been associated with and this is one of the main reasons why colour-based spatial hierarchies have been repeatedly reproduced over history.

[4] In *Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women Identities in Guyana* (1999), Linda Peake and D. Alissa Trotz raise the question of what spatial representations ethnicity and gender take as women "negotiate [those aspects of their identity] in their practices of cultural reproduction" (14). The aim is to prove that no place can exist beyond the cultural representation it is given in the text. It is a construct.

Is contemporary multi-ethnic America a race-free space?

The question of whether a racially mixed space like the US, in which racist practices have long been institutionalized, can become raceless is not easy to answer. Historically, racism accompanied the rise of the American nation as the 13 colonies became independent states and this tells us that even in contemporary post-Civil War multicultural America, it may be hard to define America as a race-blind space. In "Why Place and Race Matter", Judith Bell and Mary M. Lee dwell on this point arguing that the struggle against racism is not over in contemporary America:

> America likes to think of itself as a land of opportunity for all, but our protracted struggle with issues related to race is far from over. Moments of great progress repeatedly collide with instances of intense polarization. The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the US seemed a triumphant example of racial healing. Yet, that triumph has been short-lived, with bigoted confrontation characterizing debate over many issues, such as immigration, and hate-filled speech becoming more and more a staple of media coverage and political discourse. (2011, p. 11)

Though racial healing is still far from post-Obama America, one should not rush to conclusions aborting the possibility of America becoming a race-free space in the future. Drawing on the case of the M62 corridor of England which, despite the interracial conflicts it has witnessed, is not regarded as a failed example of a race-free multicultural space, the multi-ethnic America of today can still be perceived as a space where interracial relations are, even if to a limited extent, freed from institutionalized hierarchies.

As members of ethnic minorities living in America, there is no doubt that Angelou and Majaj's relationships with members of their ethnic groups and of other ethnic groups have been shaped by their spatial interactions there. While this shows that individuals belonging to different ethnic backgrounds can coexist in American society, it shows as well that coexistence is racially conditioned in it so that white Americans are spatially more privileged than non-white Americans who are spatially more restricted. This entails that the two poets' difference plays a more significant role in bringing them together than in

setting them apart. It is, therefore, significant to highlight the fact that the different cultural upbringings the two poets have been exposed to do not privilege one of them over the other. In the American society of today, both poets are ethnically and sexually marginalized. Angelou's being a descendant of African forefathers, some of whom may have fought in the American Civil War and shared in building the country, might make her an older American, but it is unlikely expected to make her more privileged than Majaj whose Americanness has recently started with an act of immigration. For white American society today, neither is regarded as a full-fledged citizen, and this proves that integrating space into their treatment of the themes of segregation, racial discrimination, assimilation and freedom is not coincidental.

In one of her interviews, Majaj stresses the importance of shedding light on the spatial aspect of the individual and collective activities members of ethnic groups in American society engage in. Devoid of the spatial element, those activities are prone to lose much of their intended impact for "... our identities and actions, both political and personal, are located and take place within a physical world and a context defined by relations of various sorts: familial, communal, national, political, cultural, spatial" (p. 403). The same standpoint is taken up by Angelou, who ascertains, in an interview with Nelson Gonzalez (2002), that interracial relations are spatially grounded in racism in contemporary America. Thus, instead of "[treading] in timidity", Americans should "have enough courage" to see that the history of America is not exclusively the history of "the noble pioneer on the noble plains", but is more about "slavery and its vulgarity".

This said the discussion below will examine the extent to which the hierarchically structured space-race relationship that is as old as the rise of the newly independent nation is challenged in the selected poems by Angelou and Majaj. The aim is to compare and contrast the two poets' perceptions of the role space plays in challenging the prevalent racial and ethnic restrictions in contemporary America and in making them more race-friendly. "In whose poetry can the reader find a more successfully constructed race-blind space?" is the question the discussion below will attempt to answer.

Race and space in the poetry of Maya Angelou and Lisa Suhair Majaj

The discussion above shows that analysing racial practices and interactions in literary works from a spatial perspective helps give a more thorough understanding of the impact space has on social relations in multiracial societies.[5] In the selected poems by Angelou and Majaj, the relationship between race and space will be analysed by examining and comparing the extent to which space is represented as hierarchical, fluid, disputable and/or interactional. Doing so will help shed light on the significance of this new interdisciplinary study in examining the distribution of power in the social network of contemporary American society and in attempting to make it more race-free.

1) Space as hierarchical

In works where race is a core question, hierarchical spatial relations are seen as the norm, not an exception. And this, as Neely and Samura explain, can be ascribed to the "political struggles over space" (2011, p. 1939), which, in spaces populated by different races and ethnic groups, result in unequal social relations defined by the group with more power to determine what spatial practices are accepted and what are not. Thus, given that Angelou and Majaj share the same racial and ethnic inferior position in contemporary American society, their poetry is expected to shed light on the spatial inequality resulting from racial hierarchies.

A good example is Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" (1983) which opposes the state of freedom a wild bird enjoys with the state of confinement a caged bird suffers from. Right from the opening lines of the poem, the reader notices the sense of spatial inequality between the two birds. Thus, as the free bird "floats downstream/.../ And dares to claim the sky", the caged bird "stalks/.../ seldom [seeing] through/ His bars of rage". Furthermore, the state of physical confinement enforced on the caged bird is intensified by the fact that he is stuck in the past, living in his old memories and oblivious to his present state. Thus, not only is he spatially confined, but temporally as well. This causes it to experience negative feelings which are intensified and copied to its physical surroundings. Read

[5] In the Introduction, Peake and Trotz (1999) note that the "transnational realities" (15) we are forced to live with today require that we occupy or reside temporarily in numerous places, for the more places we occupy, the more aspects of who we are made known to us.

symbolically, a racially different person's passive reaction to racially enforced hierarchies and social codes of behaviour turns whatever space he occupies and interacts with others in into a race-conscious space. As long as this state of opposition is setting the two birds apart, a race-blind space is impossible to create.

The same state of inequality resulting from bringing together race and space is seen in "Awakening in New York" (1983), in which Angelou represents the difference between the two states of sleeping and awakening in spatial terms. As dreaming is associated in the poem with elements taken from nature such as the wind, it brings about feelings of freedom and peace to the place (New York City). However, as awakening is described in the poem using technical and industrial terms such as subway and war, the same free place turns into a physically confining one which is anything but a race-blind space.

Like Angelou, Majaj represents spatial relations hierarchically in several of her poems. The fact that she shares Angelou's double bind in a culturally segregatory society explains why she has chosen politically racist settings in the selected poems. In "Country" (2009), for instance, political power is what defines spatial relations between countries. Thus, as the scene shifts from America to Afghanistan to Iraq to Palestine and Jordan, the perception of what constitutes space and defines spatial relations differs. In America, space is described as beautiful, good, and brave, while in Palestine, space is associated with demolition and shelling actions. This difference, in return, creates an unequal relationship between the different places which serves to enforce dysfunctional relations between the people belonging to those different places.

"Peace", another poem of Majaj's, talks about the danger of racially loaded perceptions of space, and the destructive effect those have on the social relations between different racial and ethnic groups and the natives sharing one place of living is brought to the fore. Two kids, one Palestinian and the other Israeli, are trying to plant a seed each on one side of the barricade. Though scientifically speaking, planting two seeds in two spots of the same place separated by a fence is not the reason for the failure of one to grow and the success of the other, the fact that the two sides of the barricade are spatially defined through racial differences and unequal power relations overpowers the botanic process of planting and growth. Nevertheless, the reader is given some hope by Majaj who considers the spatial proximity of the two kids sufficient to turn the barricade zone, even if

temporarily, into a race-blind space on the two sides of which sprouts can grow. Still, the fact that the barricade is physically there all the time makes it unlikely that the two kids will forget the feelings of "anger and desperation and loss" (p. 67) that this confining barrier has planted in them and their parents. The open-ended statement Majaj closes her poem with reflects the feelings of uncertainty which cloud the expectations she has had at the beginning.

> ..., they go
> home humming a flower song, each in their own
> language. (p. 67)

2) Space as contingent

The contingency of space is another shared feature between the selected poems of Angelou and Majaj. Yet, comparing the selected poems shows that Majaj represents space as more fluid than Angelou, who, more or less, represents spaces as opposites. In "Caged Bird", for instance, the two states of freedom and confinement are opposed in the figures of the two birds. What makes this opposition so deeply rooted in the spatial surroundings of the two birds is that the wild bird is portrayed as enjoying absolute freedom at the time that the caged bird is not. In reality, however, this either-or equation is hard to find, for even in nature there are obstacles and different forms of physical confinement which limit the bird's spatial freedom. The exaggerated privileges that the wild bird is endowed with to "[float] downstream" and "[dare] to claim the sky" contrast sharply with the basic rights that the caged bird is denied. What adds to the stark opposition is the effect those two separate states have on the spatial surroundings of the two birds. The passivity of the caged bird in "[opening] his throat to sing" of freedom is extended to the place in which his cage is found, turning it into a gloomy and lifeless space.

The same state of unbridgeable opposition is found in "Awakening in New York" which opposes two states of human consciousness, sleeping and awakening. Just as in "Caged Bird", the effect of that state of opposition is extended to the speaker's spatial surroundings. As the children sleep, the wind tries to blow against the curtains which serve to add to the confinement of the place they sleep in. The fact that the children dream of

seraphim also adds to the feelings of freedom that sleeping allows them to experience. Yet, the moment the city awakens, a contrasting image of confinement, surveillance and urban entrapment begins to replace the previous one. It is indeed shocking for the reader that Angelou represents New York using these two dichotomous images granting freedom only in sleep, but it is a point worth thinking about as well. What tongue-in-cheek message is she trying to impart to the reader about today's post-racial America? One answer could be that the two pairs of unbridgeable states we find in the two poems reflect the spatial structure of the American society which reproduces the same old racial hierarchies but implicitly. In a chapter titled "Ethnicity and Space" (2009), Wei Li describes the different spatial residential forms of ethnic groups in contemporary America, among which is the ghetto which is one of the most common spatial structures black people choose to live in. Despite their being urban forms of residential structures that boost feelings of belongingness amongst members of the same ethnic group, this so-called solidarity brings about opposite feelings.[6] Thus, waking up in New York has, according to the speaker, awakened feelings of confinement associated with many of the racially segregated spatial forms in urban settings, and this emphasizes the discrepancy between the expectations one builds about living in a more race-blind utopian area and between what he experiences in reality.

Angelou's to a large extent blunt messages about the difficulty of arriving at a spatial reconciliation of racially segregatory spatial structures in contemporary America are turned inside out by Majaj. In the selected poems, the reader can notice that even when different spaces are brought together in a binary relationship, this opposition can still be liquidated. Should this leave the reader with the conclusion that Angelou is not employing poetry as a medium of spatial resistance to deconstruct the racially hierarchical structure of American society as should be? Definitely, not. Both Angelou and Majaj are enacting a political act of resistance through the spatial perspective they adopt in their poems, but each in a way that suits the cultural mindset she brings into her poetry. Compared to Angelou's openly challenging tone which speaks of her preference to underscore the role one's racial upbringing plays in shaping one's spatial behavioural codes and social relations, Majaj

[6] Here, Li explains that the limited scope of the 1960s and the 1970s research on ethnic geography in America has restricted the study to "examinations of segregation" (p. 18) which prevented seeing the ghetto as a section of a larger community with which it is supposed to interact.

chooses to play it more safe. In "Country", for instance, she establishes a new kind of spatial relationship devoid of opposition. This is noticed in the opening lines of the poem in which the speaker describes his state as one of simultaneous closeness and distance: "here we are far away and near" (p. 58). This ambiguity in describing the spatial scope does not entail geographical indeterminateness. On the contrary, it allows more space for social interaction across different geographical spaces which, unlike the cases of opposition found in Angelou's poems, is not restricted by racially enforced spatial practices. In the globalized world of today, such shifting geographical states of being do not serve as a threat to individual or collective spatial identity any more. And this is a thing Majaj is expected to have experienced given the several places of residence she has lived in during her life.

The sudden shift from one geographical location to another (in most cases from one country to another) shows that Majaj does not define inter-racial interaction according to traditionally fixed categories such as geographical borders, racial upbringing or political sovereignty, but according to the spatial experience racially diverse individuals share at a specific moment in time. When social relations between different races and ethnic groups are perceived in light of the spatial interactions taking place between them, the possibility that they are restructured is still there. In *Race and Social Analysis*, Caroline Knowles dwells on this point arguing that as long as racialized spaces are solely socially constructed, they cannot become race-blind. Thus, in the process of "race-making", space should not be only regarded as the physical place on which racist practices take place, but as an intrinsic "element of the creation and maintenance of social inequality… residential segregation, global displacement and land theft" (2003, pp. 78-80) there. This entails that creating a race-blind space necessitates restructuring it spatially as a first step. In the poem, this is specifically seen in the last stanza in which Majaj makes an intentional, sudden shift from a globally spatialized perception of the geographical reality of today's world to an American-centred perception of that geographical reality. Through her final words, "God bless/ America the beautiful/.../America my country/ God bless/, Oh Earth/ my world!" (ibid., p. 64), she can create the intended ironic effect: decentring the relationship of opposition which has traditionally given America the power and right to control other economically inferior countries such as Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq and replacing it

with a fluid relationship which helps bring the different countries together in one shared race-blind space.

The same rejection of the fixated view of space is seen in "Guidelines", another poem by Majaj. The challenging tone that shocks the reader in the opening lines underscores the view that the spatial experience ethnic Americans share with white Americans plays an integral part in shaping interracial relations in contemporary America, whether white Americans like it or not. Compared to the more globalized spatial perspective found in "Country", "Guidelines" limits its spatial perspective to the experiences of ethnic groups in America. Nonetheless, even at this narrower and more national level, the same message is sent to the reader. First, the speaker addresses a person who is most likely an immigrant and whose ethnic background is making it difficult for him to assimilate to the new place. Thus, due to the discriminatory practices in the host country, the immigrant finds himself forced to try assimilating spatially to the new place before he does so socially.

> If they ask you where you come from,
> Say Toledo, Detroit, Mission Viejo
> Fall Springs, Topeka. If they seem confused,
> …
> Help them locate these places on a map,
> Then inquire casually, Where are you from?

Two points are worth pondering on here. The first relates to the plurality that the speaker associates with the immigrant's spatial identity. This view shows that space is not solely a factor detrimental to shaping identity; it is an inseparable aspect of identity which adds to the features of fluidity and contestation. Second, the fact that the immigrant creates multiple spatial connections by attaching himself to different places and sites in America shows that it is possible to experience spatial relations differently without being restricted to one specific way. Majaj herself is sure to have experienced spatial belongingness in this sense, as she was born in America, lived for a while in Jordan and is currently residing with her family in Cyprus. This ability helps decentre the fixed view of space and the one-way

relationship bringing space and race together. Indeed, the plurality of this experience refutes the belief that spatial relations are necessarily shaped by the racially superior. With this more flexible approach, Majaj is able, more than Angelou does, to disentangle "geography's twisted strands" ("Guidelines") between the homeland and the foreign land and to make the Bill of Rights less American and more human.

3) Space as disputable

Spaces are represented as disputable in several of the poems by Angelou and Majaj. Reading the selected poems and comparing them (as the following paragraphs in this section will reveal) shows that both poets share Neely and Samura's perception of the race-space relationship as part of the overall process of societal construction, which means that the relationship holding race and space in their poetry is not fixed, but changes according to the nature of social interaction taking place amongst the culturally diverse groups living in the same place (2011, pp. 1939-1940). From a transnational spatial perspective, this translates into the fact that spatial relations are best contested in settings populated by diverse ethnic groups, where space is integrated into the inter-racial network of social relations there.

Thus, when the perception of space is freed from the racially prejudiced associations, the possibility that those internalized racial hierarchies are challenged becomes more feasible. This is seen in several poems by Angelou and Majaj. In Angelou's "A Plagued Journey", (1983) the fact that the speaker, who seems physically confined in some place, can move from one place to another (though not necessarily physically) shows that space is contested in this poem. Moreover, the multiple spatial states that the speaker experiences as they change place proves that Angelou challenges the hierarchical spatial construction of interracial relations in the America of her day. This is seen when the speaker's gloomy state of mind, which is caused by the physically confining place they are forced to stay in, is extended to their surroundings.

... Hope fades, day is gone
Into its irredeemable place
And I am thrown back into the familiar

Bonds of disconsolation.
Gloom crawls around
Lapping lasciviously
Between my toes, at my ankles, and it sucks the strands of my
Hair.

The speaker's spatial confinement, however, is lessened as they attempt to unite themselves with the Hope phantom. As it comes to them riding the sun's rays, a new spatial experience is initiated.

I am forced
Outside myself to
Mount the light and ride joined with Hope.

Unfortunately, the poem ends with the speaker's bright expectations truncated as they are eventually "Joined again into its/ Greedy arms".

A voice more confident than that in "A Plagued Journey" speaks to the reader about a contested space found somewhere in outer space in "A Brave and Startling Truth" (1995). Composed by Angelou in commemoration of the United Nations, the poem celebrates the positive impact the change of place from our "small and lonely planet" to outer-space planets and eventually to an unknown but still shared destination has on humans, including inter-racial, relations. As humans manage to travel further from Earth, they can arrive at a peace-making agreement, according to which different forms of discrimination practised on Earth are abandoned, giving a tinge of hope for creating a race-blind space. Even though the poem is made up of long conditional sentences which are most likely employed by Angelou to emphasize how far-fetched the proposal that this race-blind space be earth-bound is, when compared to the poem above, a more positive attempt at ending spatially grounded forms of racial discrimination is being made.

As in Angelou's poems, several of Majaj's poems serve as sites where space is contested. In the rather long poem "Country", the recurrent references to different countries refute the fixated view of space as a geographically defined place with a culturally unified population. As borders are crossed and countries are connected not only geographically,

but virtually as well, places are no longer spatially isolated nor are people racially segregated.

Here we are far away, and near
Cordon of gasps
Breath flung in horror
Hauling in grief

Stunned faces tilted upwards
Too dazed to cry
Broken phone lines
Endless dialing
Paroxysm of fear
Till we reach
those there. (p. 58)

Though the gloomy tone of the speaker and the grief-loaded words he employs cloud the interracial spatial scape of the poem, it is no doubt that the poem is a cry against the different forms of racial discrimination practised spatially against the citizens of less powerful countries. Describing how grief-stricken the people of those countries feel as they try to connect with the outer world is, therefore, a means to highlight the urge to free interracial relations which are spatially constructed from racial prejudice.

Space is likewise contested in Majaj's "Living in History", which, to a large extent, resembles Angelou's "A Brave and Startling Truth" in its future-based expectations of a place free of all human-bound prejudices. Both poems associate creating a race-blind space with a spatially far place referred to as "the destination", but with minor differences. At the time that the speaker in Angelou's poem locates this place in outer space, the speaker in Majaj's poem envisages this place as a space anchored in nature.

...Whatever the skins we live in,

the names we choose, the gods we claim or disavow
May we be like grains of sand on the beach at night:
a hundred million separate particles
creating a single expanse on which to lie back (p. 70)

Compared to Angelou's choice, Majaj's choice of nature as a space where racial differences are blurred is more realistic. At the time that outer space is hard to reach, nature is an earth-bound space where the different forms of racial discrimination practised in human societies are absent. This can leave the reader with some hope to see in nature the race-blind space they miss in society, but to what extent that vision is applicable in real life is left to them to decide.

4) Space as interactional[7]

In her article, Doreen Massey (1993) stresses the importance of perceiving spaces as interconnected to be able to effect positive change in the current racially shaped spatial relations. Doing so, she explains, helps contextualize spatial relations and practices, and this, in return, helps turn space into a site of contestation. On a wider cultural level, the fluidity associated with space takes the form of interaction. Interactive space is, therefore, marked by "the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global". (p. 80) Perceiving space as interactional means that the spatial construction of social life in one setting intersects with the spatial construction of social life in another. Across national borders, the interactional view of spatial relations helps weaken the hegemonic spatial presence of socially and racially more powerful groups and give more space for ethnic and racial minorities. In this sense, interactional space is where racial hierarchies are best contested. As interracial relations are formed on a more fluid spatial scape, it is highly unlikely that those relations

[7] In their article, Neely and Samura (2011) describe space and race as relational and interactional. Being so means that neither space nor race is a fixed entity. It also means that spatial and racial relations are established intersectionally. While this can lead to the inference that racial relations are hierarchically established in specific settings, it leaves some hope for reconstructing those relations. As the space-race relation is deconstructed, racial hierarchies are immediately questioned. The same, of course, applies to the other side of the relation as race plays the same integral role in determining what spatial practices and codes of behaviour are accepted and what are not.

be defined through the difference-as-threat correlative. Thus, it is here that the old racist spatial forms can be reconstructed and structured according to less race-conscious parameters.

This feature is not manifested with the same zeal in the poetry of Angelou and Majaj. Reading the selected poems by the two poets shows that the spatial structure of Angelou's poems is not as interactive as that of Majaj's. And this can be ascribed to two reasons. First, the fact that Angelou emphasizes spatially opposite relations rather than spatially fluid relations restricts spatial interactions in her poems to a minimum level. This is clearly seen (as pointed out in the discussion above) in the two poems "Caged Bird" and "Awakening in New York", in which Angelou maintains a certain level of distance between the two opposed categories or states in each of them making it difficult to break the fixity of the spatial relations holding between the two sides. In "Awakening in New York", for instance, this is seen when the speaker places the two states of sleeping and awakening on two opposite poles, discarding the possibility of reconciling the two states or finding a shared spatial perspective between them.

This, however, is not the case in the selected poems by Majaj. The fluidity with which she perceives the spatial dimension of the question of race gives more chance for more spatially interactional inter-racial relations. In "Peace", for instance, the fact that the two children plant their seeds on opposite sides of the barricade does not block the interactional nature of the spatial setting where they meet.

Peace is two children walking toward each other from
Different sides of a barricade.
…
Tiny shoots emerge they slap hands gleefully through
The fence… (p. 67)

It is clear that after this interracial meeting, the place loses a part of the racial prejudices it stands for in the mind of the reader. It is turned, as well, to a race-blind space where the two children, despite the enmity that is supposed to set them apart, share doing the earth-bound activity of seed planting. It could be that the two kids' spatial proximity has played

an important role in minimizing the segregatory effect of the place and the racial and lingual differences it represents. But to Majaj, this is not the only reason. Majaj makes sure to choose two children for this scenario, since, she is sure, that two grown-ups will certainly fail to establish the same race-free zone as successfully as the two children do. Not to forget that the absence of the two children's parents from the scene allows for more free spatial interaction between them. Had the two children met in a more crowded place or in a place where the strict application of segregatory rules is monitored, this race-blind meeting would have been extremely difficult to make come true. To what extent Majaj's short-lived creation of that race-blind space can be real-to-life is hard to tell. But, what we can be sure of is that with the existence of such peripheral spaces where the fixed opposition we have seen in Angelou's poems above is liquidated, the possibility of restructuring less prejudiced interracial relations is more likely to be achieved.

The fact that the two children do not meet in the inner city is spatially significant as well. It implies that their meeting would have been destined to fail if they met elsewhere. Drawing an analogy from Li's comparison between the inner city and the suburbs as residential areas for immigrants in the US, it is clear that this meeting requires a less crowded, less trodden space to materialize. This, according to Li, can be ascribed to the fact when they "stay in the inner city, most live in segregated neighbourhoods. When they move out to the suburbs, their experiences vary from being totally dispersed, to being relatively concentrated, to being highly segregated" (p. 19), which may leave some hope for making that area race-free.

The same perception of space as interactional is seen in "Living in History", in which Majaj's aspirations for creating an interactional space are given more ground to prosper. Here, it is not only two children belonging to two races who are trying to break free from spatially imposed racial hierarchies. Majaj here is making space for all humans, regardless of their race, gender or religion, to interact in one race-blind space.

> May we all fit together like this: trees, birds, sky,
> People, separate elements in a living portrait,
> Outlines smoothed by the forgiving wash
> Of lingering light. (p. 70)

The fact that Majaj employs natural images to describe the spatial setting in these lines makes creating this race-blind space more realistic. After all, nature is not a man-made space where social hierarchies and codes of behaviour are spatially enforced. Nature is the "single expanse" (p. 70) where, Majaj believes, interracial interaction is spatially possible with the least social obligations or restrictions. To what extent could this vision be feasible? Just as in "Peace", giving a yes-no answer is not easy given the generality of the situation. Yet, what Majaj should be given credit for is the fact that she insists on integrating the spatial dimension of social life into the process by which relations between people belonging to different racial and ethnic groups are structured. In this way, not only does she manage to change the prejudiced perspective from which interracial relations are spatially defined, but to present space as an integral dimension in the construction of those relations as well. The outcome, no doubt, paves the way for loosening the restrictive spatial forms that racial hierarchies take in social life.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows that racialized relations are to a large extent spatially constructed. This is seen in multiracial societies where the spatial structure of racialized areas plays an intrinsic role in shaping social relations within and across the racial groups living there. In a study of the interplay between race and space in an architectural context, Huda Tayob and Suzi Hall stress this point, arguing that the spatial components of "building, highways, suburbs and townships are constitutive of how individuals become positioned in the vast spectre of racial segregation, tangible in the shape of space and the materiality of concrete and corrugated iron" (2019. p. 2). This explains why a society can be demographically multiracial, but fails to socially act as a race-free space. The case of the English M62 corridor region referred to in the introduction serves as a befitting example to illustrate that while racially diverse groups can share the place geographically with the

native population, they can still find it hard to integrate smoothly into social life there and choose, as a result, to isolate themselves into spaces occupied by people of their race.[8]

Despite being one of the most racially diverse societies nowadays, contemporary America is not spatially befitting to be described as a race-free country. The over three-century-old nation-founding slogan "America is a melting pot", which worked well with the founders of the nation then, cannot function safely in today's America since assimilation to the white mainstream culture in contemporary America is not only conditioned by the collective cultural amalgamation that existed three centuries ago, but by a complete erasure of the cultural heritage of the racial and ethnic groups who are trying to fit in. Thus, even in post-Obama America, after hopes were held high that through the strenuous efforts of the first African American to become president the Washington "Bill of Rights" would become less American and more human, racially and ethnically different Americans are still spatially discriminated against.

In the poetry of the two ethnic American poets Angelou and Majaj, the question of whether contemporary multiracial America can become race-free is brought to the fore. First, the fact that the two poets share being racially and sexually discriminated against despite the different periods they have lived in the US and the different cultural backgrounds they come from proves that "space" in America has not yet been freed from the racially hierarchical associations it has acquired historically. Second, the recurrent references to places in their poetry and the intrinsic role place plays in their thematic structure indicate that they are both aware of how integrated the two processes of racialization and spatialization are.

Analysing the selected poems by Angelou and Majaj has shown that they both realize how spatially entrenched the old racial hierarchies are into social life in contemporary white America. In their poems, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that racialized spaces in the US are in most cases intentionally kept socially secluded as part of

[8] This is likewise listed as one of the recommendations Wei Li comes up with in her study of ethnicity and space in *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (2009). "Empirical comparative studies of changing ethnic experiences over time and across space. Comparisons are ended of different ethnic groups within one place or country, as well as among those groups in different places, and in the national and global scene. Direct comparisons are still not abundant" (28).

what Miah et al. call the "essentialized ethnic 'difference'" (2020, p. 7) strategy which policy makers adopt to ensure a socially less explicit implementation of the racial hierarchical system. And this is translated in their poems into a call to restructure racialized spaces to make them less race-conscious.

This resisting spirit, however, is not equally observed in the poems of Angelou and Majaj. Reading the selected poems shows that, compared to Angelou, Majaj has more hope in making social spaces in contemporary America more race-neutral. This is reflected in the way she represents space in her poems. While she shares Angelou's view of space as disputable, she insists on perceiving this disputability as interactional. A case in point is her poem "Country", where she frees spatial relationships from the traditional state of opposition and paves the way for less racially instituted social relations. Accordingly, Majaj promotes perceiving space as interactional, especially across national borders since these intersecting spaces have an opposing effect on the hegemonic spatial presence of racially more powerful groups. This is seen in the hopes she builds for creating an interactional space in her poem "Living in History", where all humans, regardless of their race, gender or religion, can coexist peacefully.

This is not to say that Angelou relinquishes the hope for making racialized spaces in contemporary America more human-friendly. Her hopes are best reflected in her critique of how racially conscious those spaces have become nowadays. In her poem "Caged Bird", for instance, her insistence on shoring up the opposition between the two states of freedom and imprisonment which the two birds stand for is an implicit message urging the need for restructuring racialized spaces to make them less race-conscious. This urgency is likewise sensed in "A Brave and Startling Truth", which calls for creating a space that is exempt from all hierarchical markers.

It is indeed noticeable that both poets reject the claim that racism has become too old-fashioned a phenomenon to be taken seriously as had been before. The message both send in their poetry (other than racism is still present in the multiracial society of contemporary America) is that racism is spatially institutionalized, meaning that it is entrenched into the spatial structure of society, not only its culture or social life. And this entails that to deracialize those social hierarchies, it is a must that the spatial constructions of society be restructured. This is not to say again that racialized spaces have to be removed

or spatially isolated, but that those areas have to be made safer spaces for racially different groups to live, interact and assimilate in.

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