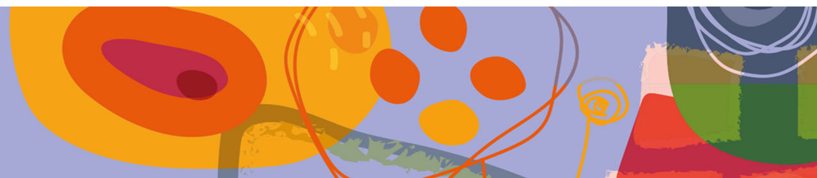
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ARTICLE

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Overlapping spaces and identities in Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*: a metatheatrical approach

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This article discusses the overlapping relationship between setting diversification and character creation as experimented by Puerto Rican American playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes (1977–) in her metatheatrical drama *Water by the Spoonful* (2011). The play, which emerges in a second chronological order in Hudes's so-called Elliot Trilogy, presents diasporic characters of different ethnicities and mixed cultural backgrounds as operating interactively within three different, though intersecting, realms or spaces: the real world, virtual cyberspace, and metaphysical space. The real world of the play features interacting Puerto Rican Americans, Japanese Americans, African Americans, and White Americans in a way that highlights their ethnocultural diversity in real American, Puerto Rican, and Japanese settings. Some of these binational, bilingual, and bicultural characters, who belong to different generations (20 s, 30 s, 40 s, 50 s), also occupy, and actually favor, the virtual realm or cyberspace of the internet where they assume unreal identities but negotiate real issues spurred by real life circumstances and reveal secrets about themselves and their families through online group therapy sessions. The metaphysical space is used as a magical realist element and is exclusively reserved by Hudes for exposing her Puerto Rican American characters' restless spiritual and mental struggle with the obsessive feelings of nostalgia, homesickness, regret, and displacement. The three realms or spaces intersect and collide in a way that determines the social attitudes and psychological moods of diasporic characters.

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Introduction

Quiara Alegría Hudes's reputation as a notable theatre practitioner, writing and producing plays for and about her Latin American community, emanates not merely from the thematic content she represents on her stage but more from her unique maneuverability with theatrical conventions and innovation in drawing characters with meta identities. In this light, the article examines Hudes's theatrical practice of identifying character in terms of space, exposing the association she generates between ordinary physical space and metaspaces on the one hand and human attitude and behavior on the other within her depiction of social, cultural, and political issues. This said, it pursues answers for some intriguing questions relating to Hudes's experimentation with dramaturgy, including: how does the author utilize stage space, scenery, and character performance to highlight the way the identities of characters and their responses to socio-moral issues change pertaining to the type of space they occupy, whether physical space or metaspace (virtual and metaphysical)?; how do the elements of family, culture, diaspora and war trauma in materialized space participate in creating a state of psychological disorder in individuals and the effect of this process on their attitudes and behaviors?; and finally how Hudes's personal social experiences in the diasporic American setting and her ingrained cultural traditions have fostered her ideology and dramaturgy?

Embarking on these unsettled inquiries, the primary objective of this article is to untangle Hudes's theatrical experimentation with meta identities, physical spaces, and metaspaces to address the issues of self-awareness, family, society, and culture in the diaspora. The discussion of these issues does not stand independently as an objective; it is rather the theatrical means by which Hudes puts them on her stage. She adopts a theatrical practice of interweaving the elements of character and setting in a way that the former can only be comprehended and identified in terms of the latter. The setting she chooses for her drama is a combination of both ordinary physical space and metaspaces (cyberspace and supernatural space) where hybrid characters operate and interact with each other. Through the article's theatrical appraisal of Hudes's experimentation with space and characters in *Water by the Spoonful*, it also takes on another objective of accentuating her representation of the psychologically muddling feelings of loneliness, nostalgia, and homesickness generated within a turbulent atmosphere of familial breakups, cultural disorientation, and psychological trauma. Besides, the article points up some referential clues drawn from the text which support the author's claim that Hudes's drama is anchored in her personal social experiences and extends from her native cultural beliefs and literary styles.

The article adopts an analytical methodology and examines *Water by the Spoonful* in the light of the metatheatrical approach. The manageable, swift transference of the action between different settings and distinct materialized and dematerialized spaces under the same dome renders the play the label of metatheatre. Hudes's theatrical practice of creating three different spaces on a single stage where multicultural, traumatized characters transfer their bodies and identities flexibly and effortlessly thus rationalizes the article's dependence on the applications of metatheatre for approaching the drama through a performative analysis. The metatheatrical approach is not employed for the presentation of a conventional dramatic analysis of the issues propagated by Hudes. As stated before, this is not the basic objective the author attempts to carry out. The article rather dwells fundamentally on analyzing the intersectional relationship between a changing setting and an evolving character. The thematic discussion of the play comes only at the periphery of the technical analysis of Hudes's investment of spaces and bodies on her stage. Related to the aesthetics of metatheatre is Hudes's culturally triggered attempt to implement the Southern American literary style of magical realism to facilitate the engagement of some of her characters with supernatural beings through voiced dialogues, voiceless visual contact, and even physical interaction.

The concept of metatheatre or metaplay was first coined by Lionel Abel in his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963). He approaches metatheatre as "a comparatively philosophic form of drama" (p. vii) and defines a metaplay as "a play-within-a play" that features "self-referring characters" (pp. 64; 65). The philosophical orientation of Abel's definition stems from his conceptualization of this dramatic form as a method of emphasizing both the artificiality and reality of theatre, which brings his concept of metatheatre under the umbrella of the critical tradition that embarks on setting the concepts of reality and phantasy apart, particularly when both rubrics are deployed in dramatic writing and theatrical production. From this perspective, the play-within-the-play becomes a means by which the audience can visualize the imaginary fourth wall but at the same time cannot evade the reality outside it. A metaplay contains two worlds, the world of the original play and another of the play-within-the-play, both determined to engage the audience emotionally and realistically. The metaplay holds an "essential … fantastic element" (p. 79); it is the plot of the play-within-the-play, which lies at the heart of the outer reality provided by the mother play. The two worlds of a metaplay, illusion and reality, "cannot be segregated; they will continually change places, and be the Same to the Other, the Other to the Same" (p. 82). They overlap and intersect. Metatheatre thus postulates two images of human existence, one is dreamlike, the other one is real.

Although *Water by the Spoonful* is void of the play-within-the-play technique, still its metatheatricality is achieved through implementing another convention proposed by the scholar Andrés Pérez-Simón (2011). He contends that the stage's artificiality and the audience's critical inquiry, two criteria of metatheatre, can also be fulfilled by "the laying bare of the artistic devices" (p. 3). Hudes lays bare her stage's theatrical devices, consisting mainly of the set design, by joining and overlapping different settings on the same stage during the same scene. In this way, the borders between these joined settings are eliminated and characters become closer in actual space yet separate in dramatic space. This metatheatrical technique helps, firstly, facilitate the playwright's experimentation with character fabrication and, secondly, alienate the audience for boosting their ability to compare and contrast the attitudes and psychological drifts of characters.

William Egginton's conception of metatheatre resonates with Abel's. Egginton believes every theatre is "already a metatheatre" (2003, p. 74); its metatheatricality is an intrinsic part of it. The rationalization he presents is that each play contains two inseparable spaces: "a real space and another, imaginary one that mirrors it" (p. 74). The imaginary space in *Water by the Spoonful*, whether the virtual or the metaphysical, is not however a reflection of the real one. Each has its own identity, but together they are complementary. The two spaces, along with the third real space, constitute what Roland Barthes calls "a succession of tableaux unified by the artist's single point of view" (1977, p. 70). Hudes's drama offers a set of images of life in different spaces that harbor the same characters. She unifies these images by simultaneously loading them with stories about family, society, and culture.

Hudes and the Elliot Trilogy

A playwright, music composer, lyricist, and producer, Hudes's career in the arts is a remarkable one. She studied music and was

mentored by dramatist Paula Vogel at Brown University; received a United States Artists' Fellowship; and was honored with a Resolution from the Philadelphian City Council. In 2008, she received the Tony Award for Best Musical for her outstanding piece *In the Heights*. Her acclaimed reputation as a successful dramatist was established upon completion of the Elliot Trilogy that consists of *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* (2006), *Water by the Spoonful* (2011), and *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (2012). Her masterpiece *Water by the Spoonful* won her the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2012. She also authored other, less popular plays including *Yemaya's Belly* (2007), *26 Miles* (2010), in addition to the children's musical *Barrio Grrrl!* (2015). Currently, She is an alumna of New Dramatists and board member of Philadelphia Young Playwrights.

The Elliot Trilogy depicts three phases of the post-war life of Elliot Ortiz, a Puerto Rican American veteran marine who served in the American Army from 2003 to 2011. He pursues a dream of becoming an actor, based on his good looks, regardless of a leg injury caused during a three-month military tour in Iraq. In addition to his physical injury, he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and becomes addicted to painkillers. He is haunted and hunted down by a ghost he thinks it belongs to the first Iraqi man he shot down. The ghost never stops demanding his passport from Elliot (who has kept it for eight years as a war souvenir), which increases his spiritual burden. His manifold distresses represent the drastic consequences of war on the physical and mental health of American veterans. Hudes highlights these consequences as part of her plan to criticize policy makers and exponents of war. A more prominent component of her dramaturgy is her focus on depicting unstable family relationships in the diaspora and underlying fragments of the original culture of diasporic characters.

Each installment of the trilogy has a unique series of events and a mixed set of both new and reoccurring characters. *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue* (2006), which was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is the opening play of the trilogy. The structure echoes that of a real musical fugue as it relates in a short, quick-paced tone the memories and describes the present lives of different generations of Puerto Rican American veteran soldiers who belong to the same family. They include Elliot, his father, and his grandfather who served in Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea respectively, in addition to his aunt Mami Ginny who served as a nurse in the Vietnam war. Eighteen-year-old Elliot is the main character, and the events take place in 2003 during the time between his first and second tours in Iraq, before he is dismissed from service. The play embarks on dramatizing their memories of war that have developed consequential psychological unrest in them ever since their return to America.

Water by the Spoonful (2011), the second play in the trilogy, takes place when Elliot, now twenty-four years old, returns home from war with a slight limp in 2009. He serves food at a subway sandwich shop on Philadelphia's Main Line, a profession he considers "not a normal job" and even "shit job" (p. 16) which he seeks to quit, aspiring to become a fulltime model or actor instead. His ambitious spirit is escorted with positive attitudes towards family, society, and culture. He genuinely mourns late Aunt Ginny who assumed the responsibility of raising him and his sister when his drug-addictive biological mother, Odessa, ceased to do so. Ginny's death forces Elliot into an evocative encounter with Odessa over her abandoned familial duties and social disintegration. The son-mother encounter is so emotionally and mentally stressful that it thrusts Odessa into a near-fatal relapse after recuperating from addiction. Elliot's emotions are stirred and his offensive demeanor is changed when he finds her lying unconsciously on the ground, while his cousin Yazmin Ortiz (nicknamed Yaz), a music adjunct professor, witnesses in a magical realist scene Odessa's soul departing her unconscious body and then returning to it once again. Influenced by the scene and motivated by their cultural background, both cousins travel back to Puerto Rico to have Ginny's ashes thrown into a local river in a ritualistic action pertinent to the Boricua tradition. Returning to native land empowers Elliot to give up his addiction to painkillers and pursue his dream and enables Yaz to take on the socio-cultural role of late Ginny and the virtual online presence of Mama Odessa. This plot has an adjacent, subplot taking place in the virtual realm of cyberspace. Before Odessa's unconscious fall inside her apartment, we find her active in the online space of a crack forum she administers. Using the forum, she and other subscribers recuperate from crack addiction, including African American Clayton Buddy Wilkie (or CHUTES&LADDERS), Japanese American Yoshiko Sakai (ORANGUTAN), and white American John (FOUNTAINHEAD). They seek to overcome addiction, familial detachment, mental distress, and cultural disconnection. In this unreal metaspace, Odessa is responsible and cooperative, but uncaring and irresponsible in real space.

The Happiest Song Plays Last (2012), the final instalment in the Elliot Trilogy, is set in 2011 and takes place in Jordan. Both Elliot and Yaz have fulfilled their destinies as anticipated at the end of *Water by the Spoonful*, with Elliot having acquired a leading role in a movie about the Iraq War and Yaz having taken over Ginny's abode and role as a community helper. Yaz develops a brief relationship with Agustín, a much older musician and counselor. He dies days later due to medical inattention while in an emergency room and she organizes a rally in protest but fails. Meantime, Elliot falls in a romantic relationship with a wealthy Persian American movie star called Shar, whom he later marries, and befriends Ali, an Iraqi refugee in Jordan co-starring in the movie. This friendship revives in Elliot old memories of war, a process which triggers his psychological trauma and crumbles his attempt to forget the past. After a year, Yaz and Elliot reassemble in North Philadelphia and the play ends with an intertextual convention as he buries the passport of the Iraqi soldier, whose ghost features in the second instalment of the trilogy, in the backyard.

The Elliot Trilogy is inspired by Hudes's first-hand experiences. Her attitude towards producing this series was formed against the background of the socio-economic conditions of her birthplace, the politics of war which exploited her male relatives, and the cultural practices of her Puerto Rican ancestors. She was born and grew up in the hybrid community of West Philadelphia at a time when most of her family lived in the poor community of North Philadelphia consumed by "AIDS, the drug wars, [and] the culture wars" (Decaul, 2017, para. 15). Besides poverty, disease and local armed tensions, the northern community of the city "was extremely … isolated from the rest of the city. Infrastructurally, not geographically, isolated…. I had family members who were always in North Philadelphia and rarely got out of that community" (Young, 2015, p. 189). This has provided the dramatic impetus for the playwright to emphasize the issues of social distress and economic disadvantageousness endured by her family, taking into consideration the inherent problem of "isolation between the classes" in the American society (Young, 2015, p. 189). West Philadelphia, her diasporic birthplace, was "a largely immigrant community that was set in a historically black, working-class community," so "it was very diverse" (Young, 2015, p. 190) with respect to the mixed ethnicities and cultures of its citizens. From this hybrid social context, Hudes gained what she called "multiple lenses" (Young, 2015, p. 190), through which she could understand and interact with these different racial and ethnic groups and represent special glimpses drawn from their real lives in her trilogy.

Hudes's drama attributes the socio, psychological, and cultural issues of poverty, isolation, and hybridity that disturb the

Philadelphian local community to American foreign policies. Within her dramatization of the impetus of such manifold ailments, she stresses the impact of the war on communist and terrorist regimes fought in Vietnam, Korea, and Iraq on her characters. The trilogy addresses the impact of the physical, moral, and psychological scars of war on individuals, families, and whole communities. She makes this point clear in her interview with Young (2015):

> What does it mean to send a young generation off to war? … That question continues. What does it mean to bring them back into our society? What does it mean for their children? That question opens up and unfolds into more questions. I realized after Elliot was complete that the question that I was asking and writing towards continues. I was very interested in the subjective legacy of war. How do our wars continue to trickle down to future generations? With that in mind, I thought, "I need to see this soldier a little bit farther in his story in order to understand … in order to further grapple with that question." (p. 190)

The playwright is not oriented by a left-wing political ideology, but rather by socially and culturally nationalistic attitudes. She does not raise political objections to or doubts about America's foreign policies sanctioning the war on communism and terrorism overseas. She gently and implicitly exposes the persistent effects of war on the dreams of present and future generations of diasporic immigrants whom Eliot stands for, pinpoints its deep psychological burden on them, and underlies its ability to destabilize their social relationships. In a later interview with Maurice Decaul (2017), Hudes again taps on the issue of war and its effect on the thematic content of her theatre. In this interview, she focuses on her inspiration for writing the Elliot Trilogy and, meantime, she associates the post-war impact on the veterans in her family with their pre-war socio-economic conditions:

> My younger cousin fled the fallout and snares of the war on drugs in Philadelphia by enlisting. It was his means to a paid salary, to an honored place in society. Whereas the neighborhood he grew up in suffered from the fallout of the crack epidemic and its financial and carceral realities. This cousin returned from his first tour in Iraq with a severe leg injury. I met him in California, where he was stationed on base while he recovered, and I registered an immediate but subtle change in his eyes. I needed to understand what had changed, how his selfhood and manhood had developed during his active military duty. (para. 19)

So, real war experiences of family members and social conditions have prompted Hudes's creation of the trilogy which comes as a reminder to her generation of the war experience and as an examination of the multidimensional trauma it has ever since triggered in wounded veterans. According to the abovementioned real experience of Hudes's cousin, the fictional character of Elliot, who represents the generation of young men to whom her cousin belongs, is portrayed as having endured the drastic consequences of the war launched abroad and the domestic struggle against drug addiction and economic misfortune which rupture and demoralize his multicultural and multiethnic local community. Elliot of *Water by the Spoonful* suffers the impact of war on his body because his limp limits his economic success and delays his dream of becoming "a movie star" (Hudes, 2011, p. 27). The depiction of his economic disappointment is relatively minor in magnitude and occupies less space in Hudes's dramaturgy when compared to her more concentrated portrayal of the familial conflicts and cultural activities of Elliot's community and the way she theatricalizes both within the perimeters of physical space and metaspace.

What has specifically attracted Hudes to dramatize the experiences of the veterans in her family, such as her cousin or even her uncle George who served in Vietnam, is their favored strategy of silence used as a method of evading a traumatic past. In her interview with Decaul (2017), Hudes calls this kind of deliberate silence a state of "willful blindness and deafness" and sets a warning that "we cannot heal if we cover our ears and close our eyes…. The moral wounds of war are profound and may never fully heal…. In silence wounds fester" (para. 24). Veterans purposefully prefer to remain silent or irresponsive when memories of war are recollected, directly or indirectly, on their behaves, or when their physical scars continue to hinder their economic development and social integration. In this way, the realities of war invade domestic life by, as Hudes states, "infecting our living rooms, breaking our illusions and sense of goodness" (para. 24).

Apart from society and politics, Hudes's dramatic motivations towards playwriting are also cultural. In addition to dramatizing the physical scars and traumas that war still inscribes on the bodies and minds of returning troops and affects their relationships with their consoling families, she is keen on pinpointing some aspects of their cultures and native landscapes by incorporating music, religion, ethnicity, and nativity. Decaul (2017) clarifies that music, including that of "Bach fugues, Coltrane, and Yoruba Lucumí drumming," plays an integral role in her dramaturgy (para. 15). Besides, Hudes's work is inspired by, as she elaborates, her mother's "Lucumí religious practices" (para. 15). Lucumí/Lukumi or Santeria refers to the African religion of Yoruba in its Cuban form. Relying on indigenous music and religions as inspirational and motivational resources demonstrates the playwright's passion for portraying scenes and rituals drawn from her native Puerto Rican society and culture, a passion that is more solidly apparent through her fitting of *Water by the Spoonful* in the stream of Boricua literature.

Echoing Boricua drama, Hudes focuses on depicting a diversity of issues that include the loss of cultural values, the fragmented image of family, the economic conditions of Latino immigrants, the image of women (as intelligent and complex, not as typically submissive, though sometimes as lonely), the celebration of native landscapes, and the religious and spiritual beliefs of native Boricuas. These issues form the backbone of the entire trilogy, and certainly *Water by the Spoonful* is no exception. The loss of cultural values is represented through Odessa's disinclination from supporting and interacting with her poor community, favoring instead communicating with the intranational and multiethnic virtual community of the crack forum. The image of her family structure is similarly fragmented, with Elliot having been brought up solely by his aunt Ginny and believing his irresponsible mother Odessa caused his sister's death. As an indication of the family's poor condition, they cannot afford to buy a casket or flowers for Ginny's funeral. Odessa and Yaz, two representatives of the older and younger generations of women in the play, break away from the stereotypical image of females as submissive bodies. Odessa's character is complex. With a long history of addiction, she is physically weak, psychologically burdened, and socially isolated from her community. However, in the virtual space of the internet, she is in control of the crack forum, maintaining its protocols, censuring subscribers' offensive language, and offering help when asked. As for Yaz, she initially appears frustrated by her husband's declining love and then brokenhearted by their divorce. She too lacks self-confidence, for though she is a professor of music, she "hates public speaking" (Hudes, 2011, p. 24). Still, these negative emotions and attitudes do not refrain her from participating in social and cultural life. She supports her cousin Elliot to overcome his trauma, raises funds for Ginny's funeral, and revives the native ritual of ash-scattering. Yaz's involvement in these social activities

and cultural rituals demonstrates the inherence of such indigenously spiritual and religious beliefs in her life. The point I attempt to accentuate here is the relationship between the negotiated themes in Hudes's drama and the cultural beliefs of her Puerto Rican ancestors; in other words, to comprehend the influence of native culture on diasporic literature. An additional example of this relationship is the commonality observed between her drama and the native belief of "Ashe."

The origins of Ashe, a cultural-specific concept pertinent to the Caribbean region, go back to the Yoruba African religion in southeast Nigeria. According to De La Torre (2009), "Ashe is the substance or cosmic energy undergirding every aspect of existence that becomes the power, grace, blood, and life force of all reality. The blood of living creatures, the movement of the wind, and the elements of plants, fire, and moving water expend Ashe" (p. 37). Mary Ann Clark's (2012) definition of "Ashe" almost echoes Torre's: "Ashe means power, energy, blessings; energy of the universe; ritual power; also name of empowered material" (p. 200). So does the definition of Sana Loue (2017): "An amoral neutral energy force that serves as the foundation for all that exists and that is possessed by all entities that have life or power" (p. 134). In case an imbalance occurs to this system, physical, social, or economic disorders often befall individuals, such as "misfortune, disease, difficult interpersonal relationships, or economic hardship" (Leeming, 2014, p. 1954). Imbalance of Ashe is caused by "one's actions, such as by not being true to one's roles in life," "causing physical or emotional harm to others," or by engaging "negative things… such as abortion or suicide" (p. 1954). For instance, Odessa's choice of addiction, social exile, and embracement of virtual reality results in her daughter's death through "dehydration" (Hudes, 2011, p 43), and she winds up in a coma (p. 61). Elliot's six-year, voluntary involvement in the Iraqi war results in, as mentioned before, his own misfortune, represented in his walking with a "limp," working as a "butler," and seeing ghosts (pp. 13, 16). A further demonstration is that Clayton's addiction of crack brings him so close to death while surfing at Coronado beach (p. 20).

Meta identity in space and metaspace

Water by the Spoonful, consisting only of fifteen scenes, premiered at Hartford Stage Company in Hartford, Connecticut, on October 20, 2011. Its second staging was at Second Stage Theatre in New York, on January 8, 2013. After watching its second performance, the theatre reviewer Cindey Pierre (2013) remarks that the alienation effect is doubled by preventing actors from making eye contact, either with each other or with the audience, or acknowledging each other's presence on the stage. This extra technique, together with the flexibility given to the set design, participates in the theatrical generation of the audience's compare-and-contrast activity. Ever since its first production, the play has raised some misconceptions about its negotiated thematic content among theatre reviewers and scholars. In an interview with Harvey Young (2015), Hudes puts an end to the controversies surrounding her work, insisting that the play does not handle the "internet" and "technology" as major themes (p. 193). These are rather presented as component parts of the play's varied settings and sceneries which deviate as remarked by the playwright from their counterparts that feature in living-room or kitchen-sink dramas. Disclosing the play's intended themes, Hudes clarifies: "It's a play about a family. It's a play about a home…. It's a play about communities—different communities. It's a play about human beings and how they find friends and family. It's a play about survival" (p. 193). Her choice of themes is greatly influenced by her socio-cultural background as a Latin American citizen.

The play addresses the intricate relationships of diasporic characters in America, particularly Puerto Ricans, by laying bare their different personal attitudes, social conflicts, and ethnocultural backgrounds. The intricacy of these relationships is anchored in issues of familial discord, addiction, sacrifice, culture, history, war, and nostalgia. These issues form the criteria against which characters are judged and hence classified. The play highlights the tensive struggle between two opposite groups of Latino characters regarding the inclination/disinclination to undermine the value of family, society, and culture and give more credit to virtual relationships.

To Odessa, Clayton, Mays, and John, online relationships have come to be more real and effective than actual socio-familial bonding. Patricia Ybarra (2017) explains why the online space has become their primary choice of social contact: "The interior spaces in the play—namely, the cafés and train stations in Japan that ORANGUTAN inhabits, and Odessa's, CHUTES&LADDERS', and FOUNTAINHEAD's homes are sites of isolation that they attempt to alleviate online" (p. 55). The influence of virtual space on its adherents becomes oppressive over their social life, psychological state, and cultural belonging. The manifestations of this kind of oppression are several. Odessa abandons Elliot, lets down her dying sister Ginny, suffers self-inflicted solitude, and cannot recollect historical sites in Puerto Rico. Clayton is rejected by his son Wendell, his grandchildren cannot recognize him, and he finds relief in loneliness. Mays, originally a Japanese by birth and adopted by an American family, is homesick but cannot locate the whereabouts of her birth family in Japan, unfamiliar with the geographical landscape of her birthplace, and feels distressed and disappointed by the fakeness of both her diasporic and virtual existences. John, the newly white American subscriber, brings his wife so close to "depression" and turns himself into an "unemployed crackhead" (Hudes, 2011, pp. 32; 34).

Conversely, other characters are portrayed as disinclined to adopt the sociality of the online virtual world, preferring instead real family connections and remnants of their original culture. Characters with such attitudes include Ginny and the two cousins Elliot and Yaz. Although Ginny never appears onstage and news about her death is reported as early as Scene Three, Hudes draws her character as a woman who would not allow virtual spaces to preside over her real family circle or culture. Because of Ginny's physical absence from the stage, Elliot and Yaz become her mouthpiece in the material world. It is only through them that the audience manage to realize the full dimensions of her character. We can attribute some of her, as well as theirs, standings towards family and culture to the indigenous practices of her aboriginal society. Of these practices that demonstrate her love for her original birthplace and the cultural activities associated with it is her superintendence of the small garden where she grows some flowers she smuggles from Puerto Rico, such as "spiral ginger" used for treatment of certain diseases (Hudes, 2011, p. 74); "China rose," the official state flower of Puerto Rico; and "coqui," the cultural symbol of Puerto Rico (p. 75). These natural herbs are for her a means of physical recuperation in the diaspora as well as cultural reconnection. In Puerto Rican culture, growing flowers is a valuable activity for they are used "to protect people from evil spirits" and "for the cleansing of homes" (Galvani, 2009, p. 37). Another clue to Ginny's adoption of her cultural roots is her deathbed wish to have her body not buried in Philly but "thrown at a waterfall in El Yunque" (Hudes, 2011, p. 25). She also fulfills the distinctive cultural value of an extended family supporting a nuclear family in matters of raising children and instilling in them a strong bond with the elders and pride in their culture (Galvan, 2009, p. 53). Her raising of Elliot is a sacrificial work that is ultimately rewarded by his genuine ministrations. The worth and implications of her familial sacrifices are transferred to the younger generation. We witness Yaz

insisting that Ginny's funeral is held in "a good Spanish sermon" as requested by "the elders" (Hudes, 2011, p. 24), and the text is pregnant with many situations where she and Elliot resort to Spanish vocabulary, such as: *chancletas* (flip-flops) (p. 23), *Ay Díos mio* (an expression of shock or surprise, equivalent to the English expression "Oh my God") (p. 24), *madrina* (godmother) (p. 25), *sonrisa* (smile) (p. 26), *abuela* (grandmother) (p. 27), *barrio* (the neighborhood) (p. 27), and *fuacata* (an expression used when a person injures or causes himself/herself pain) (p. 76). The inclusion of Spanish words in their everyday conversations reflect a state of unconscious affinity with the dominant language of daily life in Puerto Rico.

The representations of the social disintegration/solidarity and cultural disentanglement/alignment of each group are uniquely conducted through avant garde theatrical techniques that rationalize the play's nondramatic structure and metatheatrical style. Hudes maneuvers theatrically with sceneries and scenes within her dramatization of the intersecting and interacting spaces of reality, virtuality, and supernaturality and their influence on character identification and orientation. She uses a technique of splitting and intersecting both the scenes and sceneries to reflect on the multicultural and multiethnic identities and divergent interests and attitudes of diasporic American characters. The process of shifting, backward and forward, the audience's focus by occasionally transferring the action between two or three split sceneries and settings is not carried out through theatrical signs or announced through the sound systems. The transition happens spontaneously and compulsorily. The audience becomes shoved to follow two or three separate actions taking place concurrently in two different settings, sometimes more, on the same stage. The sound systems are only assigned with playing John Coltrane's musical piece *A Love Supreme* or *Ascension* for the split scenes as a theatrical method of either comparing or contrasting the characters' attitudes, emotions, or psychological moods, such as the theatrically split Scene Eight, where Elliot and Yaz commemorate and honor late Ginny at the church while mama Odessa, Elliot's biological mother, overdoses alone at home as an action indicating an attempted suicide:

> YAZ. It is time to honor a woman.
>
> ELLIOT. A woman who built her community with a hammer and nails.
>
> YAZ. A woman who knew her nation's history. Its African roots. European roots. Indigenous roots. A woman who refused to be enslaved but lived to serve.
>
> ELLIOT. A carpenter, a nurse, a comedian, a cook.
>
> YAZ. Eugenia Ortiz.
>
> ELLIOT. Mami Ginny.
>
> *(Lights rise on Odessa's house. She sits on her floor. She scoops a spoonful of water from a mug, pours it onto the floor in a slow ribbon.)* (p. 56)

Sometimes a scene begins with the voices of two characters already having a conversation or a single character already delivering a monologue before the lights are turned on. The purpose of this additional theatrical technique is to impart to the audience the idea of a persistent social/psychological dilemma that continues to irritate characters even during intervals or to reveal a character's past and attitudinal transformation. This is a technique with which reality and fiction intersect in Hudes's theatre. Consider again Scene Eight that starts at the middle of an already–initiated, online dialogue between ORANGUTAN and CHUTES&LADDERS; the latter is reluctant to call his son Wendell:

> ORANGUTAN. Did you hit the call button yet?
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. I'm working on it.
>
> ORANGUTAN. Where are you? Are you at home?
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. *Jeopardy!*'s on mute.
>
> ORANGUTAN. Dude, turn off the tube. This is serious. Did you even dial?
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. Yeah, yeah. *(He does)* All right, it's ringing. What am I going to say?
>
> ORANGUTAN. "Hi, Son, it's Dad."
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. Wendell. That's his name. *(Hangs up)* No answer. ORANGUTAN. As in, you hung up?
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. Yes. I hung up.
>
> ………………………………………………………………-………………
>
> ORANGUTAN. Quit moping and dial Wendell's number.
>
> ………………………………………………………………-………………
>
> *(We hear a man's voice at the other end of the line say, "Hello?" Chutes&Ladders hangs up.)*
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. He must not be around.
>
> ORANGUTAN. Leave a voice mail.
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. Maybe next time.
>
> *(Chutes&Ladders logs off.)* (pp. 45–46)

CHUTES&LADDERS' reluctance to contact Wendell, despite ORANGUTAN's insistence, reveals a suppressed and suppressing history of familial conflict, and in other online sessions between the same chatters they blame it on crack addiction and virtual life (pp. 39, 63). The impact of such conflict is enduring that it still hinders what is supposed to be normal communication between two successive generations of the same family. An example of Hudes's convention of opening a scene in the middle of an already-commenced monologue occurs in Scene Fourteen, when the curtains rise on Yaz interrupting an ongoing conversation between the crack forum users in order to register her first online appearance as FREEDOM&NOISE:

> FREEDOM&NOISE. Hello, I am Freedom&Noise, your interim site manager, currently logging on from the Rainforest B&B in Puerto Rico. I am not a user, I've smoked pot twice, both times when I was thirteen, and am therefore unqualified for this position. There was a young woman I once knew. Let's call her "O." My crazy aunt, a fun babysitter, the baddest hide-and-seek player north of Girard Avenue. We played dress-up, built booby traps and forts, and when I was eight, she disappeared. No explanation, no acknowledgment she had ever existed, the

> grown-ups in the family had taken a vow of silence, and O. had been erased. My freshman year at college, I returned home for Thanksgiving, and thanks to a snow delay I walked into the middle of turkey dinner itself, and there was O., a plate full of food, chowing down. I hadn't seen her in ten years. After dinner she told me to congratulate her, it was her anniversary. I said, "Did you get married?" She pulled a necklace out from under her shirt and said, "You know what these gold letters mean? The 'N' is for narcotics, the 'A' is for anonymous and today is my two-year anniversary of being clean." *(Pause)* (pp. 68–69)

Yaz's online monologue offers the audience an objective sketch of Odessa's past in a more comprehensive and precise way that emotional Elliot cannot provide. From Yaz's account, it appears that Odessa has passed through three phases, from a life dedicated to family and society; to another of addiction, weakness, and absence; and then to a new life full of remorse, perseverance, and family reunion.

People in Hudes's theatre are identified by the settings, the different spaces they occupy and interact with and within it. The split scenes and sceneries are not but a reflection of the diversified nature of her characters, not only Puerto Rican Americans but also African Americans and Japanese Americans. They are depicted as having meta identities related to the type of space they operate within -cyberspace of the internet, real space of the physical world, and supernatural space of ghosts—and their mixed cultural backgrounds. Some characters claim two different names, one real and another virtual, and occupy three intersecting worlds (physical, metaphysical, and virtual) and times (past and present). On the stage, distinct types of seats and chairs, with diverse colors and usages, are used to convey the different social contexts and locations from which the virtual users usually broadcast online:

> The stage has two worlds. The "real world" is populated with chairs. The chairs are from many locations—living rooms, an office, a seminar room, a church, a diner, internet cafés, etc. They all have the worn-in feel of life. A duct-taped La-Z-Boy. Salvaged trash chairs. A busted-up metal folding chair from a rec center. An Aero chair. An Eames chair. A chair/desk from a college classroom. Diner chairs. A chair from an internet café in Japan. Living room chairs. Library chairs. A church pew. Facing in all different directions.
>
> The "online world" is an empty space. A space that connects the chairs. (Hudes, 2011, p. 13)

Odessa/ HAIKUMOM, a lapsed catholic and a current Buddhist, is an incongruent combination of dedication and indifference with respect to the setting she becomes interactive with or within. Her identity is defined by three spaces: the virtual crack forum, the Latin American space of her family and culture, and the supernatural world.

In the virtual realm of cyberspace, Odessa/ administers a crack forum where she and some other cyber-chatting junkies of different ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities assemble for recuperation from crack addiction through group therapy sessions. Their private space is comparable to a refugee camp whose residents are fugitives from the overindulgences of their selves and the abhorrence of their families. In addition to Odessa, fugitives include other crackheads such as Japanese American ORANGUTAN, African American CHUTES&LADDERS, and white American FOUNTAINHEAD. In virtuality they find companionship, and in reality isolation. The play is centered on this clash between characters who resort to virtual reality, as an escapism and for psychological recuperation, and others who still prefer real culture and social relationships regardless of its unpredictable and uncontrollable setbacks or challenges. From this clash, characters emerge with two divergent identities or selves. One of the two selves belongs to the painful or sinful past from which these characters escape to virtual reality. The other clings to a hopeful, redemptive present and still believes in and depends on cultural and social communication.

To her virtual community, Odessa is a torchbearer, providing crackheads with care, social advice, and moral lessons. The site consumes her energy and the time she may spend superintending her progeny, ministering her sister, and strengthening her sociocultural ties. Whereas she sends CHUTES&LADDERS a gift, "a care package" (p. 41), she fails to provide for her dehydrated children and does not attend the religious ceremony of Ginny's funeral and the ritual of ash-scattering. She gets to know about Ginny's death only through "the news" and shocks us by her contention that "the world is [not] going to fall apart" in mournfulness of the deceased (p. 47). Her indifference to family concerns and cultural ceremonies is rewarded with Elliot's animosity and the community's negligence. Hence, Odessa appears in the materialized world with a contrary image, as selfish and irresponsible, for a regular mother would not abandon what has come to be a natural duty towards her family particularly during critical times. Her recollected memories of this critical phase are usually escorted with overwhelming feelings of remorse, an attitude that reflects an innate, albeit rather suppressed, belief in the value of family whose members are bound, she herself notifies, by "flesh and blood" and should "share everything" (Hudes, 2011, p. 53). Such statements reflect an internal struggle between the values she believes in and the social, harsh reality she avoids. These idealistic statements lack a practical verification that such people as weak and irresolute as Odessa cannot easily offer.

Besides remorse, Odessa obscures within the shadows of virtual space the feeling of homesickness, which we manage to recognize with help of the real indigenous landscape of Puerto Rico. Whenever fragments of the national memories or historic sites of Puerto Rico are referred to or recollected on her behalf, even in the realm of virtual space, her feeling of homesickness is prompted. When white American crackhead FOUNTAINHEAD/ John mentions in her presence Old San Juan, the Spanish fort of El Morro, and the Spanish armada, he unintentionally provokes a revelation on her part that exposes a latent feeling of homesickness and a predisposition to return to Puerto Rico: "I'm still saving for that ticket" (Hudes, 2011, p. 38). Homecoming for her is congenital and inescapable but requires in-advance material preparations and spiritual readiness that delay its implementation. It is another moment when Odessa's psychological struggle caused by her attempt to mediate between the two opposite spaces, the real and the virtual, is again demonstrated. The collision of both spaces is one that occurs between the ethical norms and social priorities prevalent through her real space on the one hand and her quest for spiritual recuperation and self-motivation dominant only within virtual space. Will she ever be able to settle down in one space? Will she manage to choose between the two lives? Only almost halfway through the action, when Elliot revives her disgraceful past and reminds her of the miserable life he led in her absence, when their repressed emotions are ultimately released, that she seems ready to cross the borders to the real space of family and community. Such a transformation is signified by her submission to Yaz and Elliot's call for fundraising:

> ELLIOT. But I was raised by my Aunt Ginny and that particular aunt just died. *(To Odessa)* So now, you got three hours to find some money to pay for one basket of flowers in the funeral of the woman who changed my pampers.

YAZ. We're all supposed to be helping out.

ODESSA. You both know I run out of minutes all the time. No one could be bothered to drive by and tell me face to face?

ELLIOT. Because you always bothered to drive by and say hello to Mami Ginny when you knew she was sick? Because you bothered to hit me up one time this week and say, "Elliot, I'm sorry your mom died."

ODESSA. You still got one mom alive.

ELLIOT. Really? You want to go there?

YAZ. The flower place needs the money today.

ODESSA. She was my sister and you are my son, too.

YAZ. Guys. Two hundred dollars by end of business day.

ODESSA. That's my rent.

ELLIOT. Then fifty.

ODESS. I just spent fifty getting my phone back on.

ELLIOT. Ten dollars. For the woman who raised your son! Do we hear ten dollars? Going once!

ODESSA. I spent my last ten at the post office.

ELLIOT. Going twice!

… … … … … … … … … … … … … … … … … …

(Odessa hands Elliot a key.)

ODESSA. The pawn shop closes at five. Go into my house. Take my computer. Pawn it. However much you get, put towards a few flowers, okay?

(Odessa exits.) (pp. 41; 42)

Elliot dwells at the opposite extreme to Odessa. Unlike her, he interacts positively and responsibly in the materialized space of real family which he venerates greatly. This is verified through his comments on his mother's irresponsible behaviour and social disintegration: "Symbols matter, Yaz. This isn't about the money" (p. 56). He even wonders, "Why would God take the good one? … Why wouldn't you take the bad fucking mom?" (p. 86). His apparent resentment of his biological mother is contrasted with his affection for his adopting mother Ginny.

If we move from considering Elliot's relationship with his mother to evaluating his attitude towards culture, we notice an incongruity. At certain moments, he shows a twofold attitude of integrating with diasporic culture and meantime an aversion to grasping the full meaning, significance, and particularity of his ethnic culture. He supports white American William, Yaz's husband, in his contention that the imported Puerto Rican rituals performed during burials and funerals, particularly the "open casket" and "the prayers" are "disgusting" (p. 34). His behaviour which might reflect a state of cultural assimilation of dominant white culture does not, however, withhold him from showing a genuine respect for the indigenous values of sacrifice, benevolence, and solidarity he inherited by blood from his native ancestors or participating in putting them to practice. His fierce, evocative standoff with Odessa and the journey he makes to motherland to complete Ginny's rituals of burial provide adequate proof to this dimension of his personality.

Elliot's real world also defines his complex character psychologically. Though he is gifted with some personal advantages unavailable to others, he is stressfully disordered by war traumatic memories. Commenting on his character, Hudes herself describes him as "very charming," "charismatic" and "socially gifted" (Young, 2015, p. 191). He has opportunities that other members of his own community have never had "thanks to his appearance in television ads, radio interviews, and the film" (p. 191). Hudes also tells us about another component of his complex character: "He is literally carrying his past with him" (p. 191); that is, his memories of war and what it has caused to his body are psychologically traumatic, which weakens his spirit and demeans his resolve to resist addiction of painkillers that he "OD'd three times and were in the hospital for it" (Hudes, 2011, p. 58). His psychological trauma is incarnated in the form of the recurring ghost of the Iraqi Soldier, which ceases to appear upon Elliot's return to homeland. The ghost represents part of the play's supernatural element which entangles with it in a metaphysical space real characters from the world of the living.

The supernatural element in this play, however, breaks away from its traditionally dramatic usage. It is true that it functions in a way that expresses Elliot's mental condition upset by his memories of war, but the ghost is represented as a corporeal entity, in flesh and blood. It is capable of speaking to Elliot, touching his body, directing his attitudes, and eliciting actions from him. Interestingly, this physio-mystical relationship that exists between the living and the dead is traced back to the Puerto Rican Taino religious culture of "*espiritismo* (spiritualism)" (Galvan, 2009, p. 30), in which the spirits of the dead are believed to be surrounding humans and communicating with them. In this light, the supernatural is employed as a magical realist technique, popular in Latin American literature. Elliot does not panic or loses his mind whenever the ghost appears asking him to give back its (the ghost's] passport, nor when it incarnates in the form of a real human being, as Yaz's colleague, consulted to translate its recurring request delivered in Arabic: "Momken menfadluck ted-dini gawaz saffari?" ["Would you please give me my passport?"] (Hudes, 2011, p. 16). Although the ghost can be seen by Elliot alone, he always appears determined, rational, and in control of his temper, motivation, and action. A scrutiny of the Arabic sentence, however, offers a different interpretation of the identity of the ghost. If it belongs to the Iraqi soldier, then why it is imploring an invading stranger for its passport. More demanding is the question of why it is holding a passport in a battle supposedly taking place within the perimeters of its own homeland (Iraq). The ghost then is most likely not that of the Iraqi soldier.

The closest rationalization is that the ghost is Elliot's. It is the metaphysical incarnation of his own post-war mental and motivational scars. It is not the spirit of "the first guy [he] shot down in Iraq" returning for vengeance (Hudes, 2011, p. 85), nor is it a representation of Elliot's troubled conscience condemning him for having taken out innocent lives abroad. The ghost has a lot to do with his own addiction history when he used to overdose by administering painkillers more than prescribed. Ybarra (2017) comments: "Elliot's addiction to painkillers links him biologically to his mother despite her absence" (p. 60). The ghost is employed by Hudes as a constant reminder of his own, sinful past so that he can forgive his mother's comparable misdeeds. It is also deployed to deter such contemplated thoughts of avenging himself and his sister and making things even by forcing Odessa into a relapse. Hudes's conveyed idea that ghosts are nothing but an embodiment of one's own past is already reflected in Odessa's statement that "If there's spirits, they're hiding inside you" and they are of

"the scariest kind" (Hudes, 2011, p. 46). As the ghost engages in a real physical fight with Elliot in the final scene, it can be seen as a moment when the past wrestles with the present, vengeance with forgiveness, and real characters in real spaces with supernatural bodies in metaphysical realms. The engagement of both worlds is breathtaking and evocative:

> (The second they make contact, Elliot spins on his heels and grabs the Ghost. The Ghost defends himself, pulling away. They start pushing, grabbing, fighting. The Ghost is looking for something—is it Elliot's wallet?)
>
> Momken men-fadluck ted-dini gawaz saffari?
>
> (The Ghost finds Elliot's wallet and tears through it, hurling its contents onto the floor. Elliot attacks again, but this time the Ghost reaches out his hand and touches Elliot's face. Elliot freezes, unable to move, as the Ghost's hands glide across his features, considering each one with authority, taking inventory.)
>
> Momken men-fadluck ted-dini gawaz saffari?
>
> (The Ghost is gone. Elliot catches his breath, shaken. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bottle of pills. He puts one pill in his hand. Then he empties the entire bottle of pills into his hand. He stares at the pills, wanting to throw them away.) (Hudes, 2011, p. 80)

At this precise moment Elliot relates his addictive behaviour of overdosing on painkillers with the disturbing behaviour of the reappearing ghost, and his ability to exorcise it with his relinquishment of overdosing. The act of exorcising the ghost, both physically and spiritually, which concludes Scene Fourteen is contingent upon Elliot's physical return to the real space of Puerto Rico in Scene Fifteen. Only there does the ghost leave for good, and its departure marks Elliot's ability to find salvation from his painful past and such mind-consuming attitudes of vengeance and unforgiveness. His salvation is signified through his sudden, immediate admiration of the Caribbean island's landscape where he acknowledges his cultural breed and engages with new attitudes.

The island of Puerto Rico has two identities depending on the different attitudes of its returning diasporans. On the one hand, it stands as a space of "nostalgia, home, and authenticity" (Ybarra, 2017, p. 53), and on the other as a space of renewal or rebirth. The distinct meta-identity of this space depends on the addressed Latino American generation. As Ybarra (2017) notifies, for the older generation of people like Ginny and Odessa, "the island serves as a lost paradise, the site of their true identity and their history—a place to which they want to return" (p. 53). For the younger generation to which Yaz and Elliot belong, "the island provides revelations for both" (p. 53). The revelations do not comprise the exposition of secrets *for* both cousins but *about* their own identities and cultures. These revelations happen spontaneously and unexplainably. The only possible rationale for their occurrence is that they are induced by the indigenous landscape, as if it has a magical effect on its attendants. The revelations take the form of assuming new attitudes and roles in the diasporic setting, and they occur only in the final scene before the ritualistic act of scattering Ginny's ashes into El Yunque waterfall. This local natural landscape becomes a space of conversion and a juncture of death and rebirth. Hudes represents it as a site in which not only dead ancestors are buried but also the old attitudes and identities of the living. On the island, Elliot substitutes the restless Iraqi soldier's ghost with Ginny's smiling ghost that surprises him in a dream:

> ELLIOT. This dream was different than usual. I'm fixing a Subway hoagie, I feel eyes on the back of my neck, I turn around and expect to see him, the first guy I shot down in Iraq. But instead it's Mami Ginny. Standing next to the bread oven, smiling. You know how her eyes smile?
>
> YAZ. Best smile in the world.
>
> ELLIOT. Looking at me, her son. Coming to say good-bye.
>
> YAZ. That's beautiful.
>
> ELLIOT. She puts on her glasses to see my face even better. She squints and something changes. The moment I come into focus, her eyes widen. Her jaw drops, she starts trembling. Then she starts to cry. Something she's seeing scares her. Then she starts to scream. Loud, like, "Ahhh! Ahhh!" She won't stop looking at me, but she's terrified, horrified by what she sees. And I don't know if my lip is bleeding or there's a gash on my forehead or she's looking through my eyes and seeing straight into my fucking soul. (Hudes, 2011, pp. 85–86)

This is the second occasion when Elliot communicates with the dead, the supernatural, though in a dream that occurs only once. Through the ghosts' multiple appearances and interactions with other alive characters, Hudes turns her theatre into a hub of connection between both realms of the living and the dead, the physical and metaphysical. The horror seen on the face of Ginny's ghost during this dream is perplexing. Perhaps it is triggered by the ghost's discontent with Elliot's addictive behaviour or his deteriorating economic conditions. In this way, the ghost appears to Elliot for motivation and creation of new attitudes in him, and the action of making his countenance bleed may be the ritual of inducting him into a new identity. This unique metaphysical experience motivates and enlightens both the relator of the dream and his listener, Elliot and Yaz, for they belong to the same blood and culture.

It is only at El Yunque waterfall that the two cousins acquire new identities, attitudes, and visions. As for Yaz, she decides to return to the US mainland and take over the roles of both biological and nonbiological mothers (Ginny and Odessa) while maintaining her career as an adjunct professor of music: "I'm the elder now. I stay home. I hold down the fort" (Hudes, 2011, p. 86). On her journey back to America, Yaz intends to smuggle "spiral ginger" for planting them in Mami Ginny's garden (p. 74), her private space in diaspora, just as the latter once "smuggled coquí back with her kotex and got arrested" (p. 84). Through the actions of buying Ginny's house in North Philadelphia, continuing her illegal smuggling practices, and taking care of her garden, Yaz occupies Ginny's spot in both real and unreal spaces. In this way, Hudes revives and puts into theatrical effect the Taino religious belief of "reincarnation" (Galvan, 2009, p. 37). In the diasporic space, she decides to become the spiritual mentor and healer of her community, as mother of all Latino immigrants. Yaz replaces Odessa too in the virtual space, by the former's decision to succeed the latter in administering the crack forum. Yaz thus is determined to dominate both spaces, the real and the virtual, and acquire new attitudes towards herself and others. The island thus becomes a common ground of reunion and renewal, a bridge connecting both the younger and older generations and transferring socio-cultural roles. While Yaz invests the change induced by the space of native homeland in common service of her diasporic community, Elliot invests it somehow selfishly.

The real natural space also changes the way Elliot looks upon his current conditions and the way he looks forward to the future. There he develops a couple of congruent states of, first, detestation

of his deteriorating physical and financial conditions and, second, of self-centeredness. Instead of flying back to Philadelphia with Yaz, to where he used to fix subway hoagies, he decides to pursue his dream of becoming a movie star in Hollywood and justifies his decision to her: "If I stay in Philly, I'm gonna turn into it [addiction]. I'm gonna become one of them [crackheads]. I'm already halfway there. You've got armor, you've got ideas, but I don't" (Hudes, 2011, pp. 85, 86). This attitudinal change is not simply urged by, as claimed by Florentina Anghel (2021), "the mistake he made by accusing his mother" or by "a rage against himself and his weakness" (p. 12). It is rather spurred by the indigenous space Eliot and Yaz find themselves culturally obliged to explore and acknowledge. The change, however, is not complete or authentic. Although Ginny's death revives their familial connections and their presence on the island brings them spiritually closer to their roots, they do not substantiate this change by, for instance, contacting other members of the extended family living on the island, favoring instead to stay in a hotel as foreigners typically do.

The metaphysical space is also invaded by Odessa and Yaz. Elliot is not the only member of the family who is qualified and capable of establishing a mystical communication, foregrounded in the indigenous Taino religious belief of spiritualism, with supernatural beings, seeing, conversing with, and getting in physical contact with them. For a few minutes, Odessa manages to transcend the physical world into the metaphysical one and becomes a member of it, while Yaz suffices with observing the process of soul transcendence. When Elliot and Yaz find overdosed Odessa lying unconsciously "in a heap, motionless, on the floor" (Hudes, 2011, p. 69), Yaz alone can perceive and follow up Odessa's transient body-soul separation, soul ascension, and finally soul reinstitution to body within a magical realist scene:

ELLIOT. Help me get her to the sofa. One, two, three.

(Elliot lifts her with Yaz's help. They struggle under her weight. In fact they lift the air. Odessa stands up, lucid, and watches the action: Elliot and Yaz struggling under her invisible weight.) … (They set "Odessa" on the sofa, while Odessa watches, unseen, calm.)

ODESSA. I must be in the terminal. Between flights. The layover.

(… a radiant white light suddenly pours in from above. Odessa looks up, is overwhelmed. It is beautiful. Yaz sees it.)

YAZ. Dear god, do you see that?

(*Elliot enters. Watching Yaz, he looks up.*)

ELLIOT (Not seeing it). What?

YAZ (To Odessa). It's okay, Odessa, go, go, we love you, I love you Titi, you are good, you are good. Oh my god, she's beautiful.

ELLIOT. What are you talking about?

YAZ. It's okay, it's okay. We love you Odessa.

The sound of an ambulance siren. Suddenly the white light disappears. Odessa crawls onto the couch and slips into Yaz's arms, where she's been all along.)

YAZ. Holy shit9081 …

ELLIOT. What's happening, Yaz? What the fuck was that?

YAZ. You've got to forgive her, Elliot. You have to. (pp. 70; 72)

The scene features the physical and the metaphysical Odessa; then and now. During this brief metaphysical transition of her existence, her meta-self, Yaz is illuminated, converted, and introduced to a glimpse of the particulars of her original culture, and her cousin's attitude towards his suffering mother is transformed, from hatred to pity, unconcern to anxiety, and ignorance to knowledge. It is also because of this metaphysical experience that the whole nuclear family experiences a state of Taino reincarnation. Yaz, as hinted before, replaces Odessa in the virtual space as the forum administrator and becomes FREEDOM&NOISE, and Elliot decides to knock on the doors of opportunity in Hollywood based on his newly generated attitudes of self-confidence and efficiency. As for the now-physically weak Odessa, she signs out of the forum and undergoes rehabilitation under John's care.

Because Hudes's drama is multicultural in scope, the identities of other diasporan citizens of different racial origins are also space oriented. Asian American Madeleine Mays/ORANGUTAN is torn apart between two conflicting sets of spaces: the real space of her native birthplace on the one hand and the two interrelated spaces of diaspora and cyber reality on the other. ORANGUTAN is a Japanese by birth and an American by adoption. Like Elliot, she was adopted by an American family in Maine at the age of eight. Her chosen virtual name, ORANGUTAN, in HAIKUMOM's crack forum reflects her real status in the diaspora and meantime exposes her nostalgic feelings and self-alienating inclination. Her Asian origins and solitary lifestyle echo that of real orangutans which live mainly high-up on trees. In a symbolic connection with these primate mammals too, Mays uses "Mango's internet café" where her preferred spot is an "orange plastic chair" (Hudes, 2011, p. 20). Mays, whose birthname is Yoshiko Sakai, is represented as always anxious, reluctant, and rootless. Consider for example her feeling of being "floating," as if she were a "cloud" or "a baby in a basket on an endless river," or her statement that "wherever I go I don't make sense there" (pp. 37; 38). So, whether in the real American space or in the virtual space of the forum her mind is exhausted by such feelings of nonbelonging and displacement. This psychological state apparently creates a conflict between her rational thinking and instinctive attitudes, sensed through her metaphorical argument that "My brain is my biggest enemy—always arguing my soul into a corner" (p. 39). Her intellect is operational in the virtual and diasporic spaces of the internet and real American society respectively, while her soul is active only in the space of her indigenous birthplace. Through this metaphor, Hudes alludes to an existing clash between the two sets of spaces and implies that the first set of diasporic and virtual spaces, the two domains of her intellectual thinking, presides over the second real space of her native homeland where her soul truly belongs.

Mays's search for her birthplace memories and keen quest for a new challenge at homeland, one with which she would manage to fend off the stacked feelings of anonymity and loneliness, necessitate a departure from both spaces, the virtual and the diasporic. No longer do the diasporic American setting and the virtual online community offer spaces of containment and satisfaction for her. By choosing to quit the crack site and travel back to Kushiro in Japan, ORANGUTAN then substitutes virtual and diasporic realities for aboriginal reality. In the real space of her birthplace, she can locate her original identity by embracing her idle memories. It is in Japan that her aspiration of becoming an English teacher is fulfilled and her obsessive dream of

reconnecting with her biological family, who "had completely cut [her] off" (Hudes, 2011, p. 19), and native natural landscape is achieved. Instead of adopting the superficial virtual reality the crack forum offers to crackheads and the phony relationships the diasporic American setting provides, she prefers real, truthful affairs with considerate and supportive people of "flesh and blood" (p. 39), "not ones and zeroes" (p. 63), available only in a real, indigenous social environment. Mays shows a kind of intimacy and mutual feelings of nonbelonging, weakness, solitude, and helplessness with other virtual and diasporic characters, particularly African American Clayton Buddy Wilkie (Clay), virtually known as CHUTES&LADDERS.

The character of Clay/CHUTES&LADDERS is partly defined by the real spaces of a discriminative society, a loathing diasporic family, and a unique body, but mostly by the virtual space of online sociality. As his name implies, he is helpless, being symbolically locked up on a board where he cannot decide his own movement. In real space, he is disturbed by a disappointing present and an aching past. His current job as a GS4 paper pusher at IRS, Los Angeles, is a demeaned profession he does not seem very much to enjoy, an attitude apparent through his occasional putting of customers on hold or hanging them up. Hudes also uses Clay as her agent for reminding us of the legacy of race relations. He stands for those people with a history of discrimination still imposing itself upon their minds and controls their attitudes towards others, particularly white people. For example, his attitudes of loathing and offending the new white subscriber John/FOUNTAINHEAD are spurred mainly by a still-surviving racial history. Signs of this attitude are already evident in metaphor form when he is first introduced to FOUNTAINHEAD: "Some purebred poodle comes pissing on my tree trunk? Damn straight I'll chase his ass out my forest" (Hudes, 2011, p. 29). CHUTS&LADDERS also uses an explicitly offensive and sarcastic vocabulary to describe FOUNTAINHEAD, such as: "asshole," "a half crack addict," "a half husband," and a man of "ego" (pp. 28; 30). CHUTES&LADDERS' use of the phrase "my forest" is not random, particularly with an acknowledgement of the significance of land acquisition in African American consciousness. African Americans have always fought a socio-legal battle against a biased American society over possession of land for cultivation, a space over the board. During his tense online confrontations with FOUNTAINHEAD in the crack forum, CHUTES&LADDERS does not defend a right to a real piece of land located over the geographical *board* of America, based as he might think on his constitutional rights as an American citizen, but rather his own virtual space in a global sphere of human existence. He would not allow both real and virtual spaces, his past and present moments, to be transgressed by intruding whites.

As regards the real space of diasporic family, Hudes makes the interactive relationship between CHUTES&LADDERS and ORANGUTAN in online space a replacement of each's missing connection with relevant nuclear family members in actual real space. Both chatters belong to two different generations, with CHUTES&LADDERS being a grandfather to three children, who literally have never seen him, and ORANGUTAN a daughter to a Japanese family who would definitely not recognize her at this age. Yet, regardless of their unequal ages and distinct ethno-cultural backgrounds, they ally in the common experience of socio-familial detachment and would certainly welcome family reunion. In fact, it is not only Mays who takes serious steps towards family reunion, Clay too attempts a reconciliation, though futile, with his son's family by paying them a visit after a ten-year, self-decided isolation. During that period, Clay has become to them a "stranger" and "lost" (Hudes, 2011, pp. 38; 63). Despite his attempt at dissuading Mays from unsubscribing from the forum and travelling back home, what he describes as "the shadows" (p. 62), the latter insists on facing these shadows and reclaiming her history: "You walk the goddamn earth scared of your own shadow, getting smaller and smaller, until you disappear" (p. 64). Mays prefers confrontation rather than flight which she considers an action of cowardice.

Crack addiction is not the only reason for Clay's social alienation in real space, his physical appearance is yet another cause. His body is represented as a real, physical space provoking in its owner mixed feelings of alienation and, conversely, perseverance. Hudes draws his own body with physical differences, or perhaps uniqueness, having "small hands and six toes on my left foot" and with a "face [that] resembles a corgi". Despite his uniquely different physical condition that would entice others' satirical comments, he observes his own body not with shame or self-hatred but as a reminder of his race's perseverance for having withstood racial discrimination and tension in America chiefly during its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. His physical abnormality neither demeans his spirit nor shakes his religious beliefs, an attitude which attracts ORANGUTAN's admiration: "I've been on this planet for thirty-one years and you're the only person I've ever met who's more sarcastic than I am yet still believes in God" (p. 30). This is the only regard where CHUTES&LADDERS departs from ORANGUTAN, for the latter is, as admitted by herself, "agnostic" or "atheist" (p. 30). She is not as spiritually powerful as him. Unlike her, he shows sarcasm and a solid religious faith in response to prejudice and adversity. Even in the face of death that he encounters by wave-surfing while intoxicated, he shows a power of resilience and readiness to change his course in life. His amazing ability to survive social threats, human degradation, and the psychological burden of feeling like an alien in the diasporic space of America rationalizes ORANGUTAN's plea for him to rescue her:

> ORANGUTAN. I like you. Come to Japan. We can go get an ice cream. I can show you the countryside.
>
> CHUTES&LADDERS. I don't have a passport. If my Tercel can't drive there, I generally don't go.
>
> ORANGUTAN. Come save me in Japan. Be my knight in shining armor. CHUTES&LADDERS: I'll admit, I'm a dashing concept. If you saw my flesh and blood, you'd be disappointed.
>
> ORANGUTAN. I see my flesh and blood every day and I've learned to live with the disappointment. (p. 39)

This dialogue entails an implied discussion of the noncorporeal identity and racial condition of both characters in both virtual and diasporic spaces. CHUTES&LADDERS' statement about being a "dashing concept" implies that the conceptually attractive images online communicators have of each other are imprecise when compared to their realistic counterparts. In the real diasporic setting, he is racially separated from the dominant white mainstream. What is more evocative about this dialogue is that it sets the two identities of either participant apart, particularly as the distinction clearly made between virtual and corporeal existences reminds both sides of the fact that their relationship is effective and real only in its capacity as a virtual means of communication. To turn the virtuality of this relationship into a reality, both bodies need to meet in an authentic, antiracial space free from the restraints of both a misleading virtual space and a prejudicing racial space. That is why she insists on having him to her side upon returning to homeland Japan. Thus, Hudes makes the indigenous homelands of her characters spaces where their quest for their true identities is ultimately rewarded with success. These are spaces of reconciliation and renewal.

Conclusion

What distinguishes Hudes's theatre from other diasporic American playwrights is her maneuverability with settings and characters and her creation of overlapping relationships between them. Her characters are multiethnic and multicultural, and the spaces they occupy and interact with are varied and multidimensional. In *Water by the Spoonful*, there are three spaces wherein diasporic characters of Latin, Asian, and African origins socialize and recognize each other's cultures: physical, virtual online, and metaphysical. The three dimensions identify the characters' current conditions, their pasts, inner selves and aspirations. In the real space, Odessa/HAIKUMOM is an addict. She is alone, selfish, and pathetic; in the virtual space, she is a mentor and a supporter; in the metaphysical space, she is homeless, lost, disappointed, but meantime pure and majestic. Elliot in real space is a war survivor, an extended family supporter and a dream pursuer, though disabled and meds-abuser. He has no existence in the virtual space which he detests, for it is the space which consumes his mother's existence in the realms of both nuclear and extended families. In metaphysical space, he is helpless and conquered by the recurrence of disturbing memories in the form of a ghost. Yaz/FREEDOM&NOISE in real space is not only successful, thoughtful, and helpful, but also an abominator of her inherited cultural rituals. In virtual space, she becomes a replicator of Odessa in guiding crack addicts. This is connected to her existence in metaphysical space as the only person spiritually gifted to observe Odessa's interim soul-body separation and reunion. Mays/ORANGUTAN is solitary, nostalgic, rootless, and displaced in both real and virtual spaces. The commonality of her state in both spaces is also witnessed in Clay/CHUTES&LADDERS, who is burdened in the real space with memories of race conflict and familial rejection as well as hatred for his underpaid job. It is only in the indigenous space of Kushiro, however, when the bodies of Mays and Clay meet for the first time, that they experience new attitudes of survival, hope, and forgiveness.

Thus, the change of attitudes and feelings noticed in Hudes's characters is not triggered by a suppressively social system or a manipulatively ideological power but rather through an omnipresence of a real, virtual, or metaphysical setting. Characters are not in control of the spaces they inhabit and interact with; it is the space that modulates their attitudes and passions. This metatheatrical style underlies Hudes's preoccupation with demonstrating the multifaceted identities diasporic people assume in different spaces of human contact.

Data availability

The research does not involve the analysis or generation of any data.

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