”Voices from Sorrow’s Kitchen”

Péter-Gaál Szabó: *“Ah done been tuh de horizon and back” Zora Neale Hurston’s Cultural Spaces in Their Eyes Were Watching God and Jonah’s Gourd Vine.* Peter Lang GmbH 2011, 134 pp. ISBN: 9783631616499

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Zora Neale Hurston’s famous lament: “I have been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots. Than I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and sword in my hands” (*Dust Tracks* 227) establishes the thematic context for the scholarly inquiry alluded to in the title of this review study. Ever since Alice Walker’s unearthing of Hurston’s literary and cultural heritage, the latter has been incorporated into the American canon. The unique anthropological aspect of her literary focus primarily influenced by her studies with the famed anthropologist, Franz Boas enabled her to function as an insider novelist.

Hurston is also known for her dispute with Richard Wright and other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance regarding their respective portrayal of the African-American experience. Her famous refusal of a “tragically colored” (“How It Feels” 1942) perspective along with her anthropological training resulted in a unique, yet credible depiction of black life coupled with a leading role in the womanist movement, a branch of Black feminism eschewing essentialism in favor of a more inclusive view of gender relations. Alice Walker’s view on the function of writing: “It is in the end, the saving of lives we writers are about” (76) substantiates the struggle against the triple bind of oppression, a class, race, and gender based system of subordination confronting the African-American female.

While paying homage to a wide variety of Hurston critique including the "Speakerly Text" and "Blues Matrix" models elaborated by Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker respectively, Gaál-Szabó has placed spatiality into the focus of his scholarly interest.

II

The author's inquiry rests on a solid theoretical foundation displaying thorough familiarity with the milestones of spatiality studies. Gaál-Szabó's eventual research methodology is moored between two opposing schools, the phenomenological and the post-Marxist approaches. In both cases the main issue is space construction and the role of the human being in the respective process, in other words how the human subject is produced by space and conversely how the human subject produces space.

Space's impact on the subject is highlighted by a continuum ranging from the Heideggerian *dasein* through Sartre's notion of the embodied experience to Bachelard's concept of the felicitious space. Gaál-Szabó's exploration is also assisted by the habitus concept, a leading trope of phenomenology establishing a link between the self and the "lived place" primarily expressed by Bachelard's model of the oneiric house.

On the other hand post-Marxists believe that space production is derived from power relations. Gaál-Szabó shows an appreciation of the main achievements of this school as well. Sartre's practico-inert ensemble model explains the spatial aspects of group dynamics, Foucault posits power relations behind space formation and Lefebvre's conceptual triad distinguishes between spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces.

The research apparatus in question makes use of both theoretical approaches. Homi Bhabha's notion of *third space* and Edward Soja's *thirding* entail a "negation and building upon of the given socio-spatial paradigm" (Gaál-Szabó 33). Moreover, following Marc Augée, Hurston's universe can be considered a non-place, while deriving female creativity from an independent female space located at the intersection of male and female subcultures, Elaine Showalter's notion of the wild zone can provide further insight into the question of spatiality. It is in this terrain, in the black female wild zone where Gaál-Szabó locates and analyzes his subject, the African-American female struggling against the "triple bind

of oppression," that is, race, gender, and class-based subordination. Naturally at first, these concepts reflect the role of power behind space production. A spatial paradigm, either in the literal form expressed by the public sphere/private sphere dyad, or by the figurative division of the cultural arena into hegemonic and non-hegemonic segments is a result of current power relations. Conversely, the oneiric house, the felicitious space, or even De Certeau's poetic space is achieved by the way of *thirding* or hybridization, thereby enabling the subject to improve his or her position in a conative manner or by an escape into imagined geography.

The above discussed theoretical background creates the foundation for the author's inquiry, the examination of the interplay of space and place in Hurston's two major novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1935) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1937). Hurston places both herself and her primarily female protagonists into the Third Space. Her resentment of the "sobbing school of Negrohood" ("How It Feels" 1942) alienated her from the African-American literary establishment, but at the same time she contributed to the revitalization of the black cultural landscape. Moreover, Hurston's women (Janie Crawford, Lucy Pearson) are located in male space and build their identity within that context.

While Hurston's use of the "anthropological spyglass" facilitates a credible and authoritative first-hand look at the internal dynamics of the African-American community, the simultaneous maintenance of the researcher's distance promotes the exploration of female space potentials and the respective identity building process. In addition to Doris Bachmann-Medick and Janet Tallman's emphasis on the anthropological turn in Hurston's case Arjun Appadurai's view of ethnography: "a practice of representation that illuminates the power of large scale imagined life possibilities over specific life projectories" (Zwi xv) appears to have relevance. Hurston's ethnographic authority is further reinforced by Boas' preface to *Mules and Men* (1935) praising her disciple for "entering into the homely life of the Southern Negro." Indeed, both novels span over specific life projectories describing the personal growth of the given protagonists through various personal relationships along with providing a reliable, yet at the same time celebratory rendering of black life.

While the author presents and analyzes numerous examples of *thirding* in both novels, I would like to expand upon the verbal exchange between Janie and Starks, a crucial episode of identity formation

commemorated in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Accordingly Janie, already alienated from her husband, is rebuked and humiliated in front of an audience of black men at the porch of Starks' store for her perceived inability to slice a piece of tobacco: "I god almighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!" (*Their Eyes* 121)

At this point the attack is not only a simple marital bicker over a mishap, but a sign that both parties transgressed a certain boundary, and what is at stake here is more than domestic peace, it is human pride and dignity. After all the whole exchange takes place in public.

Janie's response is significant from several aspects as "[s]he took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before. Talkin' any such language as dat […] You de one started talkin' under people's clothes. Not me" (*Their Eyes* 121).

Joe retorts: "'T' aint't no use in getting' all mad, Janie, 'cause Ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is" (*Their Eyes122*). She counters Joe's words by the following devastating statement: "Naw, Ah aint'no young gal no mo' but den Ah aint' no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ' tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin''bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life!" (*Their Eyes* 122–23)

Apart from the commemoration of the protagonist's self-awakening under the pear tree in her grandmother's yard the abovementioned dialogue is the best known element of the novel and symbolizes the achievement of subject status through speech. At the same time it provides a microcosm of Hurston's politics of space. As Gaál-Szabó expands upon a private and public space/sphere and the male/female binary he places the black female in the male transparent social space. Janie "trapped in a concerted interaction with male oppression (12)" initially occupies a space-off position. Although desiring to be more than a home base for her husband's struggles in politics and business, Joe denies access to the public sphere for her. Male oppression in this case is signified by spatial and verbal politics illustrated by his comments comparing women to chicken and cows. Apart from the offensive content

implying a peculiar view of romantic paternalism, the spatial references are noteworthy as well. Recalling Bachelard's notion of the oneiric house, "engraved with the various functions of inhabiting" the chicken coop or the barn both occupy a secondary if not tertiary space within a given residence. As the black male transparent place signifies hegemony over the black female primarily via verbal, but in some cases physical abuse, Janie's response is to develop her own individual space. It is from this space-off, that is, from the literal and figurative "elsewhere," that Janie steps forth while imposing a physical and metaphysical challenge. Although she invades the male space and uses the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, thereby returning the devastating sexist attack with a cataclysmic reprisal, Janie appears to heed Audre Lorde's warning as well: "Survival is learning […] how to take our differences and make them strengths."
http://radicalprofeminist.blogspot.hu/2010/03/radical-feminist-audre-lordes-famous.html

Thus, forced into a space off position in the master's house, Janie accepts her difference, namely being an aging woman and by emphasizing gender pride uses words, the tools employed by Joe to keep her in secondary position, to turn the tables and eventually destroy her husband. At the same time Janie's response to Joe is an excellent example of thirding, as humiliated, ridiculed, and attacked in her femininity she not only accepts the given spatio-temporal paradigm, but builds upon it and completes Catherine Belsey's cultural self construction process. Thus following Houston Baker's assertion of the slave narrative's capability of "writing the slave into being," Janie's subject status is achieved by "talkin' under people's clothes."

The eventually fatal verbal exchange carries typological implications as well. Janie's retort forms a parallel with the acts of Michal, Saul's daughter publicly criticizing her husband David for dancing half naked in a procession greeting the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6 14–22). "How did the king of Israel get him honour to-day, who uncovered himself to-day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!" David's response was: 'Before the LORD, who chose me above thy father, and above all his house, to appoint me prince over the people of the LORD, over Israel, before the LORD will I make merry. And I will be yet more vile than thus, and will be base in mine

own sight; and with the handmaids whom thou hast spoken of, with them will I get me honour."

The words exchanged at Starks' store and in biblical Israel offer a fertile ground for further comparison. In both cases the encounter takes place in public and the underlying cause of the verbal warfare is located in the mythical realm of sexuality. In both instances the pretext is served by the physical appearance of a spouse. Despite the obvious parallels, the circumstances and the outcome of the quarrel are different. Janie responded to Starks while Michal was first to rebuke David upon the lack of his apparel and partial nudity. Starks also in an exaggerated way compares Janie to Methusalem and makes derisive comments about her body. Whereas Michal resents the fact that the scantily clad David might reveal his manhood to handmaids, thereby dishonoring his royal wife, Janie questions the very manhood of her husband. In both cases unrequited love plays a decisive role. Michal's feelings for David are not returned and in case of Joe and Janie "the bed was no longer a daisy field to play in" (111) either. Consequently, while Michal feels offended by the potential nakedness of her husband, Janie figuratively disrobes Starks. The impact of verbal abuse is similar as despite Janie's short lived tryst with Tea Cake both characters lose love in their lives.

III

One of the greatest merits of Gaál-Szabó's work is that unfazed by the availability of an intimidating Hurston scholarship, he is capable of forging a wide variety of research results into a unique critical apparatus. The fact that he is able to maintain the comparative focus throughout the book is also remarkable. Certainly Gaál-Szabó not only hears the voices coming from Sorrow's Kitchen, but offers a thorough interpretation eventually facilitating an invaluable insight into Hurston's climb on the peaky mountain. The trope of a female figure holding a harp in one hand and sword in the other appropriately symbolizes the very *Third Space* the African-American female struggling against the triple bind of oppression occupies. Hurston indeed found the middle ground between the militant resistance of the sword and the accommodating attitude of the harp, the assertion of the personal, psychological, and sexual integrity of the Janie Crawfords and Lucy Pearsons living then and now. It is to the exploration of this tenuous, yet fascinating cultural position the author provides

immense help through his thoroughly researched, thoughtful, and informative book.

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