

Rezension

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*.**

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011, 134 Seiten

Judit Molnár

Institute of English and American Studies
North American Department
University of Debrecen
4032 Debrecen
Egyetem tér 1
judit.molnar@arts.unideb.hu

The title of Péter Gaál Szabó’s book suggests that he intends to move away from the by now traditional approach to Zora Neale Hurston’s works i.e. the critical attempts that primarily focus on the importance of the characters’ use of the vernacular in the course of Hurston’s novels. Instead, he provides the reader with a complex analysis of the cultural spaces delineated in two of Hurston’s seminal novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934). Szabó contends, “It is the Southern black cultural space, where Hurston’s female characters reach ultimately the horizon of their subjectivities and sense of place” (114; emphasis added), hence the quote in Gaál-Szabó’s title.

Gaál-Szabó situates Hurston on the literary map of the Harlem Renaissance, and calls our attention to the ever-changing critical responses to the writer’s works. Szabó emphasizes the important fact that in the varied interpretations of Hurston’s literary output one has to take into serious consideration the fact that Hurston was both a writer of fiction (a creator) and a scholar-observer (student of the renowned anthropologist, Franz Boas).

Gaál-Szabó argues that by means of spatial thinking the reader can obtain a new and a deeper insight into Hurston's unique exploration of the female African American cultural experience. He reminds us of Barbara Johnson's "tetrapolar structure" (9): black/white and male/female that she applied in her well-known and often quoted essay. He, however, intends to go beyond the afore-mentioned model and expands it by concentrating on the spatial paradigms embedded in the two novels. In order to successfully achieve his purpose, first he delineates the theoretical framework (Ch. 2) that will provide the basis for situating Hurston's two novels under scrutiny within Black Modernism. First, the concepts of the phenomenological school are introduced: Martin Heidegger's, Jean-Paul Sartre's, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Gaston Bachelard's views are discussed among others with a particular emphasis on Heidegger's notion of the *Dasein*. In these thinkers' perception space is constructed by man and so is his/her image of his/her body. As Gaál-Szabó has it, "This bears special importance in African American cosmological discourse as selfassertion (sic) in an oppressive environment" (10). Further on he says, "In phenomenological understanding the heart of the world is the self. It is, however, always placed somewhere: thus the self has not only a temporal, but also a spatial aspect" (20).

Post-Marxist philosophers, however, maintain that the subject is produced and confined by space. Gaál-Szabó relies on Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey among many others, and spells out Foucault's claim, according to which the individual is ultimately the product of power relations. For his own purposes, Gaál-Szabó finds appropriate "the in-between" spatial approach. He agrees, for example with Micheal De Certeau's assumptions, which are figured in the action of "walking": "Walking becomes similar to a speech act that creatively enhances the subject's intention in the geographical context. Through walking the subject appropriates the topography by establishing relations between places [...]" (31). Further on, following in the footsteps of Homi Bhabha's *third space* and Edward W. Soja's *thirding*, he suggests that the in-between existence manifest in the hybridization of space endows the individual with alternatives to rely upon in the process of building one's own idiosyncratic space in which his/her identity will be embedded. Bearing this fundamental presumption in mind, Gaál-Szabó turns to investigate Hurston's cultural spaces (both personal and fictional) in Chapters three and four respectively.

His extensive inquiry is pursued in many directions. He points out, for example that Hurston attributes special significance to "angularity" and "asymmetry" present in African American building strategies because for her "they refer to African American tactics of cultural appropriation, as well as adaptation to diverse circumstances" (44). Borrowing Marc Augé's category of *nonplace* ("nonplaces represent characteristic places of

super/modernity that are detached from historicity due to their nature as places of transition [...]” 51), he convincingly demonstrates that they play a crucial role in Hurston’s writings, too. Among others, in both novels under discussion roads function as nonplaces “where the paradigm of social place is not binding” (57) any longer. In the subsequent chapter the “black sacred cosmos” is in the focus. Here it is plausibly asserted that for Hurston sacred places are also liminal places, too, “ascertaining cultural dynamics through hybridization” (79). Both the hoodoo places and the places of the official Christian religion are there for conversion and revival alike, and the numinous is experienced in both cases in their respective modes and systems. The fictional treatment of these places evoke much of Hurston’s anthropological field research both in the deep South and the Carribean. The following chapter is devoted to the comparison of gendered spaces: masculine and feminine. Gaál-Szabó describes them as both being transparent; the male appears as homogeneous, public, hegemonic, heterosexual, and uncontested while the female can be described by private, exclusion, surveillance, and situatedness in terms of work, time, and place. (82-3) In this part of the book, the well-differentiated places and spaces are vividly and instructively illustrated by examples taken from the two novels. Hurston’s idiosyncratic feminine spatiality is foregrounded and theorized in the last chapter. Three female places constructed by women for themselves are identified in the two novels: domestic space, the (back)yard, and places outside these two (102) where women can form their own identities. Gaál-Szabó notes, “Hurston moves beyond the binary of male/female, establishes a feminine sense of place apart from masculine social place, yet within it” (101). This leads us back to his statement made at the beginning of his book according to which one of his objectives was to expand and negotiate Barbara Johnson’s tetrapolar model. We can unreservedly maintain that Gaál-Szabó achieved his purpose. The reader gains a thorough insight into Hurston’s writing strategy in her innovative narrative that is sternly determined by her expertise in the field of anthropology on the one hand, and by her “rejection of fixity” (116), thus her belief in multifarious spatial liminality/ hybridity on the other hand.

Gaál-Szabó’s theoretically informed framework is compelling, even though it sometimes requires a special kind of reader, at home in his wide field of references. Happily, his close and discriminating readings return us to Zora Neale Hurston’s texts themselves, and are both new and suggestive in the growing field of Hurston scholarship.