

Egyetemi doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei

The Interplay of Space and Place: Zora Neale Hurston's Cultural Spaces

Szabó Péter

Témavezető: Dr. Abádi Nagy Zoltán



DEBRECENI EGYETEM
Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola
Angol-amerikai Program
Debrecen, 2009.

1. Aim of Study

The dissertation investigates African American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston's cultural space. More specifically, different aspects of the interplay of space and place are studied in two of her novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). The need for authentication perceptible in the African American community in search for an African American literary tradition and cultural identity is responsible for the renewed interest in the long-forgotten Hurston—a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance and a forebear of African American women writers. Besides representing the peak of her art as a novelist, the novels under discussion present fine examples of her philosophy of culture, conceptions of space, and ways of place-construction.

The richness and vitality of her novels denote a particular view of culture and an African American way of authentication that enable her to construct a fulfilling cultural universe for the individual, with/despite inbuilt tensions. The cultural space Hurston establishes is embedded in an African American cultural context associated with the South; at the same time, however, her cultural space proves to be diverse, due to inward heterogeneity and external contexts (e.g., a white socio-cultural frame).

In the two novels Hurston's different spatial paradigms unfold. I have chosen paradigms that are, perhaps, the most relevant and characteristic ones and play a singular role in revealing Hurston's cultural space: I therefore deal with her Modernist nonplaces, which signify her cultural space especially in relation to the Harlem Renaissance, her religio-cultural space, which denotes unique African American cultural/cosmological thinking; as well as her gendered space, in which her female protagonists reassert their subjectivities despite a panoptic socio-spatial context.

On the basis of the overlapping spaces, it is my aim to identify the practical implementation of Hurston's cultural philosophy in her two novels from a cultural-spatial point-of-view. Her space contains and builds upon African American artifacts in a playful, unfixed manner, and this technique pertains to including African American methodology of cultural inclusion. In this way, Hurston consciously employs a technique to revitalize her fictional subjects by recontextualizing and embedding them in an authentic cultural space rooted in African American cosmology and folk culture. In particular, I examine Hurston's strategy of place-construction with view of its instrumentality in subjectivation and cultural immersion of her protagonists.

2. Methodology

In a close reading of Hurston's novels, I primarily rely on theories of space and place. My method thus incorporates the phenomenological approach represented by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, and Edward S. Casey; as well as Post-Marxist views of space and place as understood by Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja, and David Harvey. In particular, I consider Casey's conception of inhabiting place, Foucault's *heterotopia*, and Lefebvre's social production of space. To establish a correlation between the seemingly opposing theoretical schools, I employ theories, culminating in Michel De Certeau's *walking practices* and Homi Bhabha's *thirding/hybridizing*; which reevaluate the contradictions between these schools.

As Hurston is both a womanist African American writer and a well-recognized anthropologist, the dissertation draws heavily on interdisciplinary scholarship, following the foci of the individual chapters.

In delineating Hurston's concept of cultural space, I point out her ultimate approach to African American culture: the metaphorical employment of an anthropological spy-glass,

which enables her to gain insight into a community by becoming a member, while, simultaneously, maintaining the critical distance necessary for research. Her blending culture with fiction renders necessary the inclusion of Doris Bachmann-Medick's account of the anthropological turn in literature as well as Janet Tallman's interpretation of the ethnographic novel to show Hurston's strategy of writing from within, in order to present her novels as ethnographic texts. Hurston's novels can thus be seen as examples of African American cultural performance. To prove my point, I make extensive use of African American scholarship, e.g., Hurston's *trickster performance* posited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston A. Baker's concepts of *blues matrix* and *underground performance*. With the help of their theories, it can be validated that Hurston's hybrid subjects are embedded in a cultural context and that Hurston's cultural space has an inherently intracommunal aspect. The latter appears in Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman's theorizing as a *call-and-response* communicational pattern, also depicting a collectivist worldview. In Hurston's case this means that improvisational conduct is performative action, showing individual striving to strengthen the core of the African American community.

In this line of analysis, I also show the essential strategies of African American spatial thinking on the basis of Hurston's own anthropological research, Robert B. Stepto's concepts of *ascent* and *immersion* narratives, as well as Edward M. Pavlic's definition of *aboveground* and *underground* performance. In Hurston's two novels the horizontal mobility posited by Stepto and the verticality of underground performances in Pavlic's view, as well as the dynamics of place-construction witnessed by Hurston in the African American community confirm subjectivity in place-making in any of her inverted places—be it nonplace, sacred place, or feminine place.

Hurston's places can be described in terms of transience as well as they have precipitation-like character—anthropological categories that can be covered by Marc Augé's

concept of *nonplace* and Nancy D. Munn's *negative space*. Much as these terms may appear contradictory, they prove very useful in considering Hurston's cultural space and her places in relation to the Harlem Renaissance. Her cultural space embraces the South, which then constitutes a black nonplace in contrast to the Modernist cultural space of the Harlem Renaissance. I also make use of Lynda Marion Hill's terms of *imitation* and *masking*, which depict Hurston's trickster strategy, in order to show that the apparent rigidity (inauthenticity) of her space is a cultural strategy to veil over authentic cultural performances. Her places form thus nonplaces from the point-of-view of the mainstream spatiality for their unintelligibility through their antisocial character in Augé's sense. As a Modernist nonplace, her cultural universe can then be seen as hybridized space within the framework of Black Modernism.

Liminality plays an important part in Hurston's religio-cultural space as it parallels an understanding of African American life in terms of rituals. Places of the margin postulate a peripherized, individual consciousness—but always-already contextualized in a broader socio-cultural space. Victor Turner's theory of *liminality* offers an excellent tool to unfold Hurston's *black sacred cosmos* (a term by Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya to refer to African American religiosity). Hurston's religio-cultural space is structured around places of margin, which are ambiguous for blending Christian and voodoo beliefs and for being liminoid—hybrid since Hurston's characters negotiate their identity there and emerge as members of the African American community after an initiation rite. Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred also facilitates an understanding of interstitial status instrumental in cultural immersion in Hurston's cultural space.

An examination of Hurston's gendered space renders the inclusion of feminist thought and feminist geography necessary. In line of the theoretical introduction, my investigation is twofold: on the one hand, I lay out the normative and hegemonic aspects of gendered space

that I call *transparent space*—a label I borrow from the feminist geographer Gillian Rose. In the feminist discourse of space, transparent space denotes masculine space, which is conceptualized as homogeneous and uncontested, but it also represents the social construction of masculinity, as I point out relying on Pierre Bourdieu's and Miklós Hadas's conceptualization of masculinity. In gendered space the female body is regulated in inflexible places, where, under the male gaze, it becomes immobile. Susan Bordo's *intelligible body* and Foucault's *docile body* are helpful concepts in laying out gendered socialization in Hurston's novels. For Hurston's women transparent masculine space effects exclusion, surveillance, and situatedness. In mapping Hurston's female social space, I rely on Judith Butler's theory and African American (feminist) thinkers to show the effect of masculine social space in women: gender conceptions become self-perpetuating and the female community a dispositif to regulate women.

On the other hand, Hurston's female characters perform their subjectivities, enact them in their bodies, as well as inscribe and reinscribe space socially and individually, proving an always-already presence of the subject despite a panoptic context. I employ propositions of generative anthropology regarding *performatism* (e.g., by Raoul Eshelman and Eric Gans), Theresa de Lauretis's concept of *space-off*, Rosi Bradiotti's theory of the *nomad*, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, as well as views of African American feminist thinkers (e.g., *unsilencing* of Rachel DuPlessis and *talking back* of bell hooks) to show the Hurstonian female subject's capability and strategy of transgressing and using space for her own benefit. My objective is to validate the autonomous subjectivity of and the dynamic place-construction by Hurston's female protagonists.

3. Major Findings

I have set the context of the present research by delineating two seemingly mutually exclusive understandings of space: phenomenological place-construction and Post-Marxist production of space. According to the former, the subjective self is the active agent to establish space and places. It is mainly the habitus (based on past experiences) of the subject that influences the inhabiting of a place by a subject. The embodied subject enlivens and organizes space around him/herself. Conversely, in Post-Marxist thought the subject is decentered and embedded in a spatial context in which power discourses condition the establishment of the places by the subject; subjects are positioned in places in the same way. Thus places of a social space prove to be dispositifs facilitating the spatial indoctrination and socialization into identity of the Post-Marxian subject.

I have offered a more accommodating (less confrontational) theoretical framework—though not as a synthesis of the two theoretical paradigms—building on the propositions of both schools. Much as the subject encounters social space as a sociopolitical fixity, s/he manages to find ways of boundary crossing via heterotopous juxtaposition and hybridization. These spatial practices entail not only the construction of places apart from places of social space—that is, elsewhere—but also the reworking of previously indoctrinating places. Relying on the theories of Bhabha and Soja, I have referred to the activity of the subject as *thirthing*—a praxis reinscribing and restructuring space. Within the given sociospatial fixity, thirthing enables refusal of categorization and grants the subject a means to construct his/her places creatively—a testimony of subjectivity.

Relying on theories of space and place outlined above, I have argued and documented with textual evidence that, in her two most renowned novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston constructs a cultural space that can be best conceptualized

in the light of her cultural philosophy, which relies on the anthropologist's knowledge of African American culture and her experience of the American (racial and gender) matrix.

Hurston's strategy builds on her knowledge of African American cultural performances and places. She revitalizes cultural performances such as tactics of insiderness, call-and-response, or tricksterism in order to portray the inherent nature of the African American community, as manifested in the relationship between the individual and community. The apparent ambivalence shows attachment to, and interdependence with, the African American community, as well as distancing from it, which can be taken as an act of subjectivation within it. Hurston's fiction thus fulfills the individual's quest both in opposition and in relation to the community. Individual conduct reinforces the African American cultural core—hence necessarily a centripetal performance—instead of transgressing it, and the centre, anticipating apparently dissenting action, reacts to it in a call-and-response communicational pattern. The inherently intracommunal pattern grants Hurston a multidimensional approach to African American culture since improvisation facilitates pluralism and heteronomy within the cultural framework. In Hurston's cultural/cosmological space the construction of places shows similar characteristics: she hybridizes places by inverting them to express the subjectivity of her characters. The resulting lack of fixity is evidence of cultural immersion and manifestation of underground performance in Baker's sense as well as trickster performance in Gates's.

Her writing strategy displays her cultural self. Blending anthropology and literature, she introduces in her writing a constant movement in and out of the paradigms of literature and anthropology, so much so that her novels can be read at times as ethnography with the narrator as a participant observer. In Hurston's cultural philosophy, her writing becomes the disclosure of an authentic cultural space. Despite critical accusations of inauthenticity, Hurston performs an African American cultural act conceptualized as *masking*—an African

American reassertion of culture. Her masking strategy, for which her cultural space has been at times dismissed as static, is clearly a sign of her cultural approach to literature, that is, writing from within; not to conceal, but to disclose a world in which heterogeneity establishes cultural variety and dynamism. In this line of thought, it can be explained why Hurston was such a controversial figure of her age. She resisted categorization in all aspects of her life, including her writing.

The playfulness implied by her cultural understanding precipitates in her place construction. Just as African American cultural performance is to be understood in the matrix of community and self, individual place-making exists also within the context of a sociocultural space—a transparent space which often proves to be indoctrinating, presenting a normative environment with explicit and implicit power-mechanisms, and influences individual place construction. Place-making, however, emerges as a phenomenological entity, intrinsic in subjectivation. In this binary, the question presents itself how.

In Hurston's case, it can rightly be argued that the two constraints, culture (not primarily race) and gender—which justify the examination of an African American cultural and gendered space in Hurston's novels—provide two overlapping spaces to specify different aspects of the same cultural space. In negotiating a place/identity in these spaces, Hurston proceeds with the help of strategies informed by trickster energies to establish an integrated cultural space and network of places, which are simultaneously both encultured (in the sense they represent an African American cultural space) and engendered.

Hurston's rejection of fixity is foregrounded in the nature of her places, both regarding their positioning and their inner structure. I have employed the terms *thirdspace* (Bhabha) and *thirthing* (Soja) to identify Hurston's hybridization of place. The strategy implied by these terms pervades all aspects of her cultural space. She turns gendered places into *space-off* to indicate a position of difference underlining the subjectivity of her female characters,

transforms African American places into *nonplace* to show the distanced, yet mainstream position of her individuals in relation to African American culture (more specifically, the Harlem Renaissance); and she uses liminal places in her religio-cultural space to allow her subjects an individual (but culturally conditioned) encounter with the numinous.

Thirling suggests that the place established in this way steps out of a narrowing dialectics designating an opposition between transparent space and individual place construction. It does not denote harsh rejection of a social space, the rejection of its places, nor does it mean a pervasive negation of its values. Much rather, one can talk about constituting difference on another level, whereby props (such as place) and strategies (e.g., power mechanisms) of the respective social space are built upon or incorporated into a different, subjective spatiality. This does not imply a synthesis of spaces, but the reinscription of space within that particular social space.

Hurston's employment of a thirling strategy, however, is not simply the reinscription of a sociocultural space. Her intention is to establish an integrated cultural space that allows the African American individual to become an agent within his/her culture. Places of thirling are always related to African American culture; even if located in the in-between, they remain embedded inherently in the sociocultural space Hurston seemingly criticizes. Thirling, therefore, can be identified as a means of cultural inclusion and the instrument of cultural emergence in Hurston's philosophy.

The notion of cultural emergence is most motivated in her religio-cultural space, in which Hurston's main characters, John in *Jonah's* and Janie in *Their Eyes* go to liminal places, where their subjectivation is aided in the axis mundi, as well as they obtain subjectivity at liminal places that connect them intrinsically to the African American tradition via an initiation rite. These places partake in a black sacred cosmos (see Lincoln and Mamiya)

informed by African American cosmology and the ritual movement of the African American subject to liminal places.

Hurston's nonplaces and space-offs prove vital in her cultural space since they serve as aids of subjectivation and become communicational interfaces with a motivated African American cultural context. On the one hand, these places present fissures in hegemonic discourses of African American culture and gender, as they project the possibility of agency and the establishment of alternative spatialities; on the other hand, they serve as individual statements as against the mainstream cultural discourse of the Harlem Renaissance and the gender discourse of transparent social space.

Hurston's cultural space proves dynamic despite apparent rigidity. The interplay of space and place dramatizes interaction between them in a way that ensures justification of places regarding the different aspects of social space. Hurston conceptualizes their relation as interrelation and not as superimposition of space over place. The ultimately African American pattern follows the traditional call-and-response dialogicity, whereby places, supposedly of the margin, are complementary categories that embody necessary tethering of the African American cultural core.

4. Related Publications

a. Book Chapter

“Női helyek—férfi terek Zora Neale Hurston *Their Eyes Were Watching God* című regényében.” *A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum*. Orbis Litteratum. Ed. Séllei Nóra. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi, 2007. 141-57.

b. Journal Essays

“Cultural Space as a Modernist Non-Place in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.” *Gender Studies* 1.7 (2008): 17-26.

“Feminine Social Space in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.” *Gender Studies* 1.5 (2006): 37-49.

“Motherwit in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston.” *HUSSE Papers* (2002): 95-109.

“The Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston’s Imaginative Space.” *British and American Studies* (2004): 187-97.

c. Electronic Journal

“Transparent Space and the Production of the Female Body in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.” *Americana* 3.1 (Spring 2007).
<<http://americanajournal.hu/vol3no1/gaal-szabo>>.