

## A New Perspective on Zora Neale Hurston

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Gaál-Szabó, Péter. *“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.

Going against traditional literary analyses Péter Gaál-Szabó in his engaging new book, *“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*, introduces the reader to the various ways space and place interact in Hurston’s novels, and discusses different paradigms that bring about Hurston’s unique cultural space: her Modernist “nonplaces,” her religio-cultural space, as well as her gendered space. In a very informative and refreshing style Gaál-Szabó offers new perspectives and contexts for understanding Hurston’s blending culture and fiction, while attempts to map the contributions to the spatial discourse of two seemingly opposing schools of thought. The author 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.

A detailed introduction outlines the key themes and theoretical premises of the book’s subsequent chapters, proposing an in-depth analysis of Hurston two major novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Gaál-Szabó claims that Hurston’s cultural space is embedded in an African American cultural context associated with the South, and, at the same time, it proves to be diverse, due to “inward heterogeneity and external contexts” (10). On the basis of the overlapping spaces the author aims to identify Hurston’s strategies of including her cultural philosophies in the aforementioned novels, as well as her ways of place-construction as connected to her protagonists’ subjectivation and cultural immersion.

In the first chapter the author explains his use of the terms “place” and “space,” and attempts to bring together two seemingly mutually exclusive understandings of space: phenomenological place-construction and Post-Marxist space production. According to the former, the subjective self creates and organizes space around him/herself, thus the human subject becomes the center of place-construction. “The subject absorbs place through habitus-directed bodily activity, in other words, by transforming place to the subject’s own likeness. Places become dwelling-places, places of habitation” (Gaál-Szabó 19). In Post-Marxist thought the subject is decentered and contained in a space in which a superimposed power structure conditions the establishment of places by the subject. In short, the subject is produced by space. In search for a balanced approach the author demonstrates that thinkers representing one school do not necessarily exclude ideas of the other. Gaál-Szabó manages to bring these two paradigms together in a more accommodating theoretical framework without

falling prey to the dangers of creating a synthesis of the two, and claims that human subjects are able to hybridize space, that is, their creative activities of reinscribing and restructuring space can be understood as *thirthing* (after Homi Bhabha's and Edward W. Soja's theories); a practice extremely important in understanding Hurston's cultural space.

In the second chapter, after presenting the major trends of Hurston scholarship, that is, the popular emphasis on her vernacular use in terms of African American cultural phenomena ("Signifying Monkey" and blues patterns as exemplified by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker), Gaál-Szabó reflects upon the complexity and richness of Hurston's writing strategy as determined by the "spy-glass of Anthropology." Such an approach—blending anthropology and fiction—enables Hurston to acquire both an outsider and an insider view in the African American community at the same time. Such in-betweenness provides an understanding of a hybrid subject embedded in an African-American cultural context. The cultural space that shapes up here reflects Hurston's tricksterism, that is, revitalizing African American hybridizing strategy, thereby refusing fixity. Discussing blues patterns in *Their Eyes*, the author finds that "the trickster quality of blues performance suggests that the trickster is not only an inherent cultural recuperation, [...] but also a political act in the production matrix of a political framework" (42), therefore, blues performers can be seen as actors in opposition with power structures. Even the organizing principles of the African American space suggest difference. Angularity as well as asymmetry serve to emphasize the expression of African American self and a "desire to break away from the politico-spatial setting in the particular time-space compression" (44). The interdependence of individual and group has an utmost importance: apparently Hurston's characters are outsiders, but in reality, their—often improvisational—performative actions draw attention to their belonging to a community. Hurston's multifacial characters release trickster energies, and become hybrid characters (as in the case of Janie who constantly transforms her own place, thus is engaged in the practice of thirthing).

The third chapter offers an intriguing analysis of the use of nonplaces in *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's* and sheds light on Hurston's position in the Harlem Renaissance as equally distanced and inclusive. In his discussion of nonplaces, Gaál-Szabó points out the two meanings of the concept (51): as representing characteristic places of (super)modernity that are detached from historicity due to their nature as places in transition (Marc Augé) and are open to social activity, and representing negative space, that is, racist tactics of place production (Nancy D. Munn), implying the existence of a closed and intact place. According to the author, Hurston's nonplace hybridizes both concepts, thus generating a Modernist nonplace, so that her hybridized space can be seen "within the framework of Black Modernism" (52). Therefore, concrete text analysis of *Jonah's* and *Their Eyes* in the second subchapter presents nonplaces as positive and individualizing: John keeps running away from something somewhere to elsewhere, as well as Janie's being on the road can be interpreted as a way of finding herself, breaking away from masculine social space. Leaving fixed spaces introduces the idea of freedom in both novels; and various places, such as the muck in *Their Eyes* come to represent a democratic social space based on nonhierarchical human relations. This is how nonplaces become hybrid places that are always ready for inscription.

Hurston consciously creates her cultural space in opposition to white and black cultural space while never deconstructing a social setting, but heavily emphasizing it. She even questions Black Modernism via this approach, especially through inverting the Great Migration in her novels, redirecting it toward the South, as well as depicting it with great irony. As far as the depiction of the Negro-stereotype is concerned, she also goes against the Richard Wright-like modernism, that of liberating the Negro from the traditional image of being uncivilized and primitive. Her character portrayal—as Gaál-Szabó points out—is rather authentic since it is grounded in her professional anthropological point of view. The trickster energy of her novels, itself a Modernist trait, provides an excellent framework for imitation and masking. As Gaál-Szabó argues, “masking her cultural space as a static world that seems to reinforce racial stereotypes carries on the tradition of disguised resistance to racialist conceptualizations of the African American self” (54), and her “mimicry can than be explained as programmatic inauthenticity that veils over authentic cultural performances” (55).

The next chapter is devoted to the investigation of liminal places in Hurston’s religio-cultural spaces. Sacred places are both similar to and different from nonplaces. Gaál-Szabó sheds light on how Hurston creates her own religio-cultural space by blending in her cosmological framework official Christian elements and African-American folk traditions, recalling in this way Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s concept of “black sacred cosmos.” According to Gaál-Szabó, Hurston’s liminal places often stand for non-Christian (hoodoo/voodoo) places, as well as places of conversion. “[F]olk religious aspects denote liminal places as structural units within the black sacred cosmos” (66). Such places, where everyday life is interwoven with African religiosity, appear in *Their Eyes* and in *Jonah’s* quite frequently. Both John’s and Janie’s journeys are structured around places of margin (liminal places), and emersion from these often bears a significant meaning (for example, John’s childhood hide-and-seek games foreshadow his sexual promiscuity). Places of official religion and of ritual practices are always juxtaposed—as one can see in the analysis of the big white church and the conjure man’s hut in *Jonah’s*—while the revival meetings can be interpreted as third spaces that allow the subject to have an encounter with the numinous. Besides denoting an encounter with the divine, Hurston’s sacred spaces are inextricably connected to social life practices. The tie-camp experience triggers the formation of cultural and masculine identity, hence a place of initiation. In *Their Eyes* Janie also goes through a process of initiation that is connected to two special places: the pear tree and the hurricane. The tree is linked to Voodoo practices and signifies a transformative power inherent in African-Americans. As Gaál-Szabó contends “Hurston blurs a univocal understanding of the tree as Christian symbol by substituting apples with pears and inverting the outcome of the encounter with the tree” (73). The author also claims that *Their Eyes* can be seen as an initiation narrative “in which the final scene of the muck represents the ultimate liminal place of simultaneous purification and becoming” (75). Moreover, in the hurricane scene Janie encounters a certain “Jobian cosmological experience” (77), a close experience of the divine, which also marks the end of a coming of age process: Janie’s individuation is completed.

In the last two chapters Gaál-Szabó discusses Hurston’s gendered space, in which female places, and thus the female body, are created and maintained by masculine power systems.

Hurston's women are ascribed to inflexible places (the realm of the private—that is, marginalized, alienated—such as kitchens, bedrooms, back yards), and when they are outside the home, they become placeless nomads. Making use of feminist criticism the author states that Hurston's gendered space is transparent (a homogeneous and uncontested masculine space), in which the female subject seems to be trapped, always being in opposition with the hegemonic male space. Gaál-Szabó asserts that the relationship between the female and male spaces is not based on mutuality or reciprocity, rather, “as a subspace, female transparency is complementary” (95). Female communal spaces are, in fact, ritual spaces constructed by birth as well as death traditions in both novels (see the analysis of the transparent female spaces in childhood both in *Jonah's* and in *Their Eyes*). Therefore, the final question the author poses is whether Hurston's female subject is able to create her individual places as well as a specific female social space. According to Gaál-Szabó, Hurston's female subjects are engaged in a certain place construction, thus emphasizing their subjectivity, in two ways: by reinscribing space (transforming male social space into their own spaces) and by hybridizing spaces, that is, by establishing what Teresa De Lauretis calls “space off.” Metaphors such as the tree or the road signify for Hurston the opportunity of self-fulfillment. The open space of the roads also symbolizes a certain abandoning of the social in favor of the individual; thereby, being on the road becomes “a metaphor of a particular nomadism in the search of self and place embedded in a region of cultural space” (110).

Gaál-Szabó's book is primarily recommended for scholars as well as students interested especially in Hurston's oeuvre. “*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* also provides useful endnotes as well as a select bibliography. All in all, extensively researched and lucidly written, Gaál-Szabó's thorough-going interpretation successfully complements the reader's understanding of Hurston's spatial imagination, never leaving the connections between Hurston's key themes out of sight, while combining theoretical concepts and approaches creatively.