

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. Debrecener Studien zur Literatur 16. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011. 134 pages.

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In the literature survey seminars I teach, the topic of canon formation will occasionally arise, with not a few students aghast at the idea that race or culture could be a factor in a text’s inclusion on reading lists. Certainly, some will inevitably remark, good writing is good writing and the “value” of a text lies exactly therein; the notion of an author’s race, background, sexual orientation, or whatever affecting the text’s formation is sheer nonsense for them. Listening to such remarks, it seems as if not much had happened critically since the hey-day of New Criticism some sixty to seventy years ago. It is these students I thought of while reading the introduction to Peter Gaál-Szabó’s book and how effectively his monograph could address their concerns about the “value” of a text.

Of course, undergraduate students are not the intended audience for this book. Written originally as a PhD dissertation, *‘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* examines spatial paradigms in Hurston’s two best-known works and how Hurston uses cultural space to establish female subjectivity, engaging along the way concepts and language that many undergraduates would find difficult to digest. For the academic reader, however, the book presents an intriguing study of how theory can be used to view an old text through a new prism.

The opening chapter provides the theoretical framework, reviewing two opposing trends in literary theory regarding space and place: the phenomenological approach that places the human subject at the centre of place-construction and the post-Marxist view that understands the subject as constructed by space and place. The tour begins with Heidegger, continuing on to include Bachelard, Casey, Foucault, Lefebvre, among others, before settling on a compromise between the two poles, a hybridization of space and place that allows for some degree of human influence in the creation of subjectivity.

This emphasis on hybridization and blending continues throughout the remaining five chapters and indeed influences the overall approach the book takes in applying concepts of space and place to analyze Hurston’s works. The following chapter moves on to look at representations of cultural space in the two works and how she draws on African American ideas about spatiality; the next chapter deals with black modernism and the concept of non-space, while the last three chapters focus on the somewhat more traditional themes of African American spirituality, gender, and feminism

in Hurston's writing. The multiple perspectives mirror the approaches taken when Hurston was rediscovered by academics in the 1970s and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was adopted into the canon of African American literature, for it was not alone black feminists, cultural anthropologists, or the Black Arts Movement who brought about Hurston's rehabilitation.

While the multiple perspectives allow for a multifaceted understanding of Hurston's novels, an even more effective use of blending lies inside the individual approaches themselves. Gaál-Szabó does not adhere to rigid categories of any kind and stresses crossing borders and the bringing together of different spheres. This is particularly evident when discussing the "black sacred cosmos," and he shows how black folk religion and Christianity occupy different spaces, both liminal in relation to white society and the African American social sphere, yet both "realms shap[ing] an integrated whole" (87). Much of this is believably traced back to Hurston's background in anthropology, while examples from the text underscore this idea. Similarly, Hurston's cultural spaces are shown to be based on a hybridization of non-places. Indeed, the controversial role Hurston played in the Harlem Renaissance—was she selling out to white sponsors in the end?—is explained as a result of masking and mimicry, combining "programmatic inauthenticity that veils over authentic cultural performances" (71).

Of course, there are limits to the blending one can do, and when Gaál-Szabó encounters these, such as in the discussion of the hierarchies of gendered space, he examines carefully how the two spheres—male and female—interact with one another. Clearly, both Janie in *Their Eyes* and Lucy in *Jonah's* are limited at points by male space in their agency, but it is pointed out how they can carve out a social space for themselves. Gaál-Szabó demonstrates how this occurs through a process of hybridization, using Edward Soja's concept of thirding, in which space is deconstructed and reconstituted with a meaning that is both new and the same. Janie, for example, is able to appropriate male space (playing checkers or shooting) and reinscribe it for her own purposes.

As with all books, there are a few areas where one wishes for a larger discussion. One such point is the treatment of mother wit. While defined in an African American cultural context, a clearer separation of its meaning for white and black American cultures would have been useful. The perhaps too brief definition is not sufficient for understanding precisely how it applies to the hurricane scene in *Their Eyes*, in particular because the space in which it occurs, the muck, represents one of the key African American cultural spaces in the novel. Fortunately, the ensuing, as well as an earlier discussion of the hurricane's meaning—it is seen in an intriguing analysis as a religious symbol—overshadow the shortcomings with mother wit.

In general, Peter Gaál-Szabó's arguments for understanding Hurston's use of cultural space as an expression of her cultural philosophy gain strength as the book develops. While my undergraduates less keen on theory would find the first chapter tough going, their understanding of how culture can appear in a literary text would quickly find new horizons thereafter. Early on, race is subsumed by culture and one can very quickly visualize through Hurston's use of space and place—the muck, porches, roads, kitchens, bedrooms, barbeques, churches, courthouses—the creation of a cultural arena, both public and private. Indeed, replacing race with culture is certainly the key to getting students to recognize how an author's life experiences can be reflected in a text,

but looking at how and where a writer places characters, events, and dialogues provides easier access to understanding how cultural processes work.

In the end, one may not come away with radically new interpretations of either of Hurston's works: the pear tree remains the central locale of Janie's personal dreaming and the muck a vision of how the African American community could function. But the application of comparatively new theoretical approaches toward space and place in literature, and then employing these ideas to study an individual author's creation of a culture geography make this a thought-provoking book. Peter Gaál-Szabó enlarges one's understanding of how cultural spaces can be created and one takes away a different and multi-varied approach to reading these two African American novels.