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## **The Politics of Location: Jessie Redmon Fauset’s “The Sleeper Wakes”**

Professor Marinovich’s doctoral dissertation defense in Eötvös Loránd University’s Magisterial Council Room in Pesti Barnabás street in 1992 was my formative experience and initiation into academic subtleties that only a woman of her stature could exhibit. Her feminist work on the female fantastic and science fiction (to my best knowledge, the first Ph.D. dissertation in Hungary that had the courage and commitment to enlarge on feminist matters) met with the arrogance and ignorance of most of her doctoral committee members, yet Professor Marinovich coped with animosity and resistance by exemplary grace and scholarly wisdom. Apart from her way of dealing with her opponents, when I look back on it, her dissertation appears to be a great source of inspiration for my own research, opening new vistas of other spaces “for feminist envisionings by challenging the masculine “transparent” space to imagine the “possibility of different spaces being known by other subjects” (Rose 40).

The objective of my contribution, paying tribute to Dr Marinovich’s formative presence in my personal and scholarly life, is to pick up her idea of “feminine spaces,” this time not related to the female fantastic but to an early modernist short story by African American woman writer Jessie Redmon Fauset.<sup>1</sup> Her short story, “The Sleeper Wakes” (first published in

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<sup>1</sup> African American woman writer, editor, and teacher, Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961) was instrumental in revising the “destiny” of black Americans, women and men in modernity, by setting a personal example as well as re-orchestrating liberatory discourses of African Americans. As her biographer, Carolyn Wedin Sylvander writes, she was unique in “breaking habits of expectations not only in pursuing a college degree but in attaining financial and personal independence in the professional world” (33). She edited the official mouthpiece of NAACP, the *Crisis* (in Du Bois’s frequent absence when he was committed elsewhere) and the *Brownie’s Book* (a magazine for black children), as well as wrote short stories and novels (*There Is Confusion*, 1924; *Plum Bun*, 1929, *The Chinaberry Tree*, 1931; *Comedy: American Style*, 1933). Her narratives, short and long, boldly went against the grain, resisting the allure of the black primitive exotic and challenging the contemporary fad with folk representations of African American life. In her work, she sought to explore a new black middle-class in the ascendant with a special regard to black women, whose changing identity she saw constrained by the racist and masculinist limitations imposed on them (Federmayer

*Crisis*, in 1920) easily yields itself to an interpretation of female *Bildung* or story of development (one of Sári's favorite research topics) on which I wish to enlarge, relying on the politics of space, a concept Sári also probed in her dissertation. My main concern is to render the significance of distinct locations that engender and racialize subjectivities in 1920s America by way of reading the female protagonist, young Amy's development, through repeated relocations that involve her flirting with men as well as the construction of feminine identities, all this eventually helping her embody the person she wants to be in a distinct space she longs for.

Places, spaces, geographic and cultural, have always been integral to the shaping of a great variety of African American cultural identities. Indeed, black American history has conspicuously been inflected by memories and "rememories" of the Africans' initial displacement from their homeland, relocation to the Americas, and their dreams of finding freedom and home in the north (following the North Star, the emblem of liberatory reorientation in slave narratives). The post-slavery history of African Americans likewise follows an itinerary inscribed by geographical places and cultural spaces affecting the lives of black Americans. Although their moves curtailed by the racialized cultural geography of racist America, black Americans also sought to negotiate contact zones, traveled back and forth in the Black Atlantic,<sup>2</sup> and migrated to urban centers to seek racial integration and black citizenship.

Black woman writers as well as feminist scholars availed themselves of the conceptualizations and representations of place and space<sup>3</sup>, such as Teresa de Lauretis (experimenting with the implications of women's social and cultural marginality and discursive potentials of "space off" and "elsewhere" in *Technologies of Gender*), radical women of color (ironically reinscribing women's traditional confinements, the "kitchen" in the name of their feminist press, Kitchen Table), or Toni Morrison (brooding on the liberatory potentials of urban spaces or the lack thereof for black people in "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction").

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4). Fauset's contemporary gaining in stature, as Jacquelyn Y. McLendon states, evidences struggles for canonical debates: "[A]lthough her work has been caught in the crossfire of the Black Aesthetic debate then and now, current scholars are beginning to give her the attention and recognition she so richly deserves" (270).

<sup>2</sup> As Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*, constructions of African American culture and identity have been constituted by geographical mobility and cultural dynamics of a transcontinental dimension rather than by nationalistic rootedness and essentialist orientations.

<sup>3</sup> For "spacecritics," see "Theory and Space: Space and Woman", an early summary by Ruth Salvaggio.

In contrast to Toni Morrison's aforementioned essay holding that African American writers are traditionally ambivalent about the emancipatory implications of the city – their characters favoring it only as “the village within it: the neighborhoods and the population of those neighborhoods” (37) – Jessie Redmon Fauset's female protagonist seems to be a radical migrant, a nomadic subject-to-be, zooming from place to place, apparently untroubled by the (un)familiarity of neighborhoods.

From the story's start, 17-year old Amy is rendered as potentially belonging to several locations by reason of her skin color and beauty, as well as her ambition to freely transgress policed social and cultural boundaries. Fauset's narrative interrogates the normative boundaries of her young female protagonist's racial and gender identity, challenging constructions of white and black femininity as coherent referents of corporeality, the “natural” domain of gender and race. With regard to this trajectory of the narrative to disassemble normative cultural discourses (even if apparently providing a softer version of it), Fauset's “The Sleeper Wakes” can well be regarded as a significant prefiguration of Toni Morrison's “Recitatif” (1983) which rearticulates two young women's (Twyla's and Roberta's) subjectivity in six locations as inflected by race, class and place in a radically puzzling way.

Fauset's female protagonist is an apparently free-wheeling character who takes delight in moving from place to place, trying her luck in New Jersey, New York City, Richmond, Virginia, then in New Rochelle, New Jersey, and Trenton, New Jersey again. In the first half of the narrative Amy is rendered as a young woman adamant about opening up clearings – to paraphrase Michel de Certeau – that would allow “a certain play within a system of defined places” (255). In order for her to make the world habitable beyond the confines of the respectable black home in Trenton she flees, Amy seeks to capitalize on her feminine resources, on the approving glances of men and women who are attracted to her youthful radiance. Her narcissistic pleasure is enhanced not only by mirrors she looks in but by the movie stars she watches to interrogate the productive possibilities of her evolving subjectivity.

Not only “always living in some sort of story” (2) but also using her mind to utilize the emancipatory possibilities of those stories, her life seems to be equally inspired by gendered discourses of the “heart” and the “mind.” The feminine discourse of sentimental dreams (heart) and the masculine or rational discourse of ambition (mind) are strategically connected to gender difference in patriarchy that Amy seeks to change into a habitable space. No matter how carried away by fairy tale romances in nickelodeons, Amy is always ready to strike up rational bargains to advance

her life, that is, to move from place to place, chasing apparently self-enhancing opportunities, as if pursuing the American dream in her own assertive (and feminine) way within a heterosexual matrix. Her bargains eventually aim at an alternative life style with an alternative family in geographical and cultural spaces that her black (foster) family would refuse to enter. Amy chooses Zora, the cynical white upper-class divorcée in an upscale New York City apartment to replace her loving foster-mother, black Mrs. Boldin in Trenton, New Jersey, and marries the middle-aged white Southerner, Stuart Wynne of Richmond, Virginia. Amy obviously seeks to negotiate contact zones where white patriarchal supremacy and her dreams of a more liberated multiracial femininity can comfortably be aligned.

Fauset's narrative, however, changes this itinerary of negotiations into a nightmare from which the heroine (called "the sleeper" in the title) is to wake. Paradoxically, this nightmare turns out to be the rock bottom reality of American life in the first quarter of the twentieth-century. Amy's collision with Stuart over a humiliated black servant triggers her awakening to the power dynamics of white supremacist hegemony when Stuart crushes her subjectivity, abjecting her as a woman of African ancestry. This scene of recognition is a turning-point in the story and is highlighted thus by the structuration of the narrative: it gives the first obvious clues both to the female protagonist and to the reader about the normative operation of white supremacy bolstered by the apparently invincible power of whiteness and masculinity.

If we re-read Amy's itinerary from this climactic episode, the spatial logic of the American color line, the geographical marker of white supremacy, seems to reinscribe the gender logic of patriarchy that Amy seeks to make habitable. The story-line begins with Amy's polymorphous undecidability as an orphaned child from a racially undefined location, who is placed in a black home where she is loved and cared for. Due to the geographic rationale of the American color line, Amy's racial identity automatically becomes black in Trenton, New Jersey, while living with the educated, lower-middle-class Boldins. Excited by adventures elsewhere rather than her "space off," she runs away from the Boldins and relocates to New York City as a white shop assistant, then becomes the companion of high-middle-class Mrs. Zora Harrison, a white socialite. This upscale urban home gives her temporary security as well as schooling in white womanly tricks. While staying with Zora, Amy has no qualms identifying as white, geared toward upward social mobility through marriage. After winning the elderly Southerner's heart, she moves to Richmond, Virginia as the wealthy white Stuart Wynne's white wife, also enjoying the services provided by her husband's numerous black servants. Though racialized first as white by the

side of a white husband in his Southern mansion, Amy's growing empathy with Steven, the young black servant who reminds her of her step-brother, changes her color in that supremacist white location, from white to "colored" as the show-down scene—presided over by the rabidly racist Stuart—unfolds.

After her separation, she is removed by the estranged husband to a small house in NYC, living the life of a separated wife in a transitional space, redefining herself as the "same" as well as the "different": "She was just the same woman she told herself, she had not changed, she was still beautiful, still charming, still 'different.' Perhaps, that very difference had its being in the fact of her mixed blood" (15). When Stuart's proposition as to her status-change from divorced wife to mistress is met with Amy's uncompromising resistance, in the brutal scene she changes from a "colored" woman to a "nigger," suffering physical as well as verbal abuse at the hands of her former husband (20).

Recovering from the shock, Amy relocates to New Rochelle, New Jersey, of her own will, as "colored": "I am colored, and hereafter I mean to live among my own people" (21). Here she opts to be a working woman, dependent on her own resources and becomes an independent colored woman grateful to black servant Peter, Peter's sister, and Madame, the modiste, for helping her fall back on her feet. The story ends with Amy's imaginary return to her foster-family by writing a letter to the Boldins to initiate reunion, entailing yet another relocation in her life.

This homecoming, however, is not a nativist return to her "race" and "people." Amy's choice of the Boldins in Trenton is not driven by biology or essentialism of any kind. Her choice of the black Boldins of Trenton, New Jersey is based on the choice of the heart and mind revised by experience, her own experience of "space off," marginality, and abjection. Overcoming trauma, crisis, and mourning, she learns to broaden her horizon to recognize the emancipatory possibility or the "elsewhere" within her own black foster family where she seeks to return. The lower-middle-class, educated black Boldins' home looms large as a space of love, trust, and responsibility to Amy. With them, home is not "being fixed into a place" but rather "becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter" (Ahmed 11), where the multiracial female body does matter.

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