CALL FOR PAPERS

Reading the City Conference

12 October, Friday, 2012

English and American Studies Institute, University of Pannonia, Veszprém

The one-day bilingual conference aims to bring together scholars for the first academic conference initiated by the English and American Studies Institute, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, dedicated to the study of space in the humanities in the year that marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens's birth, the writer who immortalized nineteenth-century London by contributing to the invention of urban literature and of the modern urban subject.

The organizers welcome papers on any topic related to what possibilities imaginative writing and critical thinking offer for understanding how the culture of cities and urban consciousness have been shaped in the process of creating urban life.

Possible topics (focusing at choice on any chosen perspective – literature, linguistics, history, communication, education) include, but are not limited to:

- Dickens and the city
- images of London in English and non-English literatures
- cities mythologized
- collective images of the city
- urban space as a domain of culture
- the transformation of geographical space into urban space in cultural representations
- poetic geographies of urban spaces
- hidden cityscapes
- technologies and the city
- the formation of urbanites
- urban behavior
- cosmopolitanism
- negotiating the experience of urban complexities
- urban genres
- transnational metropolises
- ecocritical directions and the city
- class, social mobility, poverty and social inequality in the city
- fantasies of a post-urban world.

The conference welcomes papers from any discipline, a variety of theoretical perspectives, and those which engage with media beyond that of the written text. Submissions are welcome from both research students and academics. Please send a title and 300 word abstract for a 20 minute paper along with your name, affiliation and a 100 word professional biography to editors@topos.uni-pannon.hu by 1st May 2012.

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INVISIBLE SPACES: RALPH ELLISON AND BLUES PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: *The attribute of Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man *postulates the incompatibility of spaces within locality – a threat members of minority groups have been aware of in America. Many architectural forms of social space undergird the political economy of social space in the novel, establishing a panoptic context and excluding heterotopias. Conversely, invisibility represents the possibility of counterspaces – unconceptualisable as they may be by dominant spaces – juxtaposed with transparent social space, or even established within it. In this way, the "black hole" – a term Houston Baker employs – becomes a possibility that nurtures alternative spatialities as a response to, and in this way, negation of social space. Baker's term relies on an anthropological approach to African American culture, which, from the point of view of a study of space, presumes African American strategies of place-construction: it posits trickster tactics to make use of any possibilities, however limited, in transparent space to establish one as the extension of the self. In Bhabha's footsteps, such "thirding" denotes hybridization of space by also inverting oppressive environments for the benefit of self. "Thirding" also envisions the novel's African American protagonist in a context that depicts a clash of spaces – an important notion as it allows for the reinvention of the authentic African American subject and an autonomous African American cultural space.*

Key words: *Blues performance, social space, hybridity, thirding, tricksterism*

Ralph Ellison's landmark novel introduces a protagonist who fares across landscapes without finding a place in them. The journey the invisible man undertakes apparently leads him to a "symbolic North" (1979, p. 167), where, in Robert Stepto's (1979) footsteps, he is supposed to ascend to subjecthood. However, the political economy of social space denies the African American subject place construction along the way and thus excludes the possibility of spatial

juxtaposition. Ascent then can only emerge as an unorthodox maneuver as the potential offered by the invisible space of the underground hole enables counter-hegemonic tactics that prove sufficient to facilitate identity/place construction.

Houston Baker's (1984) conceptualization of the black hole reveals an inherently African American spatial entity that presents an effective counterspace opposing white social space: "To be *Black* and *(W)hole* is to escape incarcerating restraints of a white world (i.e., a *black hole*) and to engage the concentrated, underground singularity of experience that results in a blues desire's expressive fullness" (Baker, 1984, pp. 151-152). Blues represents cultural performance that derives its force from communal interaction. As such blues performance centripetally reconnects to the African American cultural whole, reproducing, reinventing, and allowing for individual innovativeness. The improvisational pattern characteristic of blues crystallizes as a trickster's practice to continually avoid fixation in space:

> Rather than fixed in the order of cunning Grecian urns, their lineage is fluid, nomadic, transitional. Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at the junction. The crossing sign is the antithesis of a place marker. It signifies, always, change, motion, transience, process. (Baker, 1984, p. 202)

In this way blues or trickster dynamics signifies performative movement in space.

One perpetuation of blues dynamics is to be sought in African American experience of social displacement, having resulted in a sense of placelessness. As Ellison states: "The phrase 'I'm nowhere' expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable, recognised place in society" (1964, p. 300). Ellison's statement does not necessarily express disorientation, especially if we take into consideration the reference letters which accompany the invisible man to the hole – referring to orientation from without – or the recurring grandfather figure as cultural heritage – proving inner orientatedness –; but rather, it marks the limited and biased focus that is superimposed upon the African American subject.

Placelessness appears primarily in built architecture that, as dispositifs, crystallizes transparent social space in Henri Lefebvre's sense (1991). In this political spatiality of reproduction, the African American subject is produced in/by space, disallowing heterotopia, i.e., space to grant the inhabitants a sense of place for rewarding identity. The college, for instance, a reference to the Tuskegee Institute, denotes power mechanism in a Southern rural environment. The "flower-studded wasteland" (Ellison, 1972, p. 37) marks, indeed the concentrated implementation of the *other*-induced ideology of the white status quo. The centre of the scene is the church, the interior of which is described as follows: "rows of

puritanical benches straight and torturous" (p. 110) with songs staging "an ultimatum accepted or ritualised" (p. 111) that "we must accept" (p. 112). In an African American setting, the plantation-like spatial arrangement constitutes panopticism.

Similarly, the surrealistic scene of the hospital provides a straightforward example of panopticism and stages thus an oppressive environment of placelessness, which cannot represent dwelling and a dwelling place to identify with. Dwelling, in Heidegger's conceptualisation, denotes cultivation (1967, p. 147) as "to build is in itself already to dwell" (1967, p. 146), whereby he rules for the predominance of the subject: "[t]his world is always already from the outset my own" (1996, p. 118). However, Tony Tanner's (1974) claim about the book, namely, that "consciousness depends on architecture" (p. 92), reveals the condition of the protagonist. In the hospital scene, the protagonist is under constant observation in "a kind of glass and nickel box" (Ellison, 1972, p. 233) with "vast stretch of clinical whiteness" (p. 238) around him, awaiting prefrontal lobotomy to effect "a change of personality" (p. 236). The protagonist concludes at the end of the treatment: "I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me" (p. 249).

A further example is provided by the boxing match which, similarly to the hospital and other scenes, is a reflection of societal power relations. Unlike the hospital scene, here the participants find themselves in the midst of influential white people in total darkness. The invisible man testifies about altered perception when he reports: "The blindfolds were put on [. . .] I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness. It was as though I had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths" (Ellison, 1972, p. 21), then he goes on to add: "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity" (p. 22). Regardless of light or darkness, in both cases transparency is achieved through permanent supervision and total control. Apart from the hole, the invisible man is objectified, since he is identified with types, roles in and outside architecture, but it is not him who identifies.

A clear instance of objectivation is presented by the fact that African Americans do not learn about Emerson, as they were not to learn to be self-reliant. This kind of conditioning of consciousness effects blindness, which does not imply sightlessness, but limited sight referring to a totality of assumed identity. This idea gains support by Richard Jenkins (1994), who, in contrast with social groups, establishes a concept of social categories which "[are] identified, defined and delineated by others" (p. 201). Tanner, too, interprets this as automatisation through reprogramming, substituting the subjective with the "official version of reality" (1974, p. 84), the result of which is "optical illusion" (1974, p. 84).

Ellison argues *vis-à-vis* African Americans in Harlem: "[. . .] they feel alienated and their whole lives have become a search for answers to the questions: Who am I, What am I, and Where?" (1964, p. 297), in this way, he agrees with Paul Shepard (1997), who claims that "without knowing where we are, it is impossible to know who we are." The invisible man, too, puts in that "[. . .] to lose a sense of *where* you are implies the danger of losing a sense of *who* you are [and] to lose your direction is to lose your face" (Ellison, 1972, p. 577). Apparently the city cannot become a psychological frontier where the invisible man arrives through self-discovery (Butler, 1995, p. 127) and, also by rediscovering tradition (Butler, 1995, p. 128) – as Robert Butler has it. Ellison's "Harlem is Nowhere" supports the view that the quest of the invisible man debunks the myth of the liberating force of the northward movement: "[. . .] in the North [the African American] surrenders and does not replace certain important supports to his personality" (Ellsion, 1964, p. 298). Suffice it to consider the African American church in the novel, which is, according to C. E. Lincoln, "the defining reference of the black community" (1999, p. xxiv). The leader of this church has a trickster-like dual identity, a fact that denies continuation and, thus, cultural stability. Tradition seems to be lost and not rediscovered. This, too, is reinforced by Ellison: "But these, like his folk personality, are caught in a process of chaotic change. His family disintegrates, his church splinters; his folk wisdom is discarded in the mistaken notion that in no way applies to urban living [. . .]" (1964, p. 300). The invisible man finds the core of his identity in the end, and a methodology to establish himself: "Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos [. . .] or imagination" (Ellison, 1972, p. 576) – a "world [. . .] of infinite possibilities" (p. 576).

Yet blues performance precipitates negation of spatial fixity and thus avoidance of categorization. The invisible man's movement in and out of architecture endows him with the ability to break away from the built environment in a non-fixed, individualized, even improvisational way so much so that buildings can serve as a springboard to remember (Ellison, 1972, p. 335). The latter proves relevant since remembering as confabulation may render the past useful, hence self-fulfilling. Much as the invisible man's movement through space is not deliberate, he unwillingly enacts (cultural) performance that is capable of reinscribing space. Michel De Certeau's walking practice underlines the notion as "the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements" (1984, p. 98). When spatially positioned, the invisible man is threatened to suffer loss of subjectivity; however, the curve of his movement and the fact that he does not remain incarcerated in one of the built architectural forms refers to identity performance and that "Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (1984, p. 99). His South-North movement

immanently represents a series of performances telling his own story of being and creating his own topography and texture of places. It is reiterated by the structure of the book itself because the forms, apart from the hole, present different variations of a theme, ever re-experiencing it anew and reworking it – rather typical of jazz, which proves Ellison's knowledge and use of jazz, musicalizing the novel (Bone, 1974, pp. 97-101).

The culturally informed trickster practice comes to the foreground in the scene after Tod Clifton's death when the invisible man is repeatedly mistaken for Rinehart – a trickster figure who can put on many faces as that of a runner, gambler, briber, lover, or reverend. The dark glasses he is wearing "hide[s him] in front of their eyes" (p. 366) so that he manages to find various labels for the self. Beyond his hypermobility, whereby he is able to reinscribe space, it is also bodily space that he manages to thus invert. Rinehartism reappears in the novel as Henry Louis Gates's "Signifying monkey" alluring to "the figure-of-figures, [. . .] the trope in which are encoded several other peculiarly black rhetorical tropes" (1988, p. xxi) and to trickster energies perpetuating "relational signification" (Siemerling, 2004, p. 39). Relationality expressed by Gates is what the invisible man recognizes written in his body, which not only renders him invisible for whites, but, more importantly, he becomes a cultural actor by entering and accepting the cultural discourse of trickster performativity. As he reflects on Rinehart:

> He was a broad man, man of parts who got around. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity [. . .] You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not a recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. [. . .] I had been trying to turn them [i.e., the lenses] into a disguise but they had become a political instrument instead. (Ellison, 1972, pp. 376-377)

The recognition is responsible for his ultimate rearrangement of space, which goes beyond simply inverting the satellite architectural forms of social space. The political act of space-reinscription surpasses establishing a new self or constructing place. As Ellison confesses, the hole is "structured [. . .] on patterns of rebirth [but] I didn't think of his going underground as returning to the womb" (qtd. in O'Brian, 1973, p. 73). Going underground does not refer to a new start, in the sense that he turns his back on his past or loses touch with his present. Much rather, it conveys a new strategy, which is why Ellison claims that "The protagonist's story is his social bequest. And I'll tell you something else: The bequest is hopeful." It expresses "an appeal for self-reliance" for "nothing is possible means anything is possible"

(Rosenblatt, 2008). Ellison's insistence opens up a whole new terrain for the self and for action. By burning all the papers denoting his assumed identity in a dark hole in Harlem (Ellison, 1972, pp. 567-568), the invisible man steps outside social space, stating that "I [. . .] ran within myself" (p. 534). Turning inward does not mean turning his back on the surrounding world for it is also stated that "hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (p. 13), i.e., the protagonist remains conscious of the social world.

The hole represents the plastic embodiment of elsewhereness, i.e., a different paradigm, in the social space the invisible man is situated in. It establishes thus a heterotopia – a place of juxtaposition representing otherness. The different paradigm can, on the one hand, be seen as a recoupling to African American culture as Baker (1984) suggests with his concept of the "black hole" in connection with Wright's *Black Boy*, which refers to "the subsurface force of the black underground" (Baker, 1984, p. 151) thereby identifying it as a "subterranean *hole* where the trickster has his ludic, deconstructive being" (p. 151). His interpretation assumes authentication of the black cultural self by returning to cultural roots that is enhanced by the African American collectivity. His concept of collectivity is rendered by Edward M. Pavlíc as "underground communal space," in which "people perform [. . .] aspects of their subjectivity which remain off limits, or abstracted, in secluded contemplation [and where] the diasporic modernist self becomes an accumulating repertoire of presences summoned from personal depth and communal interactions both past and present" (2002, p. 24).

It appears that the definition of the hole places emphasis on revitalizing and reenlivening African American culture, in which "white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume" (Baker, 1984, p. 152). However, the invisible man identifies himself not only in relation to African American culture as when he says, "Call me Jack-the-Bear for I am in a state of hibernation" (Ellison, 1972, p. 5), but also in relation/contrast to white America:

> I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area. (Ellison, 1972, pp. 4-5)

In this way, he relies on white America by negating it, but also by using its resources when constructing his own place – a prime example of hybridizing place. Thirding, in Homi Bhabha's theorizing, refers to a process which "challenges our

sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (1994, p. 37). It envisions the phenomenon that spaces are not necessarily mutually exclusive, hierarchically rendered, or presenting direct negations of each other, but can in fact build on each other and use elements and the resources of other spatialities. The borderland through thirding enables moving between paradigms and therefore not necessarily within a particular cultural universe.

The hole does not represent liminality in the sense that it is marginal or peripheral in the first place, but rather a possible gateway for emergence in a self-perpetuated metaspace. As the invisible man argues, "I did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison, 1972, p. 7). By emerging as a subject he does not cease to be invisible; merely he learns to use the spaces around to construct his own self-rewarding cosmos. His confession in the "Epilogue" shows him as a subject emerging anew:

> Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway? – diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states. [. . .] America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. [. . .] Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many [. . .]. (Ellison, 1972, p. 435)

E pluribus unum reflects conforming to American ideology (perhaps an instance of yessing to remain invisible), but, simultaneously, the emphasis on diversity confesses to African American trickster energies, placing the invisible man in-between in self-imposed borderland.

Ralph Ellison, in an attempt to create "freedom of lexical space" (1974, p. 89), offers a possible method of place-construction by "imposing a pattern on reality by writing the book" (1974, p. 91). The walking practice in De Certeau's sense and the thirding pattern of the hole reveal indeed a method to reinscribe space in a way that the dominant structure of American social space is successfully overwritten. As Ellison himself states, "the fact that you can read the narrator's memoirs means that he has come out of the hole" (qtd. in O'Brian, 1973, p. 73). As such it proves the effectiveness of invisible spatiality as well as that of African American unsilencing signification.

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