

August Wilson's Spatial Writing Back on
Black Female in *Fences* to Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God

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Abstract:

August Wilson has long been admired for his "Pittsburgh Circle" which collectively presented a panoramic view of the love, hate, and the living conditions of African Americans. Among them, *Fences* written in 1987 as one of his "Pittsburgh Circle" series, and also the first play to win him Pulitzer Prize actually contains a deeper revelation for understanding black females except for overwhelmingly tremendous studies on black community in this work as a whole. Theoretically, when one examines through notions of "Thirdspace" from Edward Soja and garden as one typical kind of "other space" by Michael Foucault, this work of *Fences* reveals that Rose's progressive taking up of space from kitchen to porch inside the fences and finally to the family garden exceeding fences recalls the female protagonist Jannie's eastward re-locations. During her progress, she finally established her own subjectivity and lives along with her three marriages in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* created by Zora Neale Hurston. Therefore, the intertextual study of the two works proves that through spacial construction, black females as the double other to both whites and males still get a chance to reconstruct their subjectivity, and even before postmodernism identified their feminist voices in literature, great works had already hinted the power of black females which helps them finally emerge from margin to the sight of people.

Keywords: *Fences*; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Thirdspace; Black Females; Subjectivity

1. "Fences" keeping Rose in family

To begin with, the first spatial metaphor in Wilson's play is "fences", the title of the play. "Some people build barriers to prevent people from entering, while others build barriers to keep people at home" (Wilson, 2013). Rose falls into the second classification. In the play, Rose constantly asks her husband Troy to remedy the fences of their house, but Troy does not care. He delays the job for four or five weeks. Instead, he chooses to go to his mistress's house to entertain himself. And when he finally makes his mind to repair the fences, he does not really understand what his wife could do with the "damn" fence (Wilson, 2013). It is at the end of his life, the fences for him at last becomes valuable by functioning as an imaginary shield to defend himself against the invisible Death. But that has nothing to do with his responsibility toward his wife Rose. For Troy, the fences is the same as what Robinson Crusoe built to protect himself from vicious environment in the sense of regarding the story as a colonial metaphor. The only difference is that Troy replaces the white man's image and resets the background in a family rather than a isolated island. Troy as the colonized in a large social background is playing the colonizer in his own family to his wife and son. Both fences represent patriarchal buildings serving only for the good of the male member. Therefore, it is a pity for for Rose to ask for protection from Troy in the first place, for the man she relies on is the exact force to destruct her subjectivity and confine her freedom. Admittedly, fences are the range of family space functioning as a sign of protection, but at the same time, even without these fences, the family responsibility already fences her life into small place like kitchen of the household.

Like all housewives, kitchen is the major territory for a housewife's daily activities. It is in this small place where gathers together the most heavy housework of the whole family, and the living standard of a family could be largely reflected by the eating stuff in the kitchen. In this play, many details confirm Rose's hard work. In *Fences*, meals (or drinks) are mentioned many times including "ribs", "cookies", "coffee", "pig's feet", "chicken", "watermelon" and so on (Wilson, 2013). And it is should be noticeable that for each mentioning of food, not a single one kind is repeated. This enumeration on these various types of kitchen products shows how Rose utilizes her genius in the limited space trying to provide the best supplies to her family members with not-enough income given the setting that her husband is but a low-income trash-collector. In this way, Rose not only

contributes within the household, she actually involves in the production of society on a larger level. At the time of the play, America was experiencing its great period of fast expansion of massive urbanization. During this process, tremendous wastes were produced. But owing to the haziness of city development, whites left the work of clearing wastes to cheap African-American male labors like Troy. The black community became a main force for dirty but low-pay works in America in 1950s and 60s. Wilson lively describes their hardship before the play, saying that though the city “devoured” all outsiders from Europe for development, “the descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation”(Wilson, 2013). Only works like collecting rags were open for them. However, it’s fair to say that without them, the work of urbanization wouldn’t process so well. When history finally remembered black males like Troy, another fact is still ignored that without women like Rose feeding the men, there could never be so much achievement of building up metropolises. Moreover, not only this vital role lacked and still lacks recognition from other family members and society, but oftentimes it is taken for granted as a legitimate reason to imprison “the angels in the house” within certain insuperable family space like a kitchen. Rose’s attempt to achieve security through establishing fences was demolished by this way of invisible oppression.

2. “Fences” manifesting in Jannie’s marriages

Similarly, with Hurston’s realistic portrayal, Jannie is also confined into “fences” in various forms in all her three marriages even if the third one was largely regarded as true love to common readers. The first type of “fences” is from Jannie’s original family. Owing to trauma of slavery, Jannie’s grandma by whom she called “Nanny” acted as an enormous barrier to hinder Jannie’s freedom of choice on her romantic relationship and set the tragic tone of the major years of her youth time. She protected Jannie well as a virgin and hopes that the girl could marry to a well-off man and thereby live comfortably. However, Jannie’s first kiss happened exactly at the gatepost of Nanny’s yard and the fuzz was overheard by Nanny. After witnessing the affair, Nanny decided to marry this 17-year-old girl to a middle-aged man named Morgan without the young girl’s consent. At that moment, the grandma had no idea that her consideration would be the start of the girl’s whole miserable life. Judging from a spatial perspective, this gatepost before

Jannie's first marriage functions exactly as a parental fence to keep Jannie inside of Nanny's control. Jannie always harbors the hope for love in marriage, but her first under Nanny's coercion fails her completely. The first marriage fences Jannie tight at such a young age that she becomes the typical housewife rotating around the house without stepping out any further until the coming of Jody, her second husband later.

Nevertheless, as the text shows, Jody fancies only Jannie's beauty and treats her as a vase to reflect his wisdom as the mayor of the new town for black community. In the early years, Jannie admired his smartness and bravery to give the town a chance to develop. But when Jannie delivers her comment to a poor dead mule and therefore discloses her talent for public speaking, the man who claims that she is the love of his life turns out to love her in the condition that she could only act as the wife of a mayor, not an orator like him. Comparatively, his own identity matters the most, and Jannie's talent makes him jealous. When Jody gets sick, the metaphor of fences for Jannie manifests itself as physical walls in the novel when "she sat a long time with the walls creeping on her. Four walls squeezing her breath out"(Hurston, 2012). Even with her beloved Tea Cake, Jannie's third and last husband, she only senses insecurity through the spatial representation when Tea Cake took her money out leaving Jannie for the whole night. At that time, Jannie's desire resembles Rose's hope to build fences around her. "Outside the window Jacksonville looked like it needed a fence around it to keep it from running out on ether's bosom. It was too big to be warm, let alone to need somebody like her" (Hurston, 2012). At first, Jannie was just like Rose, longing for sense of security from visible enclosure.

Both women were helpless and hopeless since they asked for protection, sometimes even in the form of fences. The hard truth between male/female and the white/the black is what Nanny boldly pointed out: "de white throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh the world so fur as Ah can see"(Hurston, 2012). In this way, black women were the double "other" of the society and man, and the initial places they occupied remains dull and a backwater to open up any possibility for them to be themselves.

3. From “fences” to black female’s Thirdspace

Compared with fences, the second space metaphor of porch is more abundant as a place in its metaphysical meanings but still largely excludes black female, the subject of “double other”. Specifically, it is Eden and a comfortable “Thirdspace” for black community but not for the female protagonists. Before the discussion of black female’s Thirdspace, it is necessary to answer the question of what is a Thirdspace. According to Edward Soja, the Thirdspace is the real-and-imagined space containing the physical space and the imaginary space while transcending them at the same time. Other (minority groups) could find comfort and confidence in Thirdspace and gain the chance of communication and understanding (1996). Practically, the location of Thirdspace is a good start for minority groups to emerge from margin to center. Inheriting the idea from Henri Lefebvre, Soja rejects the dimensional division of space into the physical and the mental for the reason that this way of classification neglects the interwoven relations of the society and vaguely assumes that mental space equals social space as the opposite of the material world. Instead, he accedes to the trialectical way to distinguish all spaces into three: Firstspace, the concrete material of spatial forms, the Secondspace, the imagined representations of human spatial forms in mental or cognitive level, and the Thirdspace, an Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality.

Based on that understanding of Thirdspace, American scholar Donlon’s mentioning of porch could be regarded as the demonstration of the Thirdspace for black community to participate in social activities. For Donlon, porch not only connects private life and public life, but also functions as an important cultural venue to brag, perform blues music and tell stories. She stresses that in such a space deeply influenced by the distant African continent, African women, like their sisters, are not allowed to speak in male-dominated social groups(95). Troy entertains himself on the porch in various ways such as drinking with his friend Bono, recalling exaggerated stories of old times, fighting death, and singing songs etc, Rose on the opposite never really stepped into the space of porch to say a single word out of her mind. As stated earlier, Jannie faces the same predicaments with Jody. She was never allowed to enjoy herself on the porch among the men and women

even if she was born a better speaker than Jody. Although the whole story of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is told on a porch when Jannie finally returns to her old house after Tea Cake's death, that space is not really a porch for social purposes, but only a private footstep. And the abundant audience who played important roles to fuel the hot atmosphere also shrinks to Jannie's single one close friend. Thus, both female protagonists lost their voice on the porch while their husbands spend a lot of time there to play guitar, sing songs or deliver speeches in the sense of porch being a Thirdplace.

Although Rose and Jannie fail all the same in this second spatial place of porch, the example of porch indicates the probability of the existence of another Thirdplace for them to voice out. And the image of garden is what comes to rescue.

In her article "In Search of Our Mother's Garden", Alice Walker clearly indicates the close relationship between African American women and garden: she said that black females are so "intense", "deep" and rich both physically and mentally(Walker, 1994). One example she raises is that her mother took great care of their garden with her genius and patience. In *Fences*, the garden appears at the end of the play is such a place to reflect femininity's willingness to embrace differences between African women and African men, to empower each member in black community and produce greater influence for them to be noticed and valued. In the last scene of Troy's funeral, a new character, the little girl Raynell appears. Raynell is Troy's unlawful daughter who was accepted and well taken care of by Rose for years. She's digging the soil of the garden for fun which forms a sharp contrast to Troy's funeral in the house, the gloomy and death-relating family space seems to be haunted by the passed-by Troy who always demands people's attention on himself. But outside now the younger son Corey joins Raynell and their hilarious conversation and the girl's joy are more at ease compared with Troy's authority. Because Corey fled from his home as a teenager, while Raynell was born when Troy's dictatorship was disintegrated by her mother Rose, and the girl was too young to be married and was temporarily spared the fate of being a pathetic housewife like Jannie. On the other hand, at the chatting time of the siblings, Rose as the master of the household then freely shuttles from the inner space to the outer garden scene, reflecting her garden-like inclusiveness to forgive her husband's misdeeds in the past and to start a new life with her son and daughter in the future.

Both Wilson and Alice Walker's representation of garden could ascend to Hurston's portrayal of Jannie. For many times and various stages of Jannie's life, the author implies with garden-related symbols. Before marriage, Jannie always sat under a pear tree with blossoms, wondering how love and marriage would turn out (Hurston, 2012). Even her marriages were unfortunate, Jannie's worship toward the flower tree continues until it comes true when she met Tea Cake. She adheres to her dream of true love and finally found it on Tea Cake, the man who are willing to make flower beds in her yard and seed the garden for her. Because of the inclusiveness of garden-like love, Jannie's affection toward Tea Cake continues even after the man's death. For example, when Jannie discovers the seeds that Tea Cake left she calmly decides to plant them as Tea Cake once did owing to her faith in their love. Physically, even Everglades where Tea Cake and Jannie worked and lived could be regarded as an enormous garden. With the first impression, Jannie saw the place big and new-big beans, big cane, big weeds, "big everything" (Hurston, 2012). It was so vigorous that weeds grew tall and everything went wild including people. Later, it did prove an Eden for all kinds of people harmoniously work and live together. In fact, Everglades as a special form of garden, could be explained by Foucault's notion of Other space, a heterotopia.

In one of his several principles to define a heterotopia, Foucault reckons that "As a general rule the heterotopia juxtaposes, in real place, several spaces that would normally be incompatible" (Foucault, 1986). His example is an Oriental garden where all the vegetation of the garden was supposed together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (Foucault, 1986). Just as Foucault himself intends to expand the range to all gardens by indicating in the parentheses that modern garden spring from that source, the garden in both Wilson and Hurston's works are also capable of incorporating differences and conflicts to form a Thirdspace for black women to hold their ground and form their own identity. Besides, Everglades as a special garden also resonates with bell hooks who advocates choosing the margin as a space for radical openness. The margin is a space full of possibilities and openness that encourages motion rather than stiffness. Since the changing of one's fixed position usually requires rejection toward the oppressive margins set for a specific group based on race, gender

and class. Garden as a Thirdspace to break the binary opposition of “male/female” in *Fences* and even “white/black” in *There Eyes Were Watching God* provides a space for marginalized subjects to encounter each other and withhold themselves.

In general, the processes of space expansions in a single household (as in Rose’s case) and outside the family space eastward (as in Jannie’s case) proved that Rose and Jennie as the representative figures of black women, their status of being Other’s other would not change before they actively break free by utilizing the power from space transitions. And through the analysis of their constructing process, the paper argues that a powerful, flexible and inclusive “Thirdplace” or “heterotopia” represented by the image of garden for them serves the crucial role for the marginalized group to grow and establish themselves.

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