



Space, Travel, Freedom: A Comparative Reading of African American and Hungarian Roma Narratives

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Abstract. African American life narratives have been shaped by the traditional structure of slave narratives, revolving around a well directed movement from the South to the North in search of freedom and well-being. Some twentieth-century African American autobiographers use the same structure to emphasize the continuing lack of freedom, while others self-consciously reject this structure to claim their freedom in different ways. Roma life narratives are backgrounded by the traditional travelling lifestyle. Travelling and movement thus become signs of freedom and independence in some narratives, while others reject these images and claim their space and belonging within the majority society's structures.

Keywords: Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Menyhért Lakatos, Hilda Péliné Nyári

1. Introduction

My comparative study of African American and Hungarian Roma life narratives is centred on images of space, as traditional notions of escape and travel are used, rejected, and transformed in twentieth-century literature. The existing rich literary scholarship on African American literature can be used to better understand Roma narratives and their grapples with issues of travel, space, and freedom. This comparison, therefore, is not based on any – real or imagined – cultural or social similarities, but purely on the literary techniques of utilizing images of space for expressing quests for freedom and equality.

African American literary traditions developed in the American context, therefore, a short introduction into the understanding of space and travel in American literary tradition is necessary to understand the structure of slave narratives, which in turn background all twentieth-century African American life narratives. For further study, I chose Richard Wright's (1998) and Zora Neale Hurston's (2006) autobiographical writings, titled *Black Boy* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, respectively. Both of these authors wrote in the 1940s about living conditions in the American Southern states during the first half of the twentieth century, beset by the so-called Jim Crow laws of legal racial segregation, as well as other forms of discrimination and racial intolerance. Both Wright and Hurston are well aware of their literary backgrounds, but they use different approaches to talk about their searches for freedom. Wright's book follows closely the slave narrative structure, centring on images of bondage and attempts to escape. Hurston, on the other hand, attempts to find her own assertions of freedom and equality within the confines of the Southern space itself.

From among Hungarian Roma life narratives, I have chosen Menyhért Lakatos's *Smoky Pictures* (2000) and Hilda Péliné Nyári's *My Little Life* (1996) in order to study their use of space and travel in formulating their experiences of freedom and ethnic relations. They also describe growing up in the first half of the twentieth century, backgrounded by various Gypsy traditions, but experiencing the economic and social tensions of the 1930s. Lakatos's narrative revolves around notions of travel – recalling images of travelling Gypsies – but only to assert his own very different search for freedom, centred on education and intellectual work. Péliné, much like Hurston, insists on creating her own space of freedom within the confines of her world's realities.

2. Space and freedom in the American context

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1993) examines the role of the Africanist persona in constructing American notions of freedom and opportunity. Early immigrants to America believed in a future of freedom unprecedented in the world. The continent offered the material and social opportunities that promised genuine freedom, unprecedented wealth, and a pure society to make God's law manifest. "One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed. Much was to be written there" (Morrison 1993, 35). But the sudden abandonment of European rules, history, and social order also created a sense of fear: "Americans' fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack, their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression" (1993, 37). And nothing was more perfect to develop the exploration of this fear associated with sudden "freedom" than slavery: "The concept

of freedom did not emerge in vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery” (1993, 38).

Considering the same issues of early notions of freedom in America, Myra Jehlen (1986) emphasizes the importance of the continent’s geographical dimensions. In Europe, historical transformations of the society have made any social system relative: “the bourgeoisie could only claim to rule it *better* – and thus already in laying its claim conceded its relativity” (Jehlen 1986, 9). In America, on the other hand, the previously “empty” continent “did not connote society, or history, but indeed in its natural parameters, geography; [thus,] incarnate in the continent, the elsewhere embattled ideal of liberal individualism established itself in America as simply a description of things not only as they are but as they manifestly need to be” (Jehlen 1986, 5). This “incarnation” of the new ideals and social order into the American continent is based on the possibility of growth without change: A large enough space can accommodate all sorts of people and ways of life, without having to renounce any one of them. Transformation that takes place over time necessarily replaces one system with another, while changes in space can be added to the already existing principles. This enables theories, in this case the belief in free individualism, to survive even in the face of opposing practices: “[O]utside of time, opposites can cohabit indefinitely, unchanged and independent, if only their common space can be made large enough” (Jehlen 1986, 12).

Myra Jehlen’s idea of American freedom based on the “expandability” of the continent and Morrison’s theory of American freedom being defined against black slavery are not opposites but complementary. From Jehlen’s argument, it can be seen how Southern slavery could exist without compromising principles of individual freedom. But it was not a simple cohabitation of differing ideas. White freedom, as Morrison argues, was defined against black slavery. But this was only possible by limiting slavery not only to blacks but also to certain well-delimited spaces. The geographical division between the free North and the slave-holding South *theoretically* made freedom a possibility for all. Just as an escape from Europe established the freedom of the traditional American individual, an escape from the South could free the African slave. The most important element of freedom was thus assumed (pretended) to be not racial, social, or gender privilege, but rather the ability to place oneself in a free geographical space. The social injustices of Europe and the slavery of the South, as bad as they were, were confined to specific locations. Freedom, on the other hand, was based on the possibility of infinite expansion in America, on the ability to move to one’s most advantageous place of abode. The problem of slavery was thus confined geographically, allowing the universal principles of individualism to flourish even in its midst.

While slave narratives describe a genuine search for freedom, these accounts generally conform to the definitions of freedom just highlighted. The geographical travel from the slave-holding South to the free North is coincident with a journey

towards freedom described in other stories of rugged individualism. Beth Maclay Doriani explains that in the male slave narrative “the narrator traditionally built his story around a presentation of himself that emphasized, for the most part, the qualities valued and respected by white men: courage, mobility, rationality, and physical strength” (1991, 203). It was a story of humanity lost and then regained, humanity being defined by the prevailing concepts of American male identity, valorising rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility. As the escaping slaves “claim their humanity by separating themselves from other slaves and fleeing to the free northern states” (Foster 1993, 95), they do not simply undertake a geographical journey towards freedom, but also – unwittingly – reinforce the system of slavery which is dependent upon this geographical division. While an escape is certainly an economic loss to the owner and a victory for the hero, it does not disturb the basic set-up of the situation.

Many twentieth-century African American autobiographies build largely on the structure of slave narratives, in part because of the cultural background and in part because economic and social conditions inspired many blacks to migrate from the South to the North, most notably during the 1920s, the years that became known as the Great Migration. And while Northern cities provided jobs and more equality to most African Americans, the mass migrations to the North had far-reaching consequences both in shattering Southern communities and in increasing racial intolerance in Northern cities with changing ethnic ratios. It is in this context that both Wright and Hurston describe their lives, dominated by issues of discrimination in the South and the ever-present lure of possibilities in the North.

3. Wright: “I am completely free, I have no roots”

Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* is structured after slave narratives: the quest for freedom is played out in the spatial arena of what is called “Southern Night” in the first half of the book, with the hero’s desire and ambition to move to the more positively perceived North. His well-planned and adventurous “escape” to the North is followed by descriptions of life there. Dubek considers the book a “revision of the slave narrative” (2008, 537), while Butterfield notes that “all the elements of slave narrative structure are present” (1974, 156). Using this structure, the author does not only align himself with the literary tradition of nineteenth-century black writers, but also suggests that the South of his time is not much better than it had been under slavery. However, the story eventually veers away from this traditional structure, as Richard does not find freedom in the North. His first contacts with the Communist Party are described in terms similar to the slave narratives’ descriptions of the abolitionist and Quaker societies, experiences of truly equal and brotherly communities. Ruptures and tensions within the Party, however, force Richard to realize not only its political downsides, but also rampant discrimination and racial

prejudice in Northern communities. His further travels take him to France, but the geographical search for a free space is ended. He successfully deconstructs the notions of escape and free areas by celebrating his rootlessness and turning to art in portraying issues of race, discrimination, and freedom.

Even though rampant racism and discrimination warrants the parallels between the slave-holding South of the nineteenth century and the South of the early twentieth century, the role of space within the South itself has undergone much change. Walter Benn Michaels traces the shift in the perception of race in the United States between 1890 and 1920. The strict divisions existing under the system of slavery had ensured that there would be no danger of crossing boundaries even if familiarities were allowed between blacks and whites (1992, 662), or extra rights were granted to “quality niggers ... just as stuck up as their masters” (1992, 659). But the abolition of slavery and the rights granted to blacks during the Reconstruction Era did away with the absolute category of race; thus, it had to be redefined into a cultural category, the limits of which (both in geographical and social terms) had to be constantly strengthened (1992, 668). Michaels states that this led to “an insistence on racial inequality [... that] dissolved the sectional differences between North and South and replaced them with the racial difference between black and white, thus making possible the transsectional, white nation” (1992, 670).

Hence, we can see that the world described by Wright does not correspond to the spatial and racial set-up of the world of slave narratives. This introduces a number of tensions within the book, calling attention to new types of problems faced in the South and the different world of the North. The South is shown as a world where racial differences are indeed constantly reinforced. As spatial divisions between blacks and whites became less pronounced, common areas became increasingly more dangerous for blacks. They had to learn how to behave according to racial expectations at all times, since interracial meetings could take place anywhere. Race had to be interiorized. This is the process that Wright describes in *Black Boy*. For example, one day when his bicycle had a flat tire, Richard was offered a ride by a group of young white men. They even offered him a drink, which he declined by saying, “Oh, no!” This seemingly innocent sentence caused them to beat him up with the explanation: “‘Nigger, ain’t you learned no better sense’n that yet?’ asked the man who hit me. ‘Ain’t you learned to say *sir* to a white man yet?’” (1998, 181). At another time, the police stopped him unexpectedly in a white neighbourhood. After searching his pockets and packages at gun-point, they explained, “Boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighbourhoods at this time of night” (1998, 182). Besides the terrible and violent aspects of these and other incidents, Wright does not fail to portray Richard’s bafflement at the situation: “it was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget and act

straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class" (1998, 184-185). In Butterfield's words, with Richard "the process [of racial acculturation] does not 'take'" (1974, 158). While other blacks "laugh and talk," Richard openly states that "there's nothing much to say or smile about" (1998, 182).

The South from which Wright escaped was thus different from slaveholding times primarily because of unstable boundaries and unpredictability. Nevertheless, Wright maintains the slave narrative structure as Richard's "restless movement takes the form of flight to the North" (Butterfield 1974, 167). Robert J. Butler also links Wright to an earlier tradition: "the journey across the River Jordan celebrated by the spirituals, the odyssey down the road extolled by the blues" (1983, 5), but calling attention to the futility of escape as experienced by Wright: "conflicting images of motion and stagnation [are] presented in Wright's *Black Boy*" and "Wright's outer journey takes the form of a series of apparently random moves which end in paralysis" (1983, 9).

This paralysis is fully experienced in the North, as it does not deliver the coveted freedom from discrimination and racial prejudice. Rather, Richard has to experience discrimination even among his friends, who would not provide him with accommodation during a conference in New York. Wright describes his images of the North as an unfulfilled dream that had "symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (1998, 168). The original published ending of *Part One: Southern Night*, emphasizes this even more: "I was now running more away from something than toward something. But that did not matter to me. My mood was: I've got to get away; I can't stay here" (1998, 412). These experiences and feelings of Richard correspond to the way Butler characterizes northward journeys during the Great Migration: "with bittersweet images [...] moving vaguely North in search of new lives which may or may not be available to them" (1983, 5). The hopes and dreams the distant North meant for Wright and many of his Southern contemporaries had to be unlearned. The image of America as a sprawling land of possibilities gave way to what Wright describes as a "sprawling land of unconscious suffering" (1998, 267). The traditional reaction of escape to freedom was replaced by the knowledge of limits:

Slowly I began to forge in the depths of my mind a mechanism that repressed all the dreams and desires that the Chicago streets, the newspapers, the movies were evoking in me. I was going through a second childhood; a new sense of the limit of the possible was being born in me. (1998, 267)

The replacement of movement towards freedom by introspection about how to live with the limits is best illustrated by Wright's behaviour immediately after having been thrown out of the Chicago Communist Party:

I sat alone in my narrow room, watching the sun sink slowly in the chilly May sky. I was restless. I rose to get my hat; I wanted to visit some friends and tell them what I felt, to talk. Then I sat down. Why do that? My problem was here, here with me, here in this room, and I would solve it here alone or not at all. Yet, I did not want to face it; it frightened me. I rose again and went out into the streets. Halfway down the block I stopped, undecided. Go back [...] I returned to my room and sat again, determined to look squarely at my life. (1998, 383)

Thus, Wright uses the slave narrative structure in order to undermine the notion that one can escape to a free space. He gives up on finding a space where black people can be equal to whites, but he does not give up on freedom. For him, freedom becomes the inner independence of any tradition and any space, enabling him to "look squarely" at life and express himself in intellectual and artistic productions. Interestingly, he reaches back to the "history-lessness" studied by Morrison and Jehlen, but defines his freedom not through the American space but through being rootless: "At the close of a lecture in Paris, he once told a student: 'You see, the difference between the two of us is that I am completely free, I have no roots, whereas you are bound by European history and the tyranny of the place'" (Fabre 1985, 77).

4. Hurston: "Travel dust around the doorstep"

In Hurston's autobiographical writing, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the notion of space plays a very important role, although in a manner very different from Wright's. Hurston self-consciously rejects the slave narrative paradigm from the outset by refusing to move away from the South. Rather than vying for an escape, she describes herself as a homeless wanderer, who nevertheless stays within the confines of the Southern space. In this way, she admits to the oppressive nature of her society, but she finds the fissures that allow her to explore her creativity and create her own home. Ultimately, she becomes an ethnographer in her own hometown, thus simultaneously staying at home and becoming a distant scientific observer. Annette Trefzer calls Hurston's appropriation of the oppressive Southern space for her own uses a "floating home" and an "unhomely home" (1998, 73). These expressions refer to the noticeable fact that "being at home in the South means to realize that the safety of home is an illusion, that within the protected boundaries of home there is poverty, violence and even terror ... that the Southern

home – or any home – is never a matter of choosing safety over terror, or romance over reality; it is always both” (Trefzer 1998, 74).

Hurston’s attitude to space and motion can best be described by notions of wandering. In Will Brantley’s words, “the image Hurston creates of herself [is] a ‘wanderer’” (1993, 195). And indeed, Hurston describes her childhood self in the following terms:

The strangest thing about it was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods alone, following some inside urge to go to places. This alarmed my mother a great deal. She used to say that she believed a woman who was an enemy of hers had sprinkled ‘travel dust’ around the doorstep the day I was born. [...] I don’t know why it never occurred to her to connect my tendency with my father, who didn’t have a thing on his mind but this town and the next one. (2006, 23)

Even in this first description of her wanderings, we can see its provocative and dangerous nature. The mother is alarmed at Zora’s restlessness, and with good reason, as the traditional American image of the dangerous woods suggests in the text. The comparison with her father only adds to the concern, as the book suggests elsewhere his infidelity and wayward character. This “inside urge” thus is “a challenging of the social constrictions of both gender and race [that also] implies a certain aimlessness” (Brantley 1993, 195). Later in life, Hurston does not revel in wandering. She emphasizes its painful nature, for example, after her mother’s death: “That day began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time” (2006, 89). Wandering thus becomes an image of both her strength and the South’s inhospitableness.

Some critics view Hurston’s descriptions of the South through her wanderings as a way of avoiding racial confrontations and obtaining popularity among white readers. For example, Pam Bordelon writes:

“[s]he does not disclose in *Dust Tracks* how she felt the bitter divide of segregation, of having to share ‘separate but equal’ accommodations. [...] To do so would have alienated her largely white audience. Instead Hurston was picking her way carefully through a loaded mine field of racial feelings, both hers and her liberal white readers.” (1997, 16)

The image of picking her way carefully across a loaded mine field is an apt description of her wanderings and her writings, that are shown to be self-conscious, calculated, and careful. Lori Jirousek also notices an attempt to be at peace with whites: “Rather than salvaging a supposedly fading African American culture,

Hurston writes a hybrid text to reveal a hybrid and multi-directional cultural movement that far from threatening national stability, rather could enhance it" (2004, 418). However, what neither of these critics notices is that Hurston avoids open confrontations with race issues not in order to accept them, but rather to show her ability to wander around the obstacles raised in her path, and thus reinforce her freedom.

That wandering is as much defiance as a careful strategy is best seen in the incidents concerning her job search: "I was out of a job again. I got out of many more. Sometimes I didn't suit the people. Sometimes the people didn't suit me. Sometimes my insides tortured me so that I was restless and unstable. [...] [A]imless wandering was on me" (2006, 97). So, her joblessness was sometimes caused by not being accepted, and sometimes by her not accepting others. By this, she suggests that her environment was not always hospitable, but neither did she give up all of her agency to shape it according to her wishes. Moreover, there was a torturing inside, suggesting both a strong self and a strong suffering. Two passages from the book further illustrate that rather than acquiescing to racial discrimination in the South, Hurston's text attempts to reclaim the Southern space, even within the confines that "sometimes" did not suit her.

The first passage is about the enclosed space of a barber shop, an iconic example of Jim Crow laws of racial segregation at work. While attending Howard University in Washington, Hurston worked at this shop, owned and operated by blacks, but catering solely to white "bankers, Senators, Cabinet Members, Congressmen, and Gentlemen of the Press" (2006, 131). One day, a black man entered and demanded a hair-cut and shave, in an obvious attempt to exercise his "right to be waited on wherever [he] please[d]" (2006, 135). Banks, the black manager, with the help of *all* the black employees, threw the black customer out of the shop. Serving a black person in a "whites only" barber shop would have meant losing all of their business. In a reflection that might seem a careful treading through mine fields of a hybrid text that enhances national stability, Zora Neale Hurston agrees with the manager's decision to maintain the status quo:

It was only that night in bed that I analyzed the whole thing and realized that I was giving sanction to Jim Crow, which theoretically, I was supposed to resist. But here were ten Negro barbers, three porters and two manicurists all stirred up at the threat of our living through loss of patronage. Nobody thought it out at the moment. It was an instinctive thing. That was the first time it was called to my attention that self-interest rides over all sorts of lives. [...] One sees it breaking over racial, national, religious and class lines. Anglo-Saxon against Anglo-Saxon, Jew against Jew, Negro against Negro. (2006, 135)

During her reflection at night, Zora wanders around the issue without coming down to a decisive but probably reductive “solution.” She states, “[m]y business was threatened ... I could leave school and begin my wanderings again” (2006, 136). Here, she mentions wandering with a negative connotation, showing that wandering is not her goal, but rather her way of going about achieving goals. During this wandering of her thoughts, Hurston certainly faces the issue head-front, opening herself up to the criticisms that she is being a conformist. By revealing the “torture” of her own contradictory feelings, she clearly illustrates a very important consideration: the pain that necessity imposes upon blacks. Unlike Wright, who “could not laugh and talk like the others,” Hurston aligns herself with other blacks who act according to their instinctive defense mechanisms. And if Hurston’s person in this passage – “giving sanction to Jim Crow” – is seen as similar to how everybody else acted, then her inner feelings of pain, doubt, and contradiction are probably also shared by many.

Further, the text itself does not condone segregation, but rather points out its divisive effects: it divides blacks for understandable reasons of self-interest. Rather than taking a clear stance by denouncing either the workers or the “freedom rider” in the barber shop, Hurston presents both sides of the issue, which is as likely to alienate both sides as it is to appease both sides. In an astute way, she manages to affirm racial equality in the very passage which seems to give sanction to Jim Crow laws of segregation. By turning her thoughts to self-interest, she emphasizes a common trait of all races, as well as a reason for divisions within the races. In this way, she breaks into pieces well-defined structures, stereotypes, and boundaries, and calls attention to other connections and limits not usually mentioned in this context.

The other passage that illustrates Hurston’s understanding and use of the Southern space is the description of black people travelling on public buses and trains. In a chapter titled “My People! My People!” she contrasts two kinds of black people travelling on a bus or a train: a “well-mannered Negro [finds] other Negroes on there with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing the garbage on the floor. [...] The offenders may be ‘loud-talking’ the place, and holding back nothing of their private lives, in a voice that embraces the entire coach” (2006, 177). Later, Hurston reflects on the situation again: “Certain of My People have come to dread railway day coaches for this same reason. [...] They detest the forced grouping” (2006, 237). The enclosed space of the segregated coach is a place of rupture within the black race, an embarrassing stand-off between the behaviour of the uneducated and the norms of the educated. Rather than taking sides in the issue or at least lamenting over the divisions imposed on blacks by social necessities, Hurston celebrates this division with the humorous notion of “My People! My People!” recalling contrasts and contradiction within her culture and her self that can only be explained by the statement, “God made them duck by duck” (2006, 191). She takes the dividing line

from between blacks and whites, puts it between two types of black behaviour, and makes them both funny. Thus, she does not erase the dividing line itself, but points out its arbitrary nature.

The “dust tracks” in Hurston’s title amply illustrate her appropriation of the Southern space. Dust does not simply mean walking in the poverty of the earth or a valorisation of the underclass. It also means a sort of temporality and oblivion, the ability to create one’s own tracks in forbidden territory without being given away by permanent marks. Nevertheless, the tracks she herself created in the South – around her own doorstep – by calling attention to folk and cultural values – as well as individual values – seem to have gained permanence in the rich following she has in contemporary black literature (Walker 1984).

5. Lakatos: “Sorry for not being a tree”

Lakatos builds on and celebrates Roma traditions of travel and freedom, but shows how those traditions cannot work any more in his life. In contrast to the free-roaming past of his grandparents’ generation, he and his parents live in the Roma enclosure ironically called “Gypsy Paris.” While this enclosed space is a place of poverty, discrimination, and destitution, the hero’s attempts to leave are shown as futile. In that sense, the trajectory of Lakatos’s escape is similar to Wright’s: the received traditions of freedom through travel and escape are celebrated but also rejected as inappropriate in the present conditions. The impossibility to find freedom through travel or escape does not legitimize the living conditions in Gypsy Paris any more than Wright’s disappointment in the North legitimizes the South. As Wright moved his search for freedom from the level of geographical escape to a sense of intellectual rootlessness, so does Lakatos position himself as an intellectual chronicler and adviser of his Roma people.

Smoky Pictures opens with a description of the memories of a “free-roaming” past, a time when the protagonist’s grandfather still lived the traditional life of travelling Gypsies, defying the national boundaries and social constraints of the territory in which they lived. Lakatos aligns his feelings with the old lady, Liza, who told him tales about this past: “We were a people whose blood had the fire of life in it; neither the winds nor the winters, cruel as they were, could extinguish its flames” (2000, 7). The Gypsy travels of the past symbolize freedom for the writer of the book, even if in reality that lifestyle might have been lived out of necessity and poverty at the time. The symbolism of the sea in the stories of another old lady, Mámi, is very important to the author, who lived in landlocked Hungary: “We travelled from the great water to the great water. Mámi never used the word ‘sea,’ perhaps she did not even know the word. She only said, ‘bári pályi.’ [...] She talked about her ancestors as the embodiments of bravery and brains” (2000, 9). Even accounts of stealing in the past are made heroic in the novel, symbolizing the

freedom of a people who could defy the traditional, settled societies of the time, but having their own spatial divisions and laws. "The territory of the clans (*dolmutas*) is the area from where they pilfer gold, horses, and clothes. [...] Why would any clan take any other's territory? We never went to any other clan's territory. Let them try, they would face the 'kriszi' and learn what Gypsy law means" (2000, 14-15).

In sharp contrast to the past thus described, Lakatos grows up in the enclosed area of Gypsy Paris. The description of life in this slum shows clearly how society had circumscribed and delimited the Gypsy population, so as to control it. Several incidents demonstrate that the boundaries of this enclosed space were directly and indirectly guarded, so as to keep their inhabitants inside as much as possible. Even the post-office clerk's voice "sounded like that of a sheriff" (2000, 22) when Gypsies entered. When a group of Roma children go and sing Christmas carols, they get a basketful of "gift" from one of the houses, which turns out to be "sheep-shit" (2000, 69). As he travels on the train, Lakatos is yelled at: "This is the students' coach, hey!" (2000, 95), and at school he is made fun of even when the teacher speaks kindly to him: "So, let us ask our little Negro, can he tell us whether..." (2000, 39). The sheriff and the police sometimes raided Gypsy Paris on account of some theft in the neighbourhood, but the purpose was usually not to find the actual perpetrators, but only to wreak havoc and instill fear in them (2000, 55). Even the doctor refused to enter the enclosure, and would stop at the edge when called to the sick: "'Is he alive?' he would ask. 'Why didn't he come himself to see me? Call me only after he is dead'" (2000, 118).

In spite of the oppressive nature of living in Gypsy Paris, Lakatos realizes that escape or a return to the traditional lifestyle does not solve the problem. Bada, who tries to live the life of a traveller, pilfering horses and clothes from Romania and selling them in Hungary, is portrayed as a negative character. Bada embodies many Gypsy stereotypes, such as trickiness, a predilection to stealing, and irresponsibility. When living with Bada for a while, Lakatos criticizes that lifestyle. The feeling of freedom associated with timeless roaming around in nature is clearly checked by the hero's awareness of the impossibility to escape from the constraints of present-day society: "No. No, because this way – I was looking for the correct ideas – is the way of escape. – I had to smile at this untrue, meaningless idea. The way of escape? This? I shook my head as I was feeling sorry for my own faults. To escape from this world? Where to?" (2000, 149).

In a strange reversal of the travelling lifestyle, Lakatos redefines his own sense of space when he wishes to become a tree:

I don't know what Bada was thinking about. I was sorry for not being a tree, one among the many her, standing here for perhaps a hundred years, strong, hard, getting higher and higher to see farther and farther. What other goal can there be for a tree or for a man than to look into the obscure distance, to defy

time, knowing that every fall is followed by a budding spring, knowing that there is no death, only rebirth. But what is it that we know in our dwarf world? (2000, 273-274)

The constancy and permanence of the tree is linked to wisdom and knowledge. By refusing to partake in the doomed travelling lifestyle exemplified by Bada, he refuses to hearken back to a tradition that no longer exists for him. Caught between the enclosure of Gypsy Paris and the impossibility of being a traveller, Lakatos compares himself to Bada as such: “He simply has to leave his home, but I have to get outside of myself if I want to be considered somebody” (2000, 328). Getting outside of himself meant taking advantage of the education offered to him, an education that made him understand his position as well as separated him from his community. Upon returning home from school and seeing his parents’ superstitious beliefs, he sighs with sadness: “How much time and what distance separated me from them! The years I spent at school grew a hundred-fold” (2000, 338). In a way similar to Wright, Lakatos thus refuses to accept the restrictions of his home-space, but also realizes the impossibility to escape as of old. And just as Wright found a certain intellectual freedom in being rootless, Lakatos finds his mission in becoming a tree. But this tree is also characterized by certain rootlessness, as its small space contrasts to both the large territories of the *dolmutas* ranging from sea to sea and to the stifling enclosure of the slum. It is rather characterised by defiance of time, views into the distance, and understanding of the budding spring.

6. Péliné: “Thrown from a gadjo’s carriage”

Hilda Nyári Péliné takes advantage of the cityscape of her childhood Budapest to appropriate and call home a space where she can describe her views on racial harmony and racial connections. Throughout her autobiography, Péliné emphasizes her own personal role in furthering peaceful race relations, culminating in her unusual decision to marry a non-Roma (gadjo) man. Hilda, the child character of Péliné, is portrayed from the very outset as an artistically inclined girl, who differentiates herself from her brothers and sisters both by her extreme attraction to musicality and by her interest in gadjos. Her mother tells her both that “you dance and sing, that’s quite normal for Roma, but the way you do it is quite extraordinary” (1996, 186) and that “you were thrown from a gadjo’s carriage” (1996, 142), illustrating Hilda’s strong Roma identity, as well as her connections to gadjos. Péliné’s portrayal of her hometown space of Józsefváros shows this connectedness and Hilda’s role in breaking down boundaries. Much like Hurston does in the American South, Hilda carves out a space in the city as her home, even though the story clearly shows the “unhomely” features of this area. Her neighbourhood becomes a place of familiarity and emotional attachment even

though it is also a place of danger, discrimination, and poverty. It is, using Homi Bhabha's words, literally a place of "interstitial intimacy" (1994, 19) among the various ethnicities of Jews, Germans, Hungarians, and Roma living there. Péliné, similarly to what Trefzer writes about Hurston, "transcend[s] the tight boundaries drawn around" (1998, 70) her ethnicity, not by denying the existence of very real dividing lines, but by creating subjective spaces in her character's life. Several times throughout the story, Hilda refuses to live within the space allocated to her by ethnic conventions, and creates her own spaces, seemingly arbitrary but certainly her own. In this way, she "evoke[s] and erase[s] totalizing boundaries [...] disturb[s] those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha 1994, 213).

By portraying Józsefváros – the Budapest district where Hilda and her family lived without ever having a permanent home – as an ideal place, Péliné erases the boundaries among the "imagined communities" of various ethnicities. And by erecting boundaries between Józsefváros and the rest of the world, Péliné displays her very objective awareness of discrimination, poverty, and racial strife. The first house where the family lived is described as one where "all kinds of people lived. There were peasants, Gypsies, Jews, but we were all in the greatest harmony" (1996, 7). And even though the family soon had to move out of this house because of their poverty, the harmony experienced there remains with Hilda in other areas of Józsefváros. Hilda's family was on the move all the time, driven from one rented apartment to the other based on the momentary economic possibilities of the family. When her musician family had good jobs, they moved to larger and better apartments, but when there was illness or joblessness in the family, they moved over to smaller sub-lets. Thus, while she actually had no home in the sense of calling a flat or a house her permanent abode, she describes her neighbourhood in words befitting a home:

Back in those days, the smaller streets were full of shops, taverns, restaurants, grocery stores, milk shops, paint stores, butchers, launderettes, diners, wine cellars, pastry shops, and many artisans' shops. The shopkeepers were all kind and courteous, and their work was always admirable. Most restaurants had Roma music going, so even the passers by could enjoy it. (1996, 134)

Even when poverty forced the family to move to one of the most destitute streets in the neighbourhood, Péliné writes about love and playfulness:

There were two whorehouses in Munkás Street, just next-door to our house in Alsóerdősor Street. We were surrounded by whores, and [...] I started pitying and loving them. They were so beautiful and kind. I even made friends with

them, as I played a lot of games – for example, hopscotch, on the streets with the other children. (1996, 155)

The pity and love she felt for the prostitutes is clearly associated with her games on the streets, rather than any moral permissiveness, as she advocates prudishness elsewhere (e.g. 1996, 261). Playing games with or near prostitutes on the streets, rather, empowers Hilda to be what she wants to be even in the midst of a home that may seem unhomey for children.

Hilda resembles what Trefzer writes about Hurston: “Because Hurston’s desire for belonging in the South is balanced against the ‘unhomeliness’ of living there, her autobiography successfully reinvents subjugated southern communities as sites for empowerment” (1998, 73). The positive descriptions of Józsefváros point to a site of empowerment for Hilda, a place where she could successfully play out her desire to be a connection among various people, including gadjos, Roma, shopkeepers, musicians, prostitutes, and others.

But Péliné carefully balances this view against descriptions of “unhomey” experiences. In other words, Péliné does not describe an idealized world of racial relations; rather, she emphasizes her own determination to create around herself situations where she can live out her own expectations. She describes the reality of negative race relations by putting them into spaces other than her homely neighbourhood. For example, the racial harmony she sees in her neighbourhood and apartment buildings breaks down at school, where she has to experience racial prejudice from the outset. Long descriptions of the city slum called Augustza Enclosure contrast sharply with Józsefváros. The descriptions of this shanty-town on the outskirts of Budapest, a place her family was forced to live in for some periods of time, are naturalistic and realistic, resembling the style of Wright, rather than Péliné or Hurston: “There was real poverty here. The entire Augustza reeked of the stench of poverty, and there was smoke everywhere” (1996, 216-217). Without disregarding the serious social criticism here, the contrast between the valorised poverty of Józsefváros and the hated poverty of Augustza must be emphasized. Even more strange is Hilda’s hatred of Pesterzsébet, where they actually lived in a “comfortable” (1996, 48) house, and Bajna, her grandmother’s village, where she spent a summer. Péliné also sets the limits of her Budapest home in time. She emphasizes that her childhood world, when “we could still have a good time; singing aloud was not considered shameful” (1996, 152), was better than the present world. Even administrative procedures of various offices seem to have been better during her childhood: “I always have to make comparisons – how much better they could simplify paperwork back in the past” (1996, 250). The text, thus, abounds with critical remarks of society, poverty, and ethnic strife, but these are relegated behind arbitrary boundaries in order to portray the harmonious hometown as Hilda’s space of empowerment.

Péliné uses the notion of space for depicting her own role in breaking down boundaries between ethnicities. This can be seen most clearly in her descriptions of two squares close-by in Józsefváros: Kálvária Square and Mátyás Square. These public spaces are very important for her community, as Judit Durst explains, “the public space has a special function: it is the place for the manifestation of social identity and community feeling” (2003, 66). This is indeed amply described by Péliné, for example, in the following passage: “My family went to Mátyás Square a lot. There was always something happening there. Roma women would occupy their benches early in the afternoons, watching each other, how everyone is dressed, talking about each other” (1996, 162). Mátyás Square is further described as a special place for the Gypsies, a space of racial acceptance and unity, made through poverty: “Poverty somehow connected people [...] Issues like Gypsy, Jew, Hungarian, were not even mentioned, we did not even think of these categories” (1996, 381). Durst emphasizes the importance of setting aside spaces, such as squares or neighbourhoods, in order to create safety: “‘Our’ spaces, where we can feel safety and comfort, these spaces are endowed with special meaning, while others are avoided as being dangerous” (2003, 66). As opposed to “our space” embodied by Mátyás Square in the book, Kálvária Square is portrayed as “their space,” the space of and for gadjos.

The unique message of Péliné is that she does not stay within the safe confines of Mátyás Square, but rather wanders around to, and even prefers, Kálvária Square:

I did not like to go the Mátyás Square at all. I preferred playing on Kálvária Square and Ludovika Square, mostly with Hungarian girls. [...] I was bored with Mátyás Square, and told my mother to go over to Kálvária Square [...] My mother turned to me, angry, ‘Why on earth are you bored? Can’t you see all the things happening here? Aren’t you bored on the gadjos’ square?’ (1996, 162)

In Durst’s argument, this “can be viewed as a metaphor for Hilda’s attraction to the gadjo world and to gadjos” (2003, 66). However, it is important to also notice that the mentioned Kálvária and Ludovika Squares are still within the confines of the neighbourhood she calls home. Spending an afternoon in Kálvária Square is not like moving to Pesterzsébet, Bajna, or Augusztai. By going over to the gadjo squares in her home district, Hilda does not abandon her home, but rather expands it, erasing the invisible boundaries. And this is the crux of her message about racial unity: she does not give up her Roma home, but connects it – through wandering – to other spaces in the neighbourhood.

Thus, we can observe that Péliné creates an idealized home in the centre of Budapest, a home that is not unlike the idealized place of Hurston’s hometown,

Eatonville. But this home is framed within the dangers and sufferings of other places: the school, the countryside, the outskirts, and the slum. The reader thus gets a glimpse of two types of worlds. Péliné depicts a positive image of her home environment, but separately describes the harsh realities by inserting images of negative experiences at other places and times. In this way, Péliné presents an image of minority life that calls attention to the effects of destitution and discrimination while at the same time asserting her personal strength and ability to appreciate cultural values and create connections among various ethnicities.

7. Conclusion

Starting with the North-South distinction and migration patterns within the United States, we have seen various ways in which African American writers use both travel and the refusal to travel in their searches for freedom. A comparative reading of Hungarian Roma autobiographies reveals similarly innovative ways of using and altering traditional patterns of travelling and space in quests for better lives. Even though the four authors under discussion lived very far from each other in space, they all turn to artistic representations of these patterns in order to undermine essentializing views of race and ethnicity. Describing the constraints and boundaries of their very real communities and personal experiences, all authors make use of a “restless and revisionary energy” in order to “transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha 1994, 4). While this empowerment does not bring about a freedom from racial prejudice and oppression, it is a personal statement of cultural experience that shows the arbitrariness of received racial constructions by celebrating revisionary energies in unlikely spaces.

Wright and Lakatos – the two male authors discussed – use images of travel only to show the impossibility of escape from their negative minority experiences. Wright’s claims of rootlessness and freedom are in sharp contrast with the trauma he describes of growing up a black boy in the American South. His claim of being uprooted is an artistic statement of being able to see and describe his cultural values in spite of the traumatic experiences. Lakatos’s ironic reversal of the traveling Gypsy in him – as he wishes to become a stationary tree in the wilderness – attests to his ability to transform his traditions into an artistic site of empowerment, by representing and celebrating Romani life on his own terms.

The two female writers – Hurston and Péliné – claim their freedom from the very outset by establishing homes in unlikely spaces and unlikely ways. Even more directly than the male authors, they simply ignore the totalizing boundaries erected between races: careful not to pretend a unity that does not exist, they traverse across boundaries and thus become empowered. Rather than affirming the “imagined communities,” they build their own. Hurston’s travel dust is around her

own doorstep, as she takes the reader on a voyage of fresh cultural insights in her own hometown and countryside. Péliné utilizes travel images in order to affirm her own version of home, a version of ethnic harmony transformed into being by her creative revisionary energy.

Reading the four texts together enriches our understanding of both African American and Romani writings. As traditional uses of travel images are rejected and altered in all four texts, they open up new spaces for reinterpreting minority cultures, attitudes to freedom, and artistic creativity.

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