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Space and Gendered Subject Performing in Abraham Chan's *The Rise of David Levinsky**

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Bildung is the process of the individual growing into the subject in time and space. As a bildungsroman, Abraham Chan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* unfolds the spatial subject is produced through bodily spatial activities in the complicated social relations. Experiencing the spatial transformation and conflict between the "feminized" Jewish community in Russia and the "heroized" space in America, the protagonist David shows his subjective desire by gendered performing to reconstruct the gendered subject in spatial movement.

Keywords: The Rise of David Levinsky, space, gendered subject, performing

Henri Lefebvre says that "all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify. In order to accede to this space, individuals (children, adolescents) who are, paradoxically, already within it, must pass tests. This has the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 35). This relationship between space and subject examined in the American-Jewish Bildungsroman presents a more complicated one between the relationships of gender, ethnicity and class. Focused on Abraham Chan's *The Rise of David Lewinsky*, this paper centers on the gendered subject performed in spatial movement between "Old" and "New" world.

1. Subject Formation and Performing in Space

Examined from its origin, subject has two meanings: the subjectivity relying on the individual's feeling and the initiative based on rational thinking. Piaget's *Of Genetic Epistemology* shows that the individual in the process of the transformation into subject must assimilate the incentives or adjust himself to a suitable place. Through assimilation and adjustment an individual's epistemological structure pullulates continuously to be adapted to the new spatial environments, and then reach a comparative balance which is a state as well as a continuous process from a balanced lower state to a higher one realized by interaction between the organs and the environments.

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Certainly, subjectivity is not likely to be established only by the individual himself, but formed through his correspondence or contrast with others. Sartre sees clearly the subject's *Being* from other's look, as he said:

> The Other's look confers spatiality upon me. To apprehend oneself as looked-at is to apprehend oneself as a spatializing-spatialized. […]. As a temporal-spatial object in the world, as an essential structure of a temporal-spatial situation in the world, I offer myself to the Other's appraisal. This also I apprehend by the pure exercise of the cogito. To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals—in particular, of value judgments. (Sartre, 1993, p. 325)

Sartre tells us that man grows in others' look, and in the co-existential spatial environments. In the sense that the individual grows or forms into the subject, Judith Butler has argued that laws or norms necessarily precede the emergence of the subject. Theses norms, in effect, create the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject and initiate or interpolate that subject into the dominant social order. In Butler's parlance, "[s]ubject formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating … norms" (Sartre. 1993, pp. 266-277). So, the subject must incessantly cite and perform the very norms that created its intelligibility in the first place. This reiteration actually materializes a set of effects on the matter of bodies.

This is also true for the American-Jewish Bildungsroman, in wchich the Jewish protagonist's "free" body, acquired by escaping the traditional Jewish ethic family, is trapped and remolded by the rules and powers of American main stream society in the process of spatial wandering and movement of his body. Textually, it embodies the individual's existence with the historical time, the correlation of body's spatial stretching and self identification, the typification of the representative space, the contradiction and reconciliation between body's desire and the social rationality and so on. All in all, the formation or performing of the subject or the body is not a spontaneous, natural result determined by the biological attributes or the individual's will, but disciplined by the all kinds of social powers.

The Protagonist's frequent in-and-out movement is just like the wonderful spatial performance. To the extent that the spatial mobility is closely connected with the maturity of the body and the independence of the subject, this open spatial movement rejects undoubtedly the enclosed spatial logic. Freely entering and leaving the public space may be looked, in much extent, as the sign of the subject's maturity. The protagonist performs his suitable social identity just in the process of understanding, accepting and rejecting various kinds of spaces. Then, if performativity is constructed as the power of the dominant spatial order to produce certain repetitive effects on subjects through the discursive reiteration of its laws, it is admitted that performativity is constitutive of identity, that is, spatial norms wield the power to form and regulate the subject.

2. Gendered Subject Performing in Spatial Movement

American-Jewish Bildungsroman, unfolding the mystery of the Jewish protagonist's growth in numerous texts, becomes, to some extent, an allegory about the growth of the Jewish people. Abraham Cahan's *The Rises of David Levinsky* sets a pattern for the American-Jewish Bildungsroman of regretful success. This novel is preoccupied with the question of unstable identity attuned to the changeable spatial environments. Most critics agree that the novel investigates the difficulty of forging a coherent and stable sense of self. Jules Chametzky, for example, discussed David Levinsky's unsuccessful search for "a true, unfragmented self" (Butler, 1993, p.

232). By using the growing-up as reference point, I attempt to discuss how David's identification comes to be gendered, and how the subject's performative reiteration of gender ideals is complicated in different spaces.

Spatially, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is divided into two major sections. The first section centers around the protagonist David Levinsky's life in the Old World, where the spatial norms are made up of certain categories of the model male in rabbinic culture. In the Jewish community of Antomir, the Torah scholars are urged to live up to ideals of modesty, humbleness, and simplicity and "supported either by the congregation or by their own wives, who kept shops, stalls, inns, or peddled" (Chametzky, 2001, p. xxii). Accordingly, David's mother not only works her fingers to the bone "peddling pea mush or doing odds and ends of jobs" to enable her son's studies, but also is "a leader in most of the feuds that often divided the whole Court into two warring camps" (Engel, 1989, pp. 30-45). Clearly, the particular attributes constituting masculinity in Antomir, in turn, materialize specific effects on the matter of bodies: "The stylized repetitions that produce gender differentiation within Jewish praxis were the performances of Torah study" (Boyarin, 1997, p. 2).

This clearly plays itself out in David's attempt to emulate Nephatali, who embodies the desirable traits that a good Talmudic scholar should posses. He represents the model Talmudists and thus the model male for David. Nephtali is studious, considered as "one of the noted 'men of diligence' at the seminary" and reticent, modest, and emotional: "Nephtali had little to say other people, but he seemed to have much to say to himself. His singsongs were full of meaning, of passion, of beauty" (Cahan, 2002, p. 29). Then, David's desire to be a model *yeshiva buchor* is not coincidental, but rather produced and encouraged by the Jewish community. His attempt to approximate this masculine ideal is described as a kind of performative reiteration or what he would term bodily speech acts: "I strove to emulate his cleanliness, his graceful Talmud gestures, and his handwriting. At one period I spent many hours a day practicing calligraphy with some of his lines for a model" (Cahan. 2002, pp. 4, 12). By depicting how the "essential" traits of Antomir "manhood" can be mimed, the novel begins to unveil the way in which "being a man" is always constituted by repeating and citing a set of social conventions produced and instituted by the ruling hegemonic order.

Spatially, the configuration of regulatory ideals is specific to particular geographical locations. Throughout the second half of the novel, Cahan depicts David as patterning himself on the New World masculine ideal:

> I sought to dress like a genteel American, my favorite color for clothes and hats being … dark brown … The difference between taste and vulgar ostentation was coming slowly, but surely, I hope … I was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and ways of the well-bred American merchants with whom I was, or trying to be, thrown. All this, I felt, was an essential element in achieving business success; but the ambition to *act* and *look like a gentleman* grew in me quite apart from these motives. (Boyarin, 1997, p. 153)

Genteel and Gentile, here, are synonymous in the narrative. Taking great pains to emulate this American manhood, he confesses that he would watch "American smokers and manner of smoking as though there were a special American manner of smoking and such a thing as smoking with a foreign accent" (Boyarin, 1997, p. 156).

Apparently, The norm of the "true Talmud scholar," just like the "true American"—Anglo-Saxon heterosexual upper-middle-class male—is also an impossible-to-embody ideal. When David first enters the Preacher's Synagogue, we are told that he must constantly remind himself that he is an "independent scholar." He cannot fully inhabit this role, and he finds himself, much to his own dismay, indulging in actions not fit for

a pious scholar. His "burst of piety" are inevitably punctuated by periods of apathy, which are then sure to be "replaced by days of penance and a new access of spiritual fervor" (Cahan. 2002, p. 35). This last passage suggests that his potential for lapse is ever-present, and the attempt to approximate norms is never a smooth or uncomplicated process. Repetitive endeavors to embody or demonstrate once and for all true "masculinity" prove a failure.

3. Paradoxicality of the Gendered Subject Formation

Ironically, there appears the reasonable paradox of "growth"—the formed subject is not a free subject, but an disciplined subject. Especially the Jews in the modern American society which becomes more and more spatialized and organized receive inevitably the disciplines of the more and more rationalized social and cultural organizations which become more effective power of disciplining the individual into the subject. Meanwhile, the Jewish people has its own social space and cultural organization which exerts discipline on the growing Jewish individual whether he is conscious or unconscious of the process. This contradiction between Jewish tradition and American modernity often drives the Jewish young individual into the dilemma between escaping the traditional Jewish discipline and accepting the modern American spatial discipline and also into the difficulty in melting easily and quickly into American social space, which can be found in most the American-Jewish Bildungsroman.

As far as the Jewish protagonists are concerned in the American-Jewish Bildungsroman, their disciplines under the complicated social relations produce gendered subject performing in spatial movement. Performativity, as the most effective form of positive power, tends, according to Butler, to reinforce the given orders and upholds existing hierarchal social relations. "Reiteration produces the illusion of an identifiable and stable referent for regulatory ideals, making norms seem natural and normal" (Cahan, 2002, p. 23). However, the irreconcilable space between normative roles and actual social practices creates a continuous dissonance:

> There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the "we" cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds – and fails to proceed. (Cahan. 2002, p. 101)

Maya Lloydin argues that it is easy to overemphasize the discontinuities in gender performance and to present them as indicative of disruptive behavior. What is occluded, as a consequence, is the space within which performance occurs, as well as the others involved in or implicated by the production. Lloyd stresses that only some performances in certain contexts urge categorical rethinking (Zaborowska, 1997, pp. 21-22). Similarly, Lois McNay contends that the concept of agency that "underlies Butler's notion of a politics of the performative remains abstract and lacking in social specificity" (Cahan. 2002, p. 118). Both of them, in effect, point to the importance of contextual space in determining whether the fissures come to light and whether the chain of signification.

The Rise of David Levinsky brings to the fore and exposes both how the social practice of attempting to embody gender norms operates by repetitive citation and the ineluctable fissure that emerges as subjects try to approximate these ideals. This is the space, or perhaps the non-space, of cultural collision, which is engendered

by competing sets of norms and conflicting categories of identification. It may be that in order for the exposure of the first kind of gap between ideal and social practice to gain political currency and efficacy, the second fissure must also be forcibly present, for this space appears to be crucial in enabling subjects to perform differently, at least in the framework of competing norms in Antomir—to the young "modern Jew,"—is what appears to facilitate and ultimately enable his disindentification with the *yeshiva buchor* ideal, and his ability to entertain the possibility of other futures for himself.

To complicate matters even further, though, Cahan depicts David's own recurrent and intra-subjective struggle to negotiate between the two seemingly incompatible ideals of American masculinity. On one hand, he wants to "be a cultured man" (Cahan. 2002, p. 260) and receive an education; on the other hand, he gives this up to great wealth. This indicated, once more, that identification with spatial norms are always a complex and unstable process. The uneasiness David occasionally expresses about his success as a businessman may stem, at least in part, from his recognition of alternative normative injunctions that have been attached to the category of "male." Perhaps this negotiation between the two forms of masculinity discloses that once other norms are deemed potentially legitimate, a subject's identification with the hegemonic norm linked to a given category is forever after incomplete and problematic, suggesting that gaps surface intra-subjectively not only due to the ineluctable dissonance that emerges between the ideal and social practice, but also due to possible incomplete, ambivalent, and vacillating identifications.

Conclusion

The confrontation of conflicting sets of norms does not necessarily result in subversive performances or critical rethinking, yet it does seem to be one of the conditions of possibility of performing differently. Cahan demonstrates the way in which David's uneven identification with the American male norms does not really lead him to critically rethink the processes that produce and destabilize identity categories. An emphasis on context, that is, the space within which performance occurs and the others involved in or implicated by the production, may therefore enable us to understand more fully the operations of performativity as well as the possibility to derive both from the constitutive instabilities of performativity itself as well as from the complexity of the social orders within which performativity gets "played out" and witnessed.

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