

Space and Politics of Identity in “Eli, the Fanatic”

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Abstract—In Philip Roth’s short story “Eli, the Fanatic”, the construction of Eli’s cultural identity is interwoven with the game of space. Space not only represents the change of Eli’s cultural identity, but also participates in its constitution as dynamics. Eli, representing the Americanized Jews of Woodenton, tried to marginalize the Jewish culture through isolating and encoding the physical space where the displaced persons temporarily dwelt. Shutling between Woodenton and the Yeshivah, Eli was caught between American culture and Jewish culture. He was trapped into a liminal space full of cultural collision, which caused him to reconsider his location of culture. The implosion of liminal space triggered by Eli’s ambivalence about two cultures urged him to conduct spatial practice on his body, which indicated his embrace of Jewish identity. The fluidity of Eli’s cultural identity reflects Roth’s nonessential thought on cultural identity.

Index Terms—Philip Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic”, cultural identity, space, body

I. INTRODUCTION

First published on *Commentary* in 1957, “Eli, the Fanatic” explored Jewish issues such as Jewish life in America after the Holocaust and the relationship between newly-arrived Jews and settled ones in the “post-alienation era” (Qiao, 2003, p. 57). Eli, the protagonist, was an attorney and he lived in a rich community named Woodenton where both Jews and Gentiles dwelt. To keep their standing in the neighborhood, the Jews lived in an American way. Yet Tzoref, a newly-arrived Jewish rabbi, planned to establish a Yeshivah (Jewish school) within the community to accommodate 18 Jewish children and a young Hasidic Jew whom he had just brought out of a concentration camp. It was considered by the Jews of Woodenton as a threat to the harmony of the whole community. Thus Eli was appointed to disband the Yeshivah through the law that a boarding school cannot be established in a residential area. During the negotiation with Tzoref, Eli gradually changed his idea. He tried to persuade the Jews of Woodenton to allow the displaced persons to stay, with the condition that the young men shall wear a suit when in town. Eventually taking on the traditional Jewish young man’s costume, Eli became the fanatic in his neighbors’ eyes.

The short story has abundant and prototypical meanings. Aarons suggests that “Eli is the nucleus of Roth’s evolving characters living out counterlives” (Aarons, 2007, p.21). Rabin comments that ““Eli, the Fanatic’ seems to encapsulate and further explore several of the issues raised in the other selections, including the tension between the public sphere and private life, the relationship between clothes and identity, the implications of survivor guilt, and the nature of postmodern identity” (Rabin 2005, p.20). Among all these issues, Jewish identity has attracted much attention in the scholastic community. Aarons states that Eli represents “the ambivalence toward Jewish identity that sees Roth through his fiction into the twenty-first century” (Aarons, 2007, p.14). Pozorski believes that “identity is not essential, but a performance” (Pozorski, 2014, p.6) when Eli slipped into the Hasidic Jew’s clothing. Their opinions are insightful and lay a foundation for further exploration of the relation between identity and space. The connection between space and Jewish identity is indicated by “DPs” (Displaced Persons) used by Woodenton Jews to call the survivors of the Holocaust. Cultural belonging can also be noticed in the word “ghetto” which has strong spatial implication. Thus, space is significant for the constitution of cultural identity.

As for cultural identity, Stuart Hall offers two ways of thinking. “The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” (Hall, 1996a, p. 223) It means that our common historical experiences and shared culture provide us with a stable and constant essence for our cultural identity. “Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’.” It has origins and histories, but it is not fixed. Instead, it is subject to the “‘play’ of history, culture and power”. (Hall, 1996a, p. 225) Eli’s story seems to show Roth’s agreement with the second way of thinking about cultural identity. Eli as the cultural subject submits to the play of modern American culture. But he is still connected to the traditional Jewish culture, which causes his identity anxiety. This essay argues that Eli’s cultural identity experiences three stages----assimilation by American culture, dilemma between American culture and Jewish culture, and identification with Jewishness. Space not only represents the change of Eli’s cultural identity, but also participates in its constitution as dynamics.

II. SPATIAL REPRESSION AND THE MARGINALIZED JEWISH IDENTITY

Mike Crang sees culture as a special phenomenon that can be located (Crang, 2003, p.3), so culture can be spatially presented through landscape. Landscape thus becomes a text which can be read and interpreted. The first physical space presented at the beginning of the short story was the Yeshivah where the displaced persons temporarily settled. The

Yeshivah confronted the Woodenton community in an unequal way. The two spaces had totally different landscapes. The Yeshivah was located in the outskirts of the town and was far away from the community. It was a subspace, while the community occupied the central space. The former was surrounded by lawn and a jungle of hedges and was always dark because candles were all they had. On the contrary, the latter was bright due to the blinking street lights. Darkness meant mystery and antiquity which was a feature of Jewish culture, while brightness symbolized prosperity and modernity which characterized American culture.

The confrontation of two spaces indicated the repulsion the Jews of Woodenton felt against traditional Jewish culture and their ongoing identification with American culture. It was due to their fears of exile and persecution as well as their sense of shame about Jewish culture. For one thing, the Jews of Woodenton had migrated from eastern Europe to the US and moved from ghettos in big cities to the upper middle-class community. They had changed from poor Jews to rich Americans. They cherished their present cozy and stable life even if it meant that they had to obscure their Jewish identity. But the newly-arrived Jews, especially the Hasidic Jew in black coat and black hat, kept reminding them of their Jewishness which they had constantly tried to hide. The man made them have the sense of uncanniness because he brought the collective memory of diaspora back. They were afraid that it would offend the Gentiles in Woodenton and lead to their diaspora again. For another, Jewish culture was always stereotyped. The Jewish characters in classic literature such as Sherlock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Fagin in *Oliver Twist* were usually repulsive. Sometimes Jews themselves felt embarrassed about their customs. For instance, the Jewish heroine in Anzia Yeziarska's "Children of Loneliness" despised her father's Jewish table manners. In "Eli, the Fanatic", the Jews of Woodenton also did not like Jewish culture as they were annoyed by the Hasidic Jew's attire and the dead language Tzoref used. They claimed that "this is a modern community" (Roth, 1993, p.256) and "this is the twentieth century" (Roth, 1993, p. 258). The Woodenton Jews displaced their fears of expulsion and persecution and their lack of cultural confidence onto the Hasidic Jew, so as to ensure their Americanness and their current life.

The intensive repugnance of Woodenton Jews for the displaced persons was indicated in the spatial oppression against the Yeshivah. During the negotiations Eli offered two conditions: "1. The religious, educational, and social activities of the Yeshivah of Woodenton will be confined to the Yeshivah grounds. 2. Yeshivah personnel are welcomed in the streets and stores of Woodenton provided that they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century." (Roth, 1993, p.262) This was how the Woodenton Jews controlled representation of space in the community. Henry Lefebvre introduces a conceptual triad. "The spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space." It is perceived. Representation of space is "conceptualized space" and it is conceived. Representational spaces are actually lived spaces, tending "towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs". (Lefebvre, 1991, p.38-39) Through the conditions, Woodenton Jews were conceiving the representation of space within the community and they tried to maintain the representational space by removing "abnormal" symbols and signs that were not that American, such as the black robe. The Yeshivah as a space was degraded and marginalized. So was the cultural identity of its inhabitants. However, had the Woodenton Jews themselves been a part of the mainstream American society? Hasia Diner held that Jews had been a part of America, but they were only culturally peripheral. (Diner 2003, p.110) Both Jews of Woodenton and the displaced persons had a marginalized cultural identity.

Though being marginalized, the Yeshivah as a cultural enclave owned the force to deterritorialize and reterritorialize the Woodenton community. A cultural enclave is a distinct cultural unit enclosed within an alien territory. Although the Yeshivah was located in New York State, it became a shelter for the displaced persons who were identified with Jewish culture. They obeyed the power operation of Woodenton by confining themselves to the Yeshivah, which was actually a protection of their distinction. The most common way for a different culture to represent itself is geographical isolation. Unlike Woodenton Jews, the displaced persons were willing to admit their otherness. They studied the Talmud, wore Jewish attire, spoke Yiddish and had Jewish diet. All these activities helped them to change the spatial representation of Woodenton and to create a representational space which satisfied their need. This cultural enclave would continue influencing the spatial order of Woodenton and would cultivate cultural dynamics so as to deterritorialize and reterritorialize Woodenton. The awakening of Eli's Jewish consciousness was an example, which would be discussed in the next two sections.

III. SPATIAL SHUTTLING AND THE AMBIVALENT CULTURAL IDENTITY

The Yeshivah and the Woodenton community were almost mutually exclusive. Only two persons---Eli and the Hasidic Jew, shuttled between the two physical spaces. Both of them caused negative reaction when they stepped into each other's space in their own clothing. Eli in his suit scared the children away and the Hasidic Jew in his black coat annoyed Woodenton Jews. What influence did the spatial shuttling have upon the two? The inner world of the Hasidic Jew remained unknown, yet Roth gave plentiful description of Eli's thought. Going back and forth between the two spaces, Eli's mind became a field where the cultural collision happened. He was trapped into a liminal space where both cultures were influencing him. It forced him to reconsider his cultural location.

"Liminal" means threshold in Latin. Liminality is used to describe the ambiguous and uncertain situation of in-betweenness that individuals experience when they are facing the transition of social role or of life stages through "rites of passage". (Gennep, 1960, p.20-21) Liminality offers a different view to understand cultural identity of those

who are in a double or multiple culture context. "Liminal entities are neither here or there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." (Turner, 1991, p.95) Eli was between the American culture that valued legal institution and the Jewish culture which stressed morality. But he could be identified with neither one, which put him in a liminal space.

Liminal space was full of ambivalence. The ambivalence brought by the conflict between law and morality was highlighted by Eli's profession as an attorney. His shuttling between the two spaces not only was meant to mediate the collision between two cultures, but also implied his effort to find the balance between law and morality. During his first visit to Tzuref, he put more weight on the law. When Tzuref asked in a puzzling way: "The law is the law...The law is not the law. When is the law that is the law not the law?" (Roth, 1993, p.251), Eli replied with the specific article that "you can't have a boarding school in a residential area" (Roth, 1993, p.251). Their different language styles referred to different cultural systems and ways of thinking. Eli was under great pressure during and after the meeting. He had difficulties in completing his job not because of his incapability but his awakening conscience. When he got home, the complaint about and terrible attitude of the Woodenton Jews towards the displaced persons revolted Eli. He seemed to have a sense of guilt about his behavior. Without the community's knowledge, he offered a compromise so that the Yeshivah and the community could coexist.

But neither the Jews of Woodenton nor Tzuref was satisfied with his compromise. The intensifying ambivalence of the liminal space caused the heterogeneity of Eli's cultural identity. Roth apparently gave more description about Eli's second visit to the Yeshivah, and the conversation between Eli and Tzuref was more radical and meaningful. When Tzuref defended the Hasidic Jew, he told Eli that a medical experiment was performed on the man and nothing was left except for the clothing. Eli was forced to confront the history of Holocaust through the lively individual experience which would constantly sting him. Tzuref further pointed out the hypocrisy of law. He accused Eli of his indifference and immorality: "What you call law, I call shame." (Roth, 1993, p. 266) It aroused Eli's sense of shame. Meanwhile, Tzuref kept asking questions which guided Eli to reconstruct his cultural identity. The change of Eli's attitude towards his belonging was apparent from "I am them, they are me" (Roth, 1993, p.265) to "I am me. They are them. You are you" (Roth, 1993, p.267). It was a symbolic statement "signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions" (Turner, 1991, p.94). Separating himself from the Woodenton Jews and unable to identify with the Jews in the Yeshivah, Eli became the double "other". The twofold isolation increased his ambivalence, which made him more anxious than ever to solve the problem. In his view, the only way to satisfy both sides was that the Hasidic Jew changed his black coat to a suit. He sent the Hasidic Jew his best suits. For him and the Woodenton Jews who were surrounded by consumption culture, clothes were goods which were branded and could be replaced, while for the man, the clothing was the only thing left that marked his cultural identity. It stood for his belief and life meaning. Eli was unable to understand it, as he did not understand the collective trauma of the displaced persons left by the Holocaust. He could only try to feel the psychological pain by physical pain when he imitated the man's howl. However, he began to have sympathy with the Holocaust survivors. "In the ability to empathize with the victims of the Holocaust and to identify with the collective trauma of the Jewish people lay the only hope for a meaningful existence in 1950s America." (Writh-Nesher, 2001, p.107)

Eli endeavored to keep the coexistence of two spaces and attempted to balance the liminal space. On the one hand he wanted to maintain the standing of Woodenton Jews in the upper middle-class community and to finish his job. He offered his best suits to the Hasidic Jew so that the man could remove his cultural mark and become "invisible". On the other hand, he tried to make the Woodenton Jew less prejudiced as well as less indifferent and to make the survivors' settlement possible in response to his conscience. But his effort could not be accepted by either side. He received complaints from his neighbors and criticism from Tzuref. As a double outsider, he had great anxiety. The ambivalence of liminal space finally caused its implosion when the Hasidic Jew gave Eli his only clothing in return.

IV. SPATIAL PRACTICE AND IDENTIFICATION WITH JEWISHNESS

Body is a kind of space with various implications. "It is a concrete physical space of flesh and bone, of chemistries and electricities; it is a highly mediated space, a space transformed by cultural interpretation and representation; it is a lived space, a volatile space of consciousness and unconscious desire and motivation--- a body/self, a subject, an identity: it is, in sum, a social space, a complexity involving the workings of power and knowledge and the working of the body's lived unpredictabilities." (Soja, 1996, p.114) When Soja illustrates the multiple nature of body, Lefebvre states the relation between space and body. "[T]he body with the energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space; conversely, the laws of space... also govern the living body and the deployment of its energies" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.170). In other words, body and its surrounding space are mutually related and affected. For one thing, body is active. Body with its dynamics could accomplish self-adjustment and change the view of its surrounding space. For another, body is passive. According to Michel Foucault, body can be disciplined in a specific and special space by power.

In the short story, the Jews of Woodenton, who were in a different cultural space, had consciously Americanized themselves. They had changed their bodyscapes through language, clothes and behavior to adapt to the new environment. Their fears of expulsion and persecution together with their sense of shame about Jewish culture gave them unintended results and an inability to change the surrounding space, which enhanced their identification with

American culture. What was worse, they tried to discipline the Hasidic Jew's body by forcing him to take off his black clothes. He changed into Eli's suit and paraded this in the public area of the community to show his obedience and to exchange his and the children's living space, but he lost his most important private cultural space when he could not choose what to wear.

The body of the Hasidic Jew was passive while Eli's body was active. Body is the object of spatial oppression. It is also a means of resistance. The unconsciousness in Eli's body prompted him to reconsider and reconstruct his cultural identity and his bodyscape changed from within to form a rebel force. Taking off the suit that represented modern American culture and taking on the traditional Jewish attire was a kind of spatial practice he conducted upon his body--- a social space he could control. It was conducted in a state of both unconsciousness and consciousness: "he found he'd slipped the white fringy surrender flag over his hat and felt it clinging to his chest" (Roth, 1993, p.286). Jewish culture as the long repressed collective unconsciousness finally came to Eli's consciousness.

Eli made full use of the mobility of his body and created a movable cultural space to influence the spatial order of Woodenton. The behavior and production of body played a decisive role in constructing space. When Eli in the Jewish attire walked in the most populous streets of Woodenton, he was embedding his body into the space of Woodenton community. He was leaving something Jewish in the cityscape and announcing his cultural belonging. Eli's parade resulted in the spatial disorder of the community and shocked the Jews in Woodenton. Everyone thought that he was "having a nervous breakdown"(Roth, 1993, p.293). Eli's behavior seemed to be self-punishment for his disconnection with Jewish culture and his indifference to the displaced persons. It was also "the rite of passage" through which he stepped out of the liminal space and transformed his cultural identity.

However, his spatial practice diverted from the spatial representation of Woodenton, so the Woodenton Jews must take measures. "In a moment they tore off his jacket---it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached." (Roth, 1993, p.298) The central space was so powerful that it controlled the heterogeneous space so easily. Eli's spatial practice stopped and his body became the object of discipline. He finally lost his voice like the Hasidic Jew and was regarded as a fanatic. But was he really a fanatic? The answer was negative. What seemed to be madness was actually his resistance against and mock at real madness --- Woodenton Jews' inhumanity in a silent and covert way.

It was doubted that Eli could completely reconstruct his Jewish identity through changing clothes. But his body was a space with social, psychological and cultural meanings. In that space interests of Woodenton Jews and the displaced persons collided, legality and morality confronted each other, and American culture and Jewish culture met. There were diverse possibilities. How to constitute the cultural identity was not a personal problem that Eli had to deal with, but a common one that all Jews need to handle. Caught between powerful American culture and distant Jewish culture, what should Jews do when the choice of cultural identity gets involved in personal interest? Roth apparently objects to being totally integrated into American culture, but it was difficult to avoid being assimilated and to stick to Jewish culture as Eli and the man showed.

V. CONCLUSION

Human existence is spatial. Space has an impact on people's answer to "who I am" and vice versa. Eli's construction of cultural identity was closely related to space. His estrangement from, ambivalence about, and connection with Jewish culture was presented through the spatial opposition between the Woodenton community and the Yeshivah, the spatial shuttling and his spatial practice on his own body. The spatial narrative makes the living crisis and identity issue of Jews in America more concrete to readers. In the end, having lost the black attire and being regarded as a fanatic, Eli seemed to be in another liminal state, which implied the difficulty as well as possibility of identity constitution. Roth's understanding of cultural identity was non-essential and post-modern as Eli's cultural identity kept changing. Cultural identity sometimes is hybrid because of the subject's location in more than one culture. Stuart Hall writes that "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall, 1996b, p. 4). Till the end of the story, Eli's constitution of cultural identity was still on-going and transformation is a part of it.

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